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“LEARNING STRATEGIES AS MEANS OF IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF  
LEARNING IN THE FLD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EL SALVADOR”

FINAL PAPER

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The teaching and learning process has been a subject of many relevant findings. Besides, classrooms all over the world still remain and have always been the main place where people interact sociably; allowing in this manner the developing of human thoughts and conducts. What is more, researchers are always seeking the best way to harmonize the process itself from the antagonism among learning and teaching. There is always a new finding in this never ending process full of human dealings and thoughtful interactive processing of information; along with many ways of communication where the main objective is the transfer of knowledge and the production of new one.

By the mid 60's, countless theories gave birth to new approaches to deliver human knowledge the best way, although great advance and anew information was disclose, the barrier between teaching and learning was still there, and most of the time, teachers and students were on the discouraged side either way about teaching or learning. Teachers seem to be powerless when reviewing previous knowledge and finding out that almost all of their students were unable to storage or recall previous taught knowledge on the opposite side, students were on the verge of distress when realizing that their efforts seem to be worthless enough to fail a subject.

It was until Rubin, Stern, Wenden, Chamot and O'Malley among others researchers who started to see the whole process of teaching and learning but now from the side of the learning process. The birth of cognitive theory gave a line of attack to focus in the process of learning and their thoughtful ways where students try to cope with given information in the classroom by their teachers. Besides, the more information obtained in the process of learning gave the path

to consider how students learning process is instead of how the teaching process is. With this in mind, philologist, sociologist, psychologist, and language theorists embark into a different journey to reduce the gap between teaching and learning.

This paper aims at emphasizing the importance of language strategies in foreign language learning and teaching. It summarizes some background of learning strategies in general to focus later on learning strategies in the field of higher education. Also, it outlines the taxonomy proposed by Rubin, define the concept of learning strategy and utilize a short survey where opinions and thoughts from students of the FLD at El Salvador University served as source to identify not only the necessity of a unit that specialize on the teaching of learning strategies, but the finding of the top ten learning strategies used by students at the FLD of El Salvador University.

## **OBJECTIVES**

General:

- To carry out a bibliographical research on learning strategies to use them as means of improving the quality of learning at the FLD.

Specific:

- To give a general overview on learning strategies and their importance for higher English instruction.
- To find out about other universities' research on learning strategies and how the FLD can emulate their example.

## **JUSTIFICATION**

In the field of education it has been more emphasized teaching rather than learning. English students have a great need of learning new strategies to improve their quality of learning so that they can complete different tasks as writing good essays, answering questions effectively, taking notes in classes more effectively, getting the main idea from a listening exercise, etc.

By own experience, many students at the Foreign Languages Department from the university of El Salvador have experienced the need of getting help to deal with different problems that may arise during the learning process. For this reason, a bibliographical research was carried out to find out different kind of learning strategies that may be useful for these students.

## **Learning strategies as means of improving the quality of learning at the FLD**

In ancient times, the process of learning about things in life was a natural process, and it was taught by day to day experience among human beings and their surroundings. Moreover, at the beginning of times such process was instinctive which means that it was carried out without any more reason than adapting to changes, those, that were obtainable by environmental aspects furthermore, without any organization or direction to it. But through time different learning tools have emerged. This paper will define what learning strategies are to give a general overview about them. Besides that, the benefits they give to the learning process based on different researchers' points of view. Moreover, some experiences in other countries which can help the FLD to emulate their example.

Over and over, within the field of education, different methods and approaches emerged trying to find the correct way to teach. But during this period of time, it was becoming more and more important the fact of teaching rather than learning itself. Methods as Grammar translation, Audiolingualism, and plenty more, were developed to help teachers to prepare and teach more effective classes, but the principal and most important agent was forgotten: *The Student's learning*. For this reason, it is unquestionably that the center of all instruction and the main participant besides the teacher and knowledge is the learner, who is the one teacher must focus to (Oxford, 1990). Without a doubt, by taking a short display into the several proposed approaches, it can be noticed that the main focus was on how to carry out the process of teaching, but the learning efficacy was almost left out or neglected in a sense. In brief, the

real understanding of the learning process was not and still not being discussed with the deepness that deserves. Indeed, it can be stated that teaching cannot be equated to learning.

For the previous reason different researchers on the teaching field considered to create a new concept which aroused: *Learning strategies*. The concept of learning strategies was carried out in the middle of the seventies by some researchers such as (Rubin and Stern, 1975) which were the pioneers of this exhaustive research. These researchers focused on learning strategies to help students improve their quality of learning. Different definitions of learning strategies were created by theorists; for example the following definition which is considered a general definition of learning strategies and states: "*Learning strategies are intentional behaviors and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information*", (Richards and Platt, 1992:209). What is more, the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals, and can also be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques, (Stern, 1992).

Other researchers as Cohen (1998) says: "*Learning strategies are processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall and application of information about language*"(p.120). Consequently, Schemech (1988) stated that "*Learning strategies are a sequence of procedures for accomplishing learning*" On the other hand, Rubin herself (1975) defined them as "*techniques or devices which learners use to acquire knowledge*" Most of these researchers focus on the fact



that these strategies help learners to store, retrieve and use information to encode their own learning (Chamot, 1987, Rubin, 1987 & Oxford, 1990).

As it was expected, the learning process perspective changed totally and theorists were finally on the verge to get closer to a new path, and to focus language learning to its different functions and skills but now from the learner perspective rather than the teaching one. Theorists now believe that second language acquisition or foreign language learning cannot be understood without addressing the interaction between language and cognition (J. Michael O'Malley, Ana Uhl Chamot. "Learning strategies in second language acquisition", 1995:16).

Learning strategies are important tools to help students to pick up their performance with the language better, but it is important to know how we can apply them in our daily learning process. English language has not been the exception. Many theorists and professionals in the area have studied and classified different strategies for the four macro skills: *Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing*. Also, they have carried out studies on different schools, colleges and universities on how to classify and infer which the best learning strategies are for each area. Teaching or instructing university students what the importance of learning strategies is, it helps them in various ways. For example, they have to deal with tasks which are higher in levels. They deal with more demanding skills such as reading a novel, analyzing a poem, listening to lectures, giving a speech or writing an academic paper. Unconsciously, these students apply different kind of learning strategies when dealing with these tasks. For example, they can *organize* their ideas for an essay on a notebook.

Also, they can *plan* their assignments. Besides that, they can *cooperate* with other peers that can have some difficulties to help them up.

Therefore, instructors and professors must encourage students to be able to make themselves responsible of their own learning. Also, they ought to these students to be able to *monitor* their progress and *correct* their own mistakes. As a result, students can be *analytic* and reasonable at the time of choosing a task. Some of these theorists noted that, generally speaking, more successful learners employ language learning strategies more frequently and appropriately than those less successful learners. Actually, research supports the effectiveness of using learning strategies and has shown that successful language learners often use strategies in an integrated way. For example, the use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford, Thompson & Rubin, 1993).

Also successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together in a highly integrated way, adjusted to the requirements of the language task (Chamot & Kupper, 1998). These kinds of learners can easily explain the strategies they use and why they employ them (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Moreover, cognitive and metacognitive strategies are often used together, supporting each other (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Well combined strategies often have more impact than single strategies. In addition, learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed. Besides that, learning strategies expand the role of language teachers whose activities are problem-oriented and involve many aspects not just the cognitive one but also, they can be taught and can be influenced by various factors, etc.

All these ideas and challenges lead to conclude that there are several important reasons why learning strategies should be taught in higher education, specifically English language learning. First, learners who are aware of learning strategies can have better metacognitive processes. Second, many students can learn how to use learning strategies appropriately if they are correctly instructed. Third, many strategies can be used for a variety of tasks when learning English or another language, but students need some guidance at the time of applying them on an specific task. Fourth, learning strategies instruction can encourage students' motivation. Fifth, students are provided with techniques which can help them to be better English learners. Finally, students who learn to apply learning strategies in their learning process become more self-reliable and better able to learn independently.

Different universities have carried out researches and studies on which learning strategies are effective for English speakers. For example, a research on learning strategies in the English language was carried out in a Taiwanese EFL college, where the principal questions were what kind of language strategies students applied in learning English, how they applied them and if they knew about them. The target population was sophomores, juniors, seniors, and college students. At the end of the research it was concluded that the most used strategies were compensation strategies followed by memory strategies.

Some students showed that they do not really use these strategies for their English learning even though they know strategies are available. Others did not know about them. At the end, it was concluded that students could improve their performance in learning English by having their teachers to instruct them about these strategies and at the end, leaving them the decision to apply them or not in their daily learning. According to Taiwanese College, 1998 Researches carried out in other oriental universities show that the most common learning strategies used by students are: *Communicative learning strategies, Compensation and guessing strategies, Socio-affective strategies and mental strategies*. As these research projects show, learning strategies are very important in the process of learning. **(See classification of learning strategies for English language in the attachments)**

After the English language strategies are identified for each group or macro skill, now an important issue emerges: How can they be taught in the classrooms, or more important, how can they be taught in higher education? To begin with, different steps can be carried out. First, teachers must pay attention to their students, their material, and their own way of teaching (Sharkey, 1995). It is necessary for teachers to be aware of their students' context and background like where they graduated from. For example, if they are in a higher education level it is important to know where they studied high school also, if they were instructed or taught on how to be aware of their own learning. In addition, parents' education is very important for this background can help them to improve their kids' level of awareness regarding learning as well as their interests, and learning styles.

Second, teachers must focus learning strategies on their teaching way. At the university for example, teachers should analyze whether it is important or not to include learning strategies in their subjects. If they find it necessary; they should implement them in the course in which learning strategies could be embedded. They could highlight different learning strategies in different ways; for example to instruct students about general learning strategies or to teach English learning strategies if it is the case. Giving clear examples, modeling how these learning strategies may be used, and providing the correct material, students will become motivated and interested (Sharkey, 1995).

Third, teachers should reflect and encourage learner's reflection. At this stage, teachers will take their own experience regarding learning and taking into account their positive and negative events. A lot of important researchers as Graham suggests, "those teachers who have thought carefully about how they learned a language and which strategies are the most appropriate for which tasks, are more likely to be successful in developing 'strategic competence' in their students" (Graham, 1970). Teachers may contemplate that the importance of focusing more in student's learning will help them to be careful on how to teach these learning strategies well.

At the University of El Salvador, specifically at the Foreign Languages Department, none in deep research has been carried out regarding this matter. These strategies have just been taken as another topic for subjects and reports. In a different way, they will be highlighted with the proposal of a co-curricular course to help students get some knowledge and how they can implement those strategies in their daily learning process. Moreover, a survey was administered where there is information concerning students' opinions and

thoughts on the need of instructing learning strategies. Furthermore, surveys data shows that students are on agreement that a unit that instructs such learning strategies is needed. Besides, Surveys were administered by major, and the most important statistical data is: The level to start the instruction is at the beginning of their career also, students used learning strategies empirically not knowing which one is best for the learning activity at front. Furthermore, in the survey, there was a section which students had to classify reflexively different learning strategies.

To address the course properly and organize instruction, a syllabus was designed with general objectives and specific objectives. Such objectives were then divided into the four skills, where each learning strategy is to be taught based on its function to enhanced students learning and efficacy in their studies. Regarding speaking there are different function such as provide a network of communication, create awareness about their possible pronunciation and grammar mistakes, practice their speaking on a natural setting provided by teacher, sharing knowledge among them, etc. Regarding listening there are different functions such as recognize either relevant or irrelevant information, focus on specific information, define and infer correct information, search on their schemata and propose different solutions, etc.

Regarding reading there are also functions as clarifying syntax's errors, identifying the purpose of the writer or the message of the reading, interpreting meaning, etc. Regarding writing it can be said that functions to be taught are check for mechanics and spelling grammar mistakes, organize their ideas coherently, find main ideas from a text to depict the main content, organize their

ideas coherently. Indeed, learning strategies have been focus of studies from different researchers, theorists, and teachers. For instance, a lot of concepts and ideas have surrounded them with the concept of applying them in a daily basis learning process that students carry out in different ways. But the most important goal is to know how to make students aware and conscious about the application of these strategies to their daily thinking processes.

Based on own experiences, as students from the Foreign Languages Department it has been found out the importance of implementing a co-curricular course in which learning strategies are taught and dealt in a systematic way. Furthermore, it has been argued that as students it has not been easy to develop the four macro skills when it has been very difficult to reach the completion of tasks as writing essays, note taking in a class, listening for specific information, speaking fluently, etc. Theoretically and by experience, the importance of implementing these strategies in students' learning process is very remarkable. Moreover, examples from the University of Taiwan and others show results that reflect the positive aspects of taking them into account to improve the standards of learning at the FLD in the University of El Salvador.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- The instruction and application of learning strategies on a Learning process basis must be responsibility for both; teachers and students. Moreover, students have to be interested in learning new ways on how to improve their learning quality; in this way, both the institution and its students get benefits.
- The instruction of learning strategies help students to become more self-profficient, motivated, better in cognitive, social, affective and memory skills, etc. Also, these strategies give a great chance to teachers to expand their roles as instructors and responsible of delivering the information.
- If students learn to apply learning strategies in their learning process, they can be able to choose among a variety of tasks the ones which are better for them. Besides that they can become self-reliable to learn indepently. Moreover, learning styles have to be taken into consideration for these purposes.
- Research projects carried out in oriental and North American universities, colleges, etc; show the importance of instructing learning strategies to their students. It is showed and proved that when students are aware of their learning style and multiple intelligences, they can easily select the



appropriate learning strategy to improve their learning quality and standards.

- Emulating these models at the University of El Salvador, especially at the FLD, will help students from this department and its teachers, to gain self-confidence, options to go out from the typical teaching activities, etc. Also, students will have outstanding standards of knowledge to be better learners.
- Learning strategies addressed to the instruction of the English language is a very important step at the FLD. A different set of strategies is applied for each macro skill: Reading, listening, writing and speaking. If teachers are aware of these strategies, they will expand their role.
- If some principles are more investigated as studying students' beliefs, to choose strategies which can be interlaced with learning styles, training in L2 activities, and students having strategy training during their classes, the standards of education form in institutions will improve and moreover students' learning acquisition too.
- To be aware of which learning strategies students use unconsciously (as the research done at the department showed) can be the starting point to instruct them about these strategies in a formal way through a co-curricular course.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the bibliographical research carried out with some reliable sources as survey statistics, the following recommendations are listed:

- According to some statistic results, it is recommended to instruct a co-curricular course at the beginning of each licenciatura and profesorado first year. This is because the students' knowledge about learning strategies is too vague. Also, because they would like to improve their learning standars so that they can be good students through the process.
- Teachers should be aware of students' needs and backgrounds regarding learning strategies so that their instruction can be easier. Besides that, they should be aware of different activities which can help them expand their role.
- Students at the FLD must be conciously aware of which learning strategies they have to apply. Also, as an extra research, these students' learning styles should also be taken into account so that the best and appropriate activities can be selected for them.
- Teachers at the FLD must focus their classes not only in the teaching but also in their students' learning. This can be done by taking into consideration learning strategies. These strategies can help teachers plan activities for a better learning.

- It would be recommendable to study the background students bring to the University regarding learning. The problem why many students fail in learning processes can have a variety of roots and explanations. The Foreign Languages Department has to be aware of these facts for picking up the standards of education quality.
- A set of activities regarding speaking, reading, listening and writing can be planned and organized to help students out at the beginning of the learning process regarding each licenciatura and profesorado. Later, they can be included in the co-curricular course proposed at the beginning.

## METHODOLOGY

A bibliographical research was carried out to support the topic: "Learning Strategies across the curriculum" in which different steps were followed and completed.

- *Selection of a topic:* Due to the Little research that has been done about learning strategies at the Foreign Languages Department, it was decided to carry out a bibliographical research in which it was going to be highlighted the need to include these strategies across the curriculum to help out students.
- *Search the Literature:* Different books, magazines and confident webliography pages were read and analyzed taking into account just the necessary information for the research. Also, different reading techniques were applied to extract just the most important facts.
- *Develop the argument:* A thesis statement was written taken into account the topic. After it was written, different sub-topics were written to develop supportable arguments of that thesis statement. At the end, all the information was organized in order to argue the topic.
- *Survey the literature:* Reference books and other sources were consulted to check if the ideas and information that was gotten was reliable. Besides that, the literatura was analyzed with different Reading techniques which contributed to survey the literature very well.
- *Critique the literature:* It was picked from a logical, coherent and important point of view to support the topic that was being developed. Different ideas were taken while others were put aside for them did not contribute to the principal purpose: to support the argument.
- *Write the review:* It was written after all the information was collected, analized, organized coherently and summarized to give a better understanding about the point of argument so that readers could have it clear. It was organized in paragraphs which have coherence and cohesion.

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# ATTACHMENTS

## **LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH MACRO SKILLS**

SKILLS	ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES
Reading	Cognitive strategies are useful for this skill. Sentence analysis, discourse analysis and reading for purpose, inferencing, reviewing well, etc.
Listening	A combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies can be used. Note taking, selective attention, inferential clarification, guessing, problem identification
Speaking	Functional planning, cooperation, monitoring mistakes, practicing in natural settings, learning with others, practice.
Writing	Reviewing well, organizational planning, organization of ideas, summarizing, reorganizing information.