Twelfth Week:
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Strategy Training for Second Language Learners

Students of foreign language are being encouraged to learn and use a broad range of language learning strategies that can be tapped throughout the learning process. This approach is based on the belief that learning will be facilitated by making students aware of the range of strategies from which they can choose during language learning and use. The most efficient way to heighten learner awareness is to provide strategy training—explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies—as part of the foreign language curriculum. This digest discusses the goals of strategy training, highlights approaches to such training, and lists steps for designing strategy training programs.

GOALS OF STRATEGY TRAINING

* Self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in language learning

* Become aware of what helps them to learn the target language most efficiently

* Develop a broad range of problem-solving skills

* Experiment with familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies

* Make decisions about how to approach a language task

* Monitor and self-evaluate their performance

* Transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts.

Strategies can be categorized as either language learning or language use strategies. Language learning strategies are conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language. They include cognitive strategies for memorizing and manipulating target language structures, metacognitive strategies for managing and supervising strategy use, affective strategies for gauging emotional reactions to learning and for lowering anxieties, and social strategies for enhancing learning, such as cooperating with other learners and seeking to interact with native speakers.
FRAMEWORKS FOR STRATEGY TRAINING

Although no empirical evidence has yet been provided to determine a single best method for conducting strategy training, at least three different instructional frameworks have been identified. Each has been designed to raise student awareness of the purpose and rationale of strategy use, give students opportunities to practice the strategies they are being taught, and help them use the strategies in new learning contexts.

One framework, proposed by Pearson and Dole (1987) with reference to first language learning but applicable to the study of a second language as well, targets isolated strategies by including explicit modeling and explanation of the benefits of applying a specific strategy, extensive functional practice with the strategy, and an opportunity to transfer the strategy to new learning contexts. The sequence includes the following steps:

* Initial modeling of the strategy by the teacher, with direct explanation of the strategy's use and importance

* Guided practice with the strategy

* Consolidation, where teachers help students identify the strategy and decide when it might be used

* Independent practice with the strategy

* Application of the strategy to new tasks

In the second framework, Oxford et al. (1990) outline a useful sequence for the introduction of strategies that emphasizes explicit strategy awareness, discussion of the benefits of strategy use, functional and contextualized practice with the strategies, self-evaluation and monitoring of language performance, and suggestions for or demonstrations of the transferability of the strategies to new tasks. This sequence is not prescriptive of strategies that the learners are supposed to use, but rather descriptive of the various strategies that they could use for a broad range of learning tasks.

The third framework, developed by Chamot and O'Malley (1994), is especially useful after students have already had practice in applying a broad range of strategies in a variety of contexts. Their approach to helping students complete language learning tasks can be described as a four-stage problem-solving process.

(1) Planning. Students plan ways to approach a learning task.

(2) Monitoring. Students self-monitor their performance by paying attention to their strategy use and checking comprehension.
(3) Problem Solving. Students find solutions to problems they encounter.

(4) Evaluation. Students learn to evaluate the effectiveness of a given strategy after it has been applied to a learning task.

OPTIONS FOR PROVIDING STRATEGY TRAINING

A variety of instructional models for foreign language strategy training have already been developed and implemented in a variety of educational settings. Seven of these are described below.

"General Study Skills Courses."

These courses are sometimes intended for students with academic difficulties but can also target successful students who want to improve their study habits. Many general academic skills can be transferred to the process of learning a foreign language, such as using flash cards, overcoming anxiety, and learning good note-taking skills. These courses sometimes include language learning as a specific topic to highlight how learning a foreign language may differ from learning other academic subjects. Foreign language students can be encouraged to participate in order to develop general learning strategies.

STEPS FOR DESIGNING STRATEGY TRAINING

The approaches outlined above offer options for providing strategy training to a large number of learners. Based on the needs, resources, and time available to an institution, the next step is to plan the instruction students will receive. The following seven steps are based largely on suggestions of strategy training by Oxford (1990). The model is especially useful because it can be adapted to the needs of various groups of learners, the resources available, and the length of the strategy training. See Cohen (1998) for a thorough description of these steps.

1. Determine learners' needs and the resources available for training.

2. Select the strategies to be taught.

3. Consider the benefits of integrated strategy training.

4. Consider motivational issues.

5. Prepare the materials and activities.

6. Conduct explicit strategy training.

7. Evaluate and revise the strategy training.
CONCLUSION

The guidelines for implementing strategy training programs provide a variety of options for tailoring the training to meet the needs of a large number of students, as well as to the needs of the individual institution or language program. The most important considerations in the design of a strategy training program are the students' needs, the available resources (e.g., time, money, materials, availability of teacher trainers), and the feasibility of providing this kind of instruction. When including strategies-based instruction in a foreign language curriculum, it is important to choose an instructional model that introduces the strategies to the students and raises awareness of their learning preferences; teaches them to identify, practice, evaluate, and transfer strategies to new learning situations; and promotes learner autonomy to enable students to continue their learning after they leave the language classroom.

REFERENCES


