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**Helping the Limited English Proficient Learner Learn the  
Second Language Effectively through Strategy Instruction**

**M. Savitri, Ph.D. Candidate**

# Helping the Limited English Proficient Learner Learn the Second Language Effectively through Strategy Instruction

M. Savitri, Ph.D. Candidate

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the characteristic features of Limited English Proficient students and offers suggestions on how such students can be helped in the language classroom, assisted by the research efforts from Applied Linguistics.

## English in India

In the pre-independence period, resistance towards British rule was reflected on the use of language also. People who used English words and mixed English phrases and sentences in their speech in Indian languages were termed as people with no patriotic feeling. After independence, when English was accepted as an international language, there has been an ever-increasing demand for learning English as a tool for communication at all levels. The educated and the sophisticated class recognize the important role of English in different spheres of activity and patronize the language with great force. Thereby the language has now established its supremacy over the native languages. This development exert pressure on the language teaching people to deliver need-based courses to all learners to suit their appropriate demands, which lead to reform and restructure the entire language teaching system.

## Limited English Proficiency – A Definition

As defined in Title VII of America's Schools Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-382), a student is Limited English Proficient if he or she "has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language and whose difficulties may deny such individual the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English".

## Limited English Proficient student

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) refers to a range of linguistic ability that extends from having no knowledge of English to having some English language skills, but not adequate enough to participate in an all English academic setting. Besides the term *Limited English Proficiency*, there are other terms that are used to refer to students with limited English skills. Some of these are *slow learners*, *false beginners*, and *the English language learner* (ELL).

A Limited English Proficiency student is one who comes from a non-English background and whose difficulties in the language impairs his/her ability to perform in the other subjects also in

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all English medium schools. Students are termed Limited English Proficient only when they join colleges and universities where the medium of instruction is English. That is why the disparity between a LEP student and the others is seen prominently only in the tertiary level.

### **No Basis of Lack of Intelligence**

A Limited English Proficiency student is not one with stunted intelligence. In many cases these students have records of academic success. Their only limitation is that they cannot demonstrate their knowledge in English. This limitation in a student means that he or she requires extra help in the form of suitable materials and methods to help them become fluent in English.

A Limited English Proficient student may be a doctorate or a school dropout. The only common feature they share is their limited proficiency in English. This makes it difficult to make any generalizations about limited English proficiency students.

### **A Challenge to Incorporate**

Incorporating students with Limited English Proficiency into classrooms is challenging for the teacher because many of these students possess characteristics that are associated with low educational achievement. To name a few: poor academic preparation, lack of exposure to content material, low social status, poor attendance and poverty. This group of students has special needs that must be addressed to by the teacher. These difficulties may become serious over time if instruction is not modified to address the students' specific needs.

### **The Limited English Proficient Student in India**

In India, learners come from both mother-tongue medium schools and English medium schools to the tertiary level. There is a wide gap among the students in their performance at the lower levels of education. On the one hand, we have a set of students who were taught in the English medium schools right from their kindergarten. On the other, we have a set of students who took their education through their vernacular. The former has a good exposure to English for fourteen years whereas the latter has learnt English only as a second language. The educational needs of the former group of students are very different from the latter group of learners.

At this juncture they enter the tertiary level of education where the medium is English. To bridge the gap between the two sets of learners, a different situation to meet the challenges is to be identified. The teachers are faced with the challenge of determining an appropriate teaching method in a context like this.

The second set of students which we were discussing hitherto can be referred as Limited English Proficient students.

## **Second Language Teaching**

There is a shift, in recent years in Second Language Teaching, from the quest for the perfect teaching method to find out the methods on how successful teachers and learners can actually achieve their goals. This has led to the study of how successful learners approach learning, which in turn leads to the kind of strategies and cognitive processing they use in Second Language Acquisition. Second Language Teaching can benefit greatly by a study on the role of learning strategies in learning the second language. Instruction in Second Language Learning can be integrated with knowledge from research on learning strategies.

### **Some Prevailing Views**

A prevailing view in language learning states that Second Language Acquisition occurs automatically, without any effort on the part of the learner. J. Michael O'Malley and Anna Uhl Chamot, 1990 in their 'Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition' feel that this is a limited view of language learning. They wish to prefer to replace it with a view that language learning involves many conscious decisions at both the cognitive and metacognitive levels.

This paper expounds this view that active language learning involves many conscious decisions taken by the learner. The theoretical principles (Naiman et al., 1978) on learning strategies justify the need to practically study the learning strategies and work to develop them with our learners. The research findings on the role of learning strategies in Second Language Acquisition can be applied to English classrooms and help students become more effective and independent learners.

### **The Goal: Increasing Autonomy**

Ultimately good language learning is about increasing autonomy. When the consciousness of the students is raised towards a more self-directed learning it means they understand how to learn and take more responsibility for their learning. When students take more responsibility, more learning occurs and both teachers and learners feel more successful. Learners' self-direction keeps growing as learners become more comfortable with the idea of their own responsibility. Rebecca Oxford (1990) remarks, that it is the self-directed students who gradually gain greater confidence, involvement and proficiency in their learning process. Conscious use of language learning strategies promote over all self-direction for learners.

### **Applied Linguistics**

With an explosion in recent years in Second Language Acquisition research, a new science of applied language studies has grown up which specifically investigates language learning with the supposed intent of facilitating this process. Applied Linguists have sought to establish the way languages are learnt. They have much to say on what language is and how is it processed. Applied Linguistic research has continued to investigate the processes of Second Language

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Acquisition. The search is to understand what the successful language learner is doing so that teaching methods might be designed to facilitate rather than hinder the learning process.

### **Helping the Limited English Proficient Student**

This paper has analysed so far that if we instruct our students on 'how to learn' we can raise the achievement of our students. Better methodological understanding of how successful learners learn, on the part of the teachers will result in improved teaching which in turn will result in improved learning. This will promote autonomous language learning.

We need to discover how languages are learnt so that we might know how best to teach them. The 'good language learner' (Rubin, 1976) research tradition tells us that what successful language learners do is not done by unsuccessful learners. If we can find out what good language learners do then we may tell the other learners to use the same methodology in order to improve their chances of success.

Training the others in these skills may seem easy but it is not actually so. It is not easy to know or find out what the good language learner is doing. He or she may not know it and even if they know it, they may not be able to express it to others. As, in much applied linguistic research and investigations into the process of Second Language Acquisition, we are mostly left to surmise the underlying process from the surface product.

This paper is an indication of how a teacher might shape learning from a strategy point of view and help the LEP student. This emphasis on 'learning to learn', by the learner rather than simply being taught is an approach to language learning from a different direction. Here the role of the teacher changes from teaching the language to teaching the student to learn the language.

### **Conclusion**

It is unrealistic to assume that simply telling students about possible fruitful strategies will ensure that these pass into their repertoire and can be drawn on automatically. They need to be given an explicit training and reminders to use the strategies alongside a number of language tasks and materials likely to promote them. Once the learners are familiar with the concept of using strategies these scaffold can be removed. The teacher needs to consider the whole domain of learning strategies and what they imply for the theory and practice of modern-language teaching, before success could be accomplished.

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