UNIVERSITY OF EL SALVADOR
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Universidad de El Salvador
Hacia la libertad por la cultura

ESSAY
"Knowing about Learning Strategies and Learning Styles can be Helpful to Improve the Learning of English as a Second Language"

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UNDERGRADUATE WORK PRESENTED TO OBTAIN THE DEGREE OF:
Lic. en Idioma Ingles Opción Enseñanza

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MAIN CAMPUS, MAY 21ST 2009
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OBJECTIVES

General objective

- To conduct a bibliographical research about the importance of learning strategies and learning styles when learning English as a Foreign Language.

Specific objectives:

- To describe how learning strategies and learning styles are closely related in order to help students through the process of learning English as a Foreign Language.

- To identify the most effective strategies that teachers can apply to each student according to their learning style in order to learn meaningfully and effectively English as a second language.

JUSTIFICATION

Considering that every year, hundreds of students are registered to learn English at the Foreign Language Department in the University of El Salvador. This paper work pretends to demonstrate to teachers and students the importance of knowing new and updated strategies in the classroom. Most of the students are studying Lic. En Idioma Inglés opción enseñanza career, however, not all of them end it for several reasons. Why some students fail English courses? Why some students perform better than others in the classroom? Questions like those make you think several aspects. Learning and teaching English as a second language means lot of work and effort from both parts.

Through this investigation, the researchers will try to find out and demonstrate why it is important that teachers first of all, know about the last researches regarding Learning Strategies and Learning Styles. Second, how they have to be taken into account in the daily lesson plans to teach English as a second language. Third, to know the best learning strategies to use with the different types of learning styles that students have in the classroom. Furthermore, it is important to know whether if it is possible that all these strategies can be taught to the students; so they are aware of their learning process and improve their proficiency in using English at the FLD, and through

this students can understand the purpose of why the usage of certain strategies.

Moreover, once having all this information in formal paper what really matters is how teachers implement it and try to achieve the objectives relating to each course and subject that compounds the curriculum; so students can reach the main goal of not just understanding the learning strategies and styles, but apply them in real context when communicating by using the second language. On the other hand, to know about strategies and styles that work not just to improve the process of learning a second language, but once they become teachers they will be able to be successful in teaching English as a second language, because as teachers they will know when to use certain learning strategies that will be appropriate for each learning style.

At the end, all of these facts allowed the research on “Knowing about learning strategies and learning styles can be helpful to improve the learning of English as a Second Language” and also show the new generations of students, future teachers and professionals in the teaching area that is necessary to take into account the different strategies oriented to improve or create new habits of learning in the population of University Students.

"Why knowing about learning strategies and learning styles can be helpful to improve English as a second language?"

James Baldwin said once: **"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them"**. Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this phrase means that teacher´s performance will be done the same way by the students when they become teachers. There has been a prominent change within the field of language learning and teaching over the last few decades. However, not all the teachers are willing to make changes in their lessons plans because they may not be informed about the recent findings or because they have used the same methodology and strategies which do not take into account the student´s styles.

Research about language learning strategies began in the 1960s. Developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Williams and Burden 1997). In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report when they do learn a second

foreign language, (Rubin and Weden 1987). In 1966, Aaron Carton published his study entitled The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study, which was the first attempt on learning strategies.

Alter Carton & Rubin in 1971, started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, once identified, such strategies could be available to help less successful learners. Rubin classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Wong-Filmore (1976), Tarone (1977), Naiman (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen and Aprek (1981), Weden (1982), Chamot and O´malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Conti and Kolsody (1997), and many others have studied strategies used by language learners during the process of foreign language learning.

According to the literature reviewed about different researchers about this topic like: Douglas Brown, Rebecca Oxford, Rubin and others; when talking about learning strategies it does not mean that it will be only the teacher's work, it is also about helping students to become sufficiently independent learners. So that, students can take control of their own learning process and therefore to be effective, and responsible for what they are doing to learn the target language. There are several aspects that students and teachers have to determine and they will be learning styles, needs and goals. Some people might think that learning strategies cannot be taught, but actually is it possible through a process of awareness raising, in which students become aware of how they are learning and how the strategies can improve their learning.

According to Rebecca L. Oxford (1990) the taxonomy of language learning strategies has two categories: One of them is Direct strategies that are also known as Cognitive strategies, and Indirect strategies also known as Metacognitive strategies. First of all, direct strategies are divided in three areas which are memory, cognitive, and compensation. Second, we have indirect strategy, which also is divided in three categories as well and they are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Also, many linguistics have written about learning styles and strategies, one of them is H. Douglas Brown, and according to him, "**strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information".**

In reference to Rebecca Oxford, Direct Strategies also called cognitive strategies are classified as follow: Memory strategies are one type of learning strategies that learners use in order to learn successfully. This type of strategies helps students to store and retrieve the new information already provided. For instance: A learner associates the words with objects, images or situations that happened in the classroom. Memory strategies are normally used by students to store information in different ways such as rehearsing language at home, keeping vocabulary cards, reviewing lessons, using repetition, using key words, creating visual images or placing words in context. Students may need to work once or twice; to constantly reinforce the memorization in various contexts.

As stated by Douglas Brown, emphasizes that **the development of thinking skills and processes improve the learning through the Cognitive strategy.** These strategies help students to become more strategic and

productive in their learning for instance: you will see some students taking notes while the teacher is talking. The Cognitive strategies involve more direct contact and manipulation of the learning materials. Activities that can be described as cognitive strategies include making mind maps, underlying or highlighting key words, skimming or scanning articles, re-writing, editing and learning from written work, using dictionaries, using clues in reading comprehension and others.

Compensation strategies are specific activities taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster and more effective. In first place, Students make use of these learning strategies that seems to be like “tricks”, to understand things better. Learners that ignore unknown words or have problems to understand meanings normally are willing to guess unknown items by context. Also, other types of activities that students use to compensate new learning situations are: Looking for non linguistic clues such as pictures or gestures; asking others for clarification or paraphrase meanings. Compensation strategies reinforce the weaknesses of learners, moves them to analyze, translate and see things from others perspectives.

In second place, the Indirect strategies which are also divided in three categories as well and they are meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies. One of them is Metacognitive strategies**.** These are the ones that are related to planning and thinking about the learning process, furthermore, students have the opportunity to explore their own learning style, to participate communicatively in every task that involves the usage of the target language.

The metacognitive strategies, give the chance to the students and teachers to evaluate activities that have been used to learn the second language as well. Then we have affective strategies which are used to promote the usage of English as a second language without worrying about mistakes like grammar, pronunciation or spelling. These types of strategies encourage students to experiment by themselves new techniques to learn English. Also, provides self-confidence to the students so that; they feel comfortable and enjoy the process of using a new language.

Finally, we have the Social strategies which are mainly about communicative activities. In this phase students have to be able to be proficient in using English, to be able to participate actively in communicative activities. Students have to be people who actually know and enjoy how to act, talk, and interact with other people in different contexts by using the target language. Moreover, students will also feel comfortable asking for clarifications when they have not understood any specific topic and at the same time they won't be afraid of say what they think, and even get to the point of discussions. In other words, all kind of fluent interaction by using the target language will be a good example for students who are able to produce and comprehend English.

According to Rubin (1975) identified the following strategies used by good language learners:

- **Making reasoned guesses when not sure.**
- **Making an effort to communicate and to learn through communication.**

- **Finding strategies for overcoming inhibitions in target language interaction.**
- **Practicing the language whenever possible.**
- **Monitoring their speech and other classmates.**
- **Attending to forms (grammar)**
- **Paying attention to meaning.**

What is really a matter of concern is to realize that the previous list of language are just some of what a good learner can apply during his/her own learning process. However, there are other strategies that can be used for the same purposes but in different ways. Whether the selected strategies that are given to learners are successful or not it will depends on many factor for example:

- Nature of language task (its structure, purpose, and demands.)
- Characteristics of the learner such as learning style preferences.
- Language – learning aptitude.
- Prior experience with learning other foreign languages.
- Motivation to learn the language, cultural background, age, and personality characteristics.
- Language being learned.
- Learner's level of language proficiency.

No single set of strategies will be appropriate for all learners or for all tasks. Students need to learn how to apply strategies according to what actually works for them. This is where teachers teach learners to be more aware of their learning style, and language strategy preferences.

In 1990, O'Malley and Chamot defined "learning strategies are the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information." But in 1985 O'Malley's classified Language Learning Strategies. **(See chart 1.0 in annexes)**

Planning the learning strategies will help teachers to definitely identify the purpose of the lesson's task and classes. Organizational planning is used mostly to follow the sequence of the main ideas that are going to be used for handling a task. Cooperation is very important in the group; teachers are role models for the students, so they can imitate what teachers do. Working together with learners in different activities will help them to improve the performance; and teachers do not have to forget to provide feedback after all activities. Also, teachers should be opened minded in classes with a variety of student's cultural believes and make diagnoses that allow seeing the educational improvements of the students to guarantee the quality of learning.

Learning Styles, according to H. Douglas Brown **"is a term that refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preferences within an individual. Styles are those general characteristics of intellectual functioning (and personality type, as well) that pertain to you as an individual, and that differentiate you from someone else**".

As stated for other researchers the term learning styles is used to encompass three aspects of the person and they are: preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what and individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation. (Willing, 1988), stated that "**Learning style is inherent and pervasive and is blend of**

cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements". Based on principles of language learning and teaching by H. Douglas Brown, there are different dimensions of learning style; however, we will just mention four of the most common.

First, Independence vs. Dependence, learners that are independent easily find key details from difficult or confusing background, they do not have too much trouble when solving analytical problems or tasks. On the other hand, dependent learners have some issues trying to understand and solve situations because of their lack of information.

Second, Analytic vs. Global processing is kind of related to independent vs. dependent. For this type there is not too much information, however it has been found that the left hemisphere of the brain deals with language though analysis and abstraction. While the right hemisphere, recognizes language as more global auditory or visual patterns. But (Willing 1988), speculates that the right brain learners prefer the kind of processing done by the right side of the brain; are more eager to learn intonation, and rhythms of the target language, whereas left brain learners deal more easily with analytic aspects of target language grammar.

Third, Tolerance for Ambiguity this one stated that learning a language can be a difficult and at times ambiguous endeavor and students who can more readily tolerate ambiguity often shows the best language learning performance. Learning styles have been studied for decades and there are several models that have been proposed by various researchers and based on

observation, each students is an individual; so we have different types of styles that will be explained as follow:

To begin with, we have Auditory Learners, this type of students will be able to recall what they hear, and will prefer oral instructions. The students learn by listening and speaking. Some of the activities that they learn best are: interviewing, debating, participating on a panel, giving oral reports, participating in oral discussions of written material.

Then we have Visual Learners, they are able to recall what they see and will prefer written instructions. These students are sight readers who enjoy reading silently. Some activities that they learn best are: computer graphics, maps, graphs, charts, cartoons, posters, diagrams, graphic organizers, text with a lot of pictures.

Moreover, we have Tactile Learners; they are students with the strength to learn best by touching. They understand directions that they write and will learn best through manipulative. They learn best by drawing, playing board games, making models, following instructions to make something.

To continue with the description of the different types of learners, there are the Kinesthetic Learners who learn by touching and manipulating objects. They need to involve their whole body in learning, they learn best by playing games that involve their whole body, movement activities, making models, following instructions to make something and setting up experiments.

Then we have Global Learners, who are spontaneous and intuitive, they do not like to be bored. Information needs to be presented in an interesting

manner using attractive materials, they learn best by choral reading, recorded books, writing stories, computer programs, games, and group activities.

Finally, the Analytic Learners plan and organize their work. They focus on details and are logical. They learn best if information is presented in sequential steps, lessons are structured and teacher-directed, goals are clear and requirements are spelled out.

Considering all these types of styles, they can be taken as characteristics that differentiate an individual from another. Based on the book : Principles of Language learning and Teaching by H. Douglas **"strategies are those specific attacks that teachers make when they give a problem, they are the moment by moment techniques that we as teachers employ to solve issues posed by second language. There are two types of strategies: *learning strategy and communication strategy*".**

This means that when teaching English as a second language teachers have to prepare their lesson plans with a diversity of techniques or activities that will be explained to the students; so they can comprehend and solve situations by using the target language for instance, role play will be an activity that students can develop on their own, they can transform, create, change, and perform according to how they feel will be easy for them to learn either structures, grammar, or pronunciation. This also will motivate each student to be more independent of their learning process; because what teachers do is just to provide the necessary tools so students can use them on their own to complete tasks.

According to: (Rubin and Thompson 1982) **in order to describe good language learner in terms of personal characteristics, styles and strategies, the following 14 aspects are the ones that identify them. (See chart 1.1 in annexes)**

Based on what has been reviewed, learners now are becoming the real managers of learning and as a consequence, a change in focus from the teachers to the learners seems to be necessary. Nunan refers to this as **learner-centred. The teacher is now the facilitator of learning and should equally deal with the strengths and weaknesses of their learners.** Horwitz (1988) and Wenden (1991) **encourage teachers to discover the prescriptive beliefs of their own students, and then, translate this knowledge into teaching strategies with the purpose of enabling learners to approach second language learning autonomously and successfully. It is also important that students themselves be given opportunities to reflect on their own learning criteria and of how these ideas influence learning.**

The new role of the teacher emerging from these principles will be aim to:

a) **Giving advice, that is, counseling learners on the development of learning objectives and learning strategies.**
b) **Developing in students a series of strategies independent of the teacher's support and leading to individualization, self directed and autonomous learning, both inside and outside the classroom.**
c) **Involving students as much as possible in the whole teaching and learning processes.**

d) **Making students responsible for their decisions and encouraging students' self-assessment and evaluation by stimulating the production of a series of agreed criteria.**
e) **Raising awareness with respected to their use of strategies and on their views, language learning and language teaching.**
f) **Respecting learners´ cognitive style and attempting to match as closely as possible the teaching style with learners´ cognitive style, and**
g) **Creating the circumstances in which students become familiar and apply strategies appropriate for the type of activities being used.**

Furthermore, with the new role of the teacher there are also major findings related to successful language learning and they are the following:

- The teacher must be active in learning and practice.
- Must begin to view the language as a system.
- Must use the language in real communication.
- Must monitor his inter-language.
- Must come to terms with the affective demands of language learning.

So, by knowing the type of students you can have in a class, will give you a better idea to plan your classes. Remember, as teachers should always be focused on the main aim of studies and prepare lessons with certain strategies that would help us to move towards the main goal. When students learn how to use a strategy they become more self-reliant and better able to learn independently without difficulties. The teacher is also supposed to be able to

engage students in the learning process, to provide opportunities for feedback. In other words, we as teachers need to be skillful with our students, finding out their needs, interest, language difficulties and learning styles of the students will help us to get better results and improvements in the class.

To conclude, every student has its own style to learn and understand the strategies that teachers use. It is very important to mention that those strategies can be taught to the students so they can comprehend the way they have been taught. So in the future they can implement the same strategies. Most of the time those strategies are very obvious, for instance: the teacher may ask the students to think about the things they daily do and then create a dialogue that reflects simple present. The student will have a meaningful learning, and will remember that he/she needed to think about the real life example in order to learn the simple present tense. Therefore, if the teacher then explains present progressive tense, the students will remember to use real examples to learn that structure and its meaning.

Moreover, it has been mentioned before that there is not a specific strategy for each one of the styles that were reviewed before. The teacher's job is to be prepared for whatever can happen in the classroom, lesson plans must be flexible because when teaching any subject it is very important to remember that teachers deal with people who have different attitudes, cultural beliefs, and learning styles. In other words, teachers have to plan a class full of all kinds of strategies that can help students to learn in an effective way. Besides that, some students might require more attention; therefore, teachers have to know how to deal with that so all the class works like an orchestra.

But how this can help to the students from the Foreign Language Department and teachers as well?

Based in our experience at The Foreign Language Department, when we were studying subjects like Intensive English Courses every teacher has its own way of teaching, appropriate strategies for each of the subjects, methodology and goals that needed to be reach at the end of every course. It was previously discussed that strategies can be taught, and that there is no specific strategy for each of the styles that students have, but most of the teachers used to explain every technique and that helped us a lot. However, there were some teachers that they were stock, and they did not know how to get student's attention, participation and involvement in the learning process and they had a lot of material to use; but they did not know how to get the best of it.

So this type of research might be helpful for every teacher that is not informed and do not know that everything in the teaching field is evolving. As a matter of fact, based on this investigation, we as researchers realized that the process of learning English as a second language is improving. It is very necessary that since this is a career that is looking to prepare professionals in teaching English as a second language, students and teachers must know every update, because this will help to have people better prepared that will know what to do in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion learning strategies play an important role in the teaching field. Those strategies already mentioned are basically processes that facilitate the performance of students. It becomes more essential because students will use a strategy simply as a tool to accomplish a task. Also, it's so important because when students keep using that strategy, they get to know which strategy works better for them. All this make poor students to become effective students in the classroom.

Teachers should not ignore those strategies which promote language learning that will be useful to teach the goal of being able to speak fluently. Also, it is very necessary to understand and there is no doubt that all students have individual and different learning styles. Can you imagine the different behaviors that each student uses to learn a new language? In a class you may have shy, sociable, introvert and extrovert students. However, what is important is not keep on using the same general strategy for a group of a variety of students. Otherwise, instead of getting effective results, you might have a lot of confused students with problems to understand and assimilate information. They may get frustrated of not learning the language and their performance will be very low and they won't be motivated at all. Some students could even fail the course as a result of that.

As a summary, we can realize that to be informed and updated about changes in the teaching field is something that benefits both sides, the teachers and students. By doing this, the classroom won't be a monotonous place. Instead the teacher would become a facilitator to help the students to become independent learners as it was exposed in this bibliographical paper. One researcher said: **"Who dares to teach must never cease to learn"** by John Cotton Dana, means that we as future teachers, and the ones that are already teaching, never have to stop investigations about updates, because learning and teaching is about improving and being the best in our field.

METHODOLOGY

To complete this bibliographical research paper about the topic: “Knowing about Learning Strategies and Learning Styles can be Helpful to Improve the Learning of English as a Second Language”, there were six steps to be followed by the researchers and they were:

First step is choosing a topic, which it was not difficult because a list of topics was given. Then the topic was narrow because it was too wide. The topic was presented and approved by the assessors.

Second Gathering materials, once the topic was approved; the researchers have to look for book, articles and information from the internet. After doing that we had to take notes and read the information from the books. They had to discard the information that was not necessary for the research.

Third, the researches stated a thesis statement that is basically an argument that has to be supported and defended through the whole essay.

Fourth step, the researchers made a tentative outline that helped them to organized the main ideas logically. It contains introduction, body of the essay and conclusion.

Fifth step, organized all notes gathered before, analyze the information and verify that it was updated. Check if all the information was going to support the thesis.

Finally, the researchers wrote the essay with the information that was provided, analyzed and critized from the books and other sources. It took a little time to correct the mistakes, punctuation but at the end, the final essay was finished.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Foreign Language Department should promote among the teachers more investigations about the latest researches concerning learning strategies and learning styles, so students can be informed and more prepare to handle certain situations in the classroom.

- Students should attend conferences about how to use the learning strategies and learning styles to be applied in the classroom to become effective teachers.

- Students at the Foreign Language Department should be aware that deep research will lead to a better understanding of learning strategies and learning styles and how they work all together in a classroom.

- Students to be future teachers need to understand that the main goal of any subject is very important and the usage of different tools that we have as teachers will permit us to have a successful learning process.

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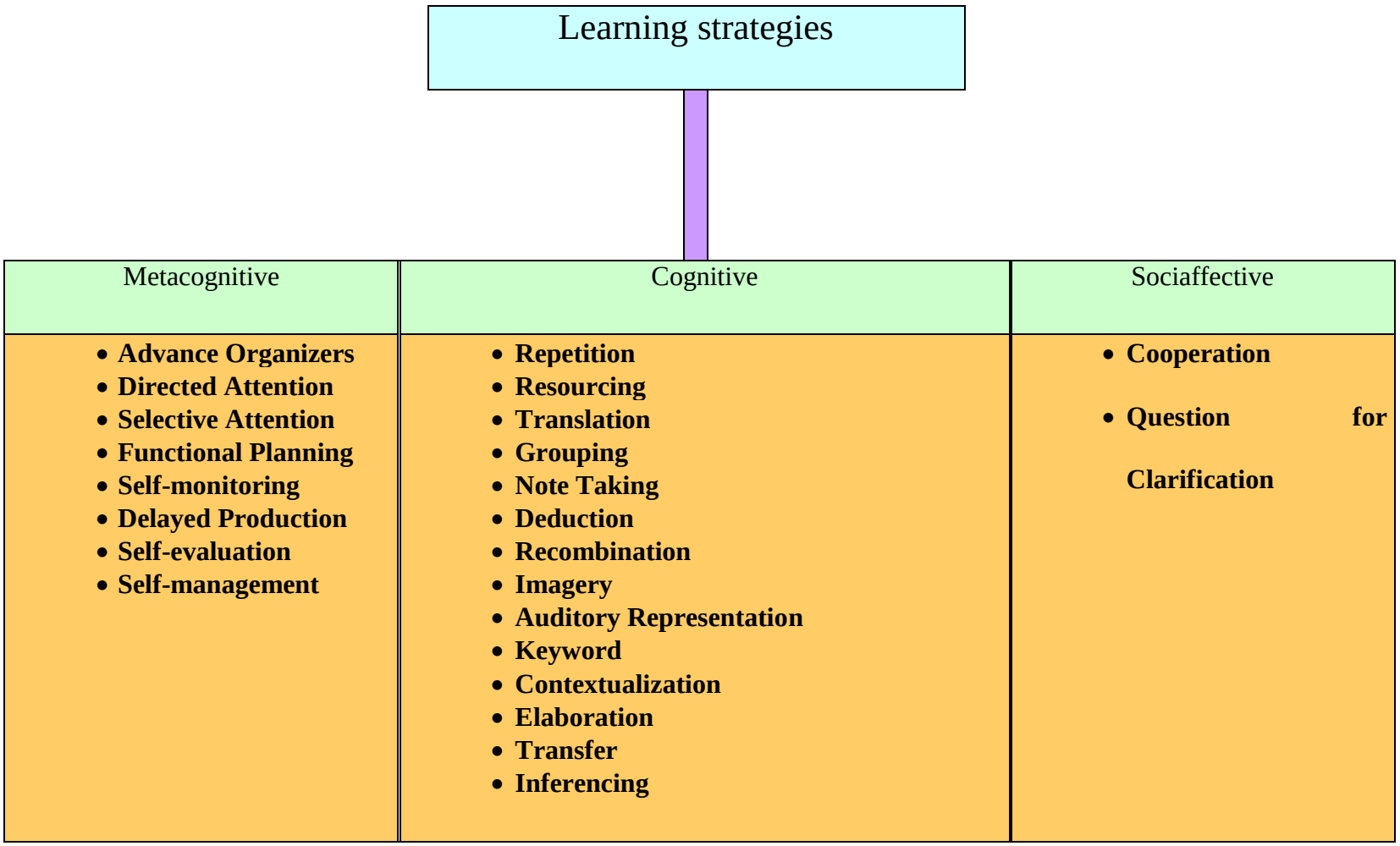
Internet sites:

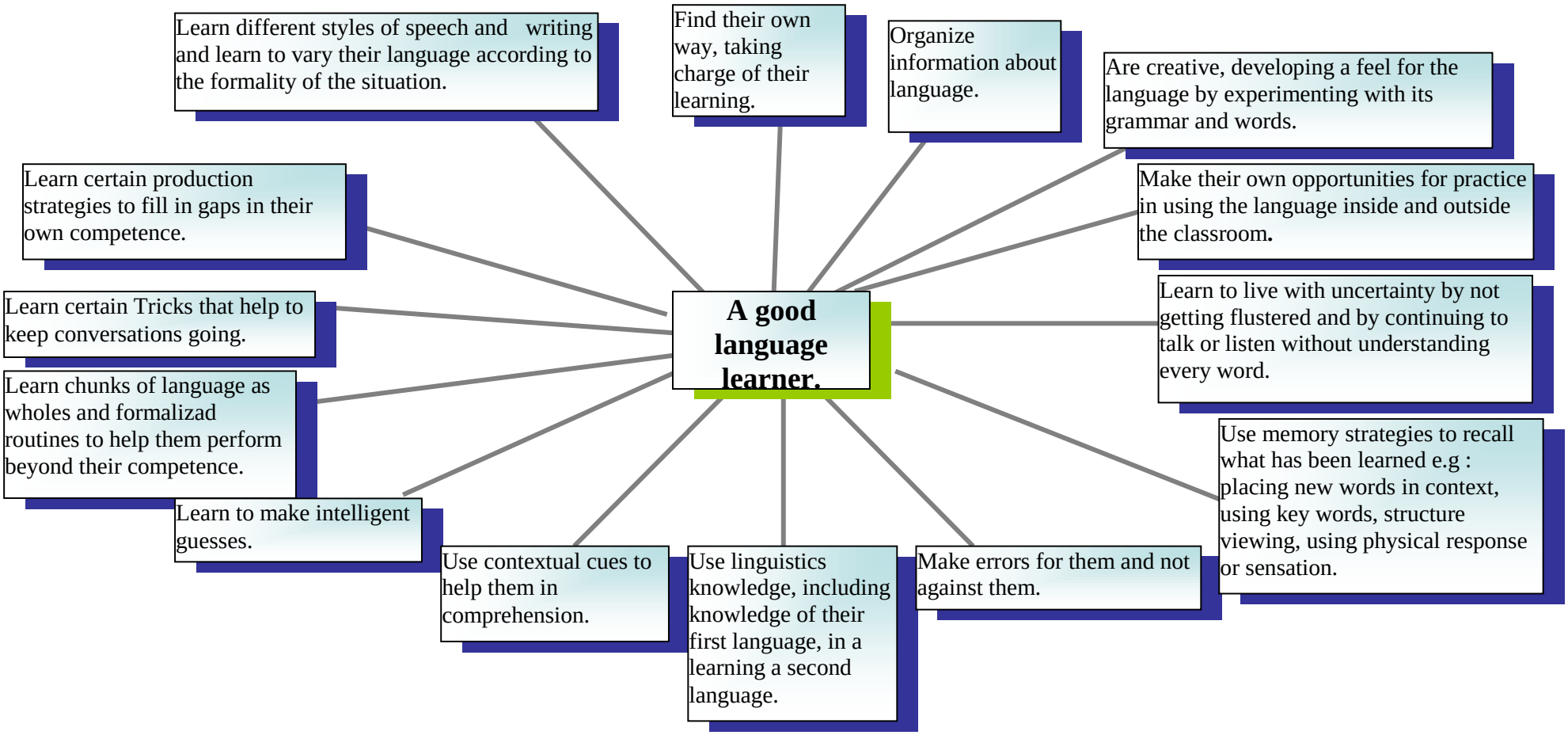
- www.usd.edu/trio/tut/ts/styleres.html

- eccill@inet.polyu.edu.hk
- www.cat.ilstu.edu/additional/active.php

ANNEXES

LEARNING STRATEGIES ACCORDING TO: O'Malley's Classification of Language Learning Strategies (1985) (chart 1.0)




A good language learner.
Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.
Find their own way, taking charge of their learning.
Organize information about language.
Are creative, developing a feel for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words.
Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
Make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.
Learn certain Tricks that help to keep conversations going.
Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalizad routines to help them perform beyond their competence.
Use memory strategies to recall what has been learned e.g : placing new words in context, using key words, structure viewing, using physical response or sensation.
Learn to make intelligent guesses.
Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
Use linguistics knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in a learning a second language.
Make errors for them and not against them.

(chart 1.1)