

Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign/Second Language: Importance of Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Every teacher has the primary goal to shape the future of his or her learners. His/her role begins with students and culminates in society in general. In order to attain perfection in any given field, one needs a guide, teacher, or a coach to mentor in the stages of learning. More specifically, the teacher of English has more responsibilities on his/her part to teach the content in respect of grammar and pronunciation for accuracy and fluency, body language in respect of decency, and to train the students in a committed and devoted manner and transform them into competent students to face challenges in career capture and life settlement. The present paper discusses some of the different approaches in language teaching and defines different learning strategies. It also emphasizes the importance of learning strategies. This paper concludes with a description of best learning strategies adopted by the good learners in learning English as foreign or as a second language.

Keywords: Language teaching, learning strategies, Second and foreign language learning.

Introduction

English is a language used to reach across the borders and bridge the gaps. It is used to communicate anything from microchip to oil. Due to increasing importance of communication through English, English teachers need to teach language skill with manifold responsibilities. There is a requirement to learn language skills to fulfil the ever-growing demands of English. The methods and approaches adopted or followed by teachers in the past to teach English language continuously evolve to meet the demands.

Present Scenario

Along with the regular curriculum, it is very important for a budding professional to develop his or her soft skills. They are part of communication skills. They form an important feature of learning process, more so in learning and teaching a language. Use of English by the professionals in the BPO, medical transcription, IT and ITES add to the importance and relevance of English in every walk of life. In the past students were introduced to English in their sixth standard. They were not given enough exposure to the language skills. The emphasis was on subjects like mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Students got very little opportunity to use the language within as well as outside the school. But in the present-day scenario, English has turned into a universal language. Its presence and value in the world have expanded enormously compared to the past decades.

Language Teaching Approaches

The context of English language teaching and learning has changed, and the focus is on communicative competence. Language teachers have adopted and followed different methodologies to teach the language skills which are discussed below.

1. Grammar Translation Method

This method was/is used by the teacher to teach young children where the teacher explained every word to students in their native language to make them understand and learn English. But in this method, there was atleast one disadvantage. Both the teacher and the student concentrated more on L1 rather than on L2. In this method English language class seemed to be L1 class rather than L2 class. Students get only limited benefit through this method. This method is still in use in many rural schools and in socioeconomically less developed areas throughout India. This method is also supported by the methods used to teach mother tongue in our schools.

2. Bilingual Method

This can be declared as the favourite method in our schools. Most teachers follow the bilingual method to teach the students in Indian schools, where the teacher, first of all, explains the entire English sentence in L1 and then asks the students to perform activities in English. Here it is used to be a main assumption that only the teachers have the freedom to take the help of L1 and students are not supposed to use it. However, this constraint is found mostly on paper, not in the classroom. When a student is in the process of composing his/her English sentences, abundant help through the use of mother tongue sentences is provided. This method does not help fluency and naturalness in language expression. Thus, this method becomes beneficial to students in learning the second language only up to some extent.

3. Direct Method

Earlier, teachers in private schools used to follow the direct method to teach Indian students. Private schools usually charge a high tuition fee, etc. These teachers will stick to the practice of using only English, without depending on L1. Here the teacher is not supposed or authorised to use any single word from L1. This forced seclusion made students from many

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families with no past history of learning or using English face great difficulty in understanding certain words and their meanings. But this method turns to be more useful for the students to learn language than any other method as this method creates more encouraging language environment for students in the classroom.

All the above methods have their own advantages and disadvantages, where the students learned English only as a subject rather than as language. They were also unable to put their learning into practice due to lack of a favourable environment. In addition to the above constraints, the teachers used to have very limited teaching hours, mostly from three to six hours for a week which are not enough to teach the language elaborately giving emphasis for the basic elements of language. It has become examination-oriented only. Another limitation seen in Indian teachers is that some of the English teachers are not familiar with the latest developments in ELT pedagogy.

Challenges before the English language teachers in India are apparent and enormous. They should be able to cater to the practical needs of learners, to make them competent enough to interact with one another and to retrieve information all over the world. The challenges visible before the English language teachers are diverse and it is the need of the hour to equip the English language learning strategies which should be integrated with the approaches and methods of language teaching.

Research shows that students do not learn a language at the same pace. The levels of competence for the learners are also diversified. Surely, the teachers cannot be held responsible for this difference in learning ability of the students in a classroom. However, they can motivate the student to make sure that they become involved in the learning process. Learning is an active process of translating new knowledge, insight, and skills into behaviour.

Cawley, M. (2017) and his associates have identified three domains of learning- cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The learners have their own preferences to learn by adopting either of these strategies suitable for their environment. These preferences are known to be an individual's own style of learning a language. The learning is usually accomplished more rapidly and retained longer if it is presented in ways that the individual prefers on its competency to meet the learners needs.

Claxton and Murrell, (1987) consider that the teachers' instructional style and the students' learning style should match. There is usually a productive language learning environment. It is important that the teacher should be aware of the learning style preferences of the students and accordingly adjust his/her own method of teaching.

Boylan, (1984) points out that learning is more productive when teachers are conscious of the learning strategies which they are going to apply in a language class. Subsequently, another significant researcher in this area Davis, (1994) came out with the suggestion that

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students can be taught what strategies the teacher are going to apply in the language class, which improves learning efficiency no matter what style the teacher uses. As students practice a variety of activities, they become aware of various strategies that can be used.

The language learning strategies are defined by many researchers. Some of them are as follows:

Learning strategies have been described (Wenden and Rubin,1987) as any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information (p19). It was argued (Richards, Platt and Platt,1992) that learning strategies are intentional behaviour and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand learn or remember new information (Pg. 209). Learning strategies were also illustrated (O'Malley and Chamot,1990) as special thoughts or behaviour that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information (pg.1).

Hence, learning strategies were seen as special ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning and retention of the information. (Oxford, 1990) defines language learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (pg.8). It is indeed a reflection of what the learner intends to do and the specific actions he can take.

As the knowledge of second language acquisition increased during 1970s, teachers and researchers concluded that no single method of language teaching and research findings would mark the start of universal success in teaching a second language (Brown, 2007). It was realized that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods of teaching techniques. Certain people appeared to be endowed with the abilities to succeed; others lacked those abilities (pg. 132). Observations and research studies led researchers (Rubin,1975, Stern 1975, Rubin and Thompson,1994) to describe good language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. They believe that good language learners:

1. Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning.
2. Organise information about language.
3. Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words,
4. Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
6. Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned.
7. Make errors work for them and not against them.
8. Use linguistic knowledge including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language.
9. Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
10. Learn to make an intelligent guess.

11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalised routines to help them perform beyond their competence.
12. Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going.
13. Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
14. Learn difference styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of situation.

Conclusion

Being aware of the characteristics, techniques and strategies of a good language learner facilitate students' language learning and help them enhance learning efficiency. In addition, with this knowledge and awareness, students' language learning can improve through learner training by their instructors.

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