

LEARNER TRAINING: FROM THEORY TO CLASSROOM REALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of language teaching and applied linguistics in the last few years there has been growing interest in the process of learning. This has led to extensive research into the way people learn languages and in particular into the kind of strategies they use. As a result of this research "learner training" has come into vogue: the training of learners in appropriate use of language learning strategies. These strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information". (O'Malley and Chamot¹).

However, while learner training has become fashionable in research and teaching circles, as yet there have been relatively few attempts to comprehensively integrate learner training into foreign language learning programmes. There is still a considerable distance between the theory of learner training, and the practice of learner training in foreign language classrooms. This article aims to look at ways of bridging this gap and of implementing learner training at secondary school level. We will look at the following areas: curricular objectives, models for learner training, learner training in syllabus planning and task design of learner training activities.

I. THE SECONDARY LEARNING SITUATION

At first sight the secondary school classroom would seem to be the least hospitable place of all for learner training to flourish. Many classes are large and many students have little or no intrinsic motivation. Many teachers are justifiably sceptical about the new waves of methodological fashion which from time to time wash over the language teaching profession. Is learner training then just another fad or fashion that will come and go?

To answer this question we need to define exactly what learner training is and what it is not. Like

¹ O'Malley, J.M. / Chamot, A. (1991) *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. CUP.

all buzz-words there are perhaps many misconceptions about it. Learner training does not involve just letting students get on with things and the teacher effectively taking early retirement. Learner training is not even synonymous with learner autonomy, even though the two often go hand in hand. Fundamentally, learner training involves a conscious focus on the learning process itself, not just on the language. A working definition could be that learner training is the systematic and explicit training of learners in learning strategies in general (metacognitive strategies) and strategies for dealing with language and communication in particular (cognitive strategies).

Learner training can be integrated into traditional whole class teaching as well as into classroom situations where students have more opportunities for autonomy. As Allright² points out, there is in fact more individualisation in a traditional classroom than we might think. Classes are after all a collection of individual learners who are all learning different things in different ways. However, if we do give learners more opportunity to work on their own or in groups, learner training must take an even higher profile. Learner training can provide students with the support needed to learn on their own and start taking responsibility for their own learning.

What is certain is that the need for learner training at secondary level is possibly even greater than for adult students. One of the broader educational aims of secondary education is to provide students with the strategies for learning which they can then carry on to tertiary education and adult life. A few years ago, in a more static society, students needed to dominate a relatively fixed body of declarative knowledge. Now, with the pace of scientific and technological change, students need to be able to learn and adapt. Skills and strategies that can be transferred to other fields have become much more important than the retention of knowledge.

In addition to these overall aims there is a particular need for development of learning skills in the field of language learning. Many secondary language learners are what could be called "long-term". They will be involved in language learning throughout their school careers and many will continue afterwards. For example, their work they may be called upon to upgrade their first foreign language or learn another one.

II. CURRICULAR OBJECTIVES: THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

The first stage of implementation of a programme of learner training is at the curricular level, something taken into account by the "DCB" curricular document in Spain. Communication and learning skills are given greater importance in terms of objectives than actual linguistic content. In addition, an important place is given to conscious "reflection on language and learning", in terms of concepts to learn, skills to develop and attitudes to acquire. Quite specific guidance is provided in the DCB curricular document for skills development (for example for receptive skills, text types

² Allright, R. (1988) *Autonomy and Individualisation in Whole Class Instruction. From: Individualisation and Autonomy in Language Learning*. ELT Documents 131. Ed Brookes, A. Modern English Publications/British Council.

and target sub-skills are stipulated). In addition, conscious learning strategies are outlined, both metacognitive and cognitive:

Learning strategies in the DCB: (First cycle of ESO)³

Listening:

- Use of non-linguistic clues.
- Awareness of the need for extensive listening (rather than trying to understand everything in a text).
- Ignoring words that are not known.

Speaking

- Use of rules of discourse (turn-taking etc).
- Awareness of error as part of the learning process.
- Compensation strategies: using communication strategies to overcome difficulties, asking for help, clarification, use of cognates.
- Avoidance strategies: use of simple constructions / referring to the functions of an object

Reading

- Use of available communication strategies to overcome problems of comprehension.
- Awareness of the need for extensive reading (rather than trying to understand everything in a text).

- Ignoring words that are not known.
- Use of elaboration: taking into account previous knowledge.
- Inference of meaning from context.

Writing

- Awareness of error as part of learning process.
- Maximum use of linguistic and sociocultural resources available.

Reflection on learning

- Understanding of principal mechanisms implied in language learning.
- Awareness of importance of participation and positive attitude.
- Awareness of own knowledge about language as support.
- Importance of risk-taking.
- Self-monitoring.
- Conscious use of learning strategies such as: paraphrasing, deduction, grouping
- Awareness of task types and communication strategies (such as use of cognates).
- Self-assessment.

³ MEC (1992) *Secundaria Obligatoria*, pages 46-52.

-Awareness of group dynamics

Some of the objectives above are somewhat opaque such as: "understanding of the principal mechanisms implied in language learning" (many a researcher in applied linguistics would be happy to achieve this objective). One could also possibly point to the lack of self-management activities, but the objectives here basically match many of the strategies set out in some of the inventories worked out by researchers (Chamot and O'Malley/Oxford⁴). And the DCB clearly advocates conscious training of learning strategies to students.

The DCB provides a useful start by clearly establishing learner training objectives in a national curriculum document, but unfortunately this is only the first step. The next step is to make it clear to secondary teachers what learner training actually is. They are the ones who are responsible for transforming the overall curricular objectives into syllabus plans and materials for their classes.

Top-down training, merely providing the theoretical background for strategy training, will not be successful here. Firstly, teachers need to see practical models for learner training. Secondly, they need to see examples of how learner training can be integrated into syllabus plans. Finally, they need to see actual examples of learner training activities which they can try out for themselves with their own students.

III. LEARNER TRAINING MODELS

Thus the first stage in implementation of learner training is the production of learning strategy models in terms of the classroom as opposed to those coming out of research. O'Malley and Chamot do this by suggesting a new approach for ESL students based around strategy teaching, called the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach⁵.

They call for the wholesale incorporation of strategy training into teaching English as a second language in the United States. Amongst other things, they produce a detailed list of strategies based on those identified in their research, but couched in slightly more practical language. Extract from CALLA objectives:

SELF-MANAGEMENT

- | | |
|---|--|
| -Descriptive study | -Instructional model |
| -Understanding the conditions that help one | -Seeking or arranging the conditions that help |

⁴ O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) *Learner strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students*. *Language Learning*, 35, pages 21-45
Oxford, R.L. (1990) *Language Learning Strategies: What every teacher should know*. Newbury House.

⁵ O'Malley/Chamot (1991) *Learner Training Strategies in 2nd language acquisition*. CUP

learn and arranging for the presence of those conditions.

one learn, such as find opportunities for additional language or content input and practice.

While simpler than the research model, the instructional framework that is offered here is still somewhat complex. Another instructional model is that provided by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) in their book *Learning to Learn*⁶. They produce an expanded and adapted version of previous strategy inventories, expressed in more practical terms.

For example:

Metacognitive:

Strategy:

Description

Advance preparation:

Planning and preparing oneself for a language activity.

Expanding subject awareness:

Finding out about English and language learning.

Keeping a diary:

Writing a personal record of and reflecting on language learning, daily events and experiences.

Cognitive:

Strategy:

Description

Memorising:

Learning language items by heart.

Risk-taking:

Feeling confident enough to try something out in L2 and not worrying about making mistakes.

Translation:

Using L1 as a base for understanding and or producing L2.

Communication:

Strategy:

Description.

Creating time to think:

Using "thinking-time" techniques when speaking in order to sound fluent and provide time when making an appropriate response.

These examples from Ellis and Sinclair's list of objectives show the practical way in which strategies are expressed. The full typology of strategies is also backed up with references to actual tasks which deal with them. Ellis and Sinclair's book *Learning to Learn English* thus provides an extremely useful instructional model for learner training.

⁶ Ellis,G. and Sinclair,B. (1989) *Learning to Learn English*. CUP.

In the following pages an alternative framework will be presented, which aims above all to provide teachers with a clear overview of learning strategies (source: original). This framework is based on the strategy inventories referred to earlier and organised to fit in with other objectives which teachers are already familiar with (eg: the skills v language). First is the division into learning strategies, related to organisation and awareness of learning itself, and language strategies, related to dealing with communication and language:

LEARNER TRAINING OBJECTIVES

Learning strategies		Language strategies	
<i>learner organisation</i>	<i>learner awareness</i>	<i>communication</i>	<i>language</i>
resources available	learning styles	speaking	assimilation
infrastructures	needs/goals	listening	memory
self-study	self-assessment	reading	self-editing
opportunities	attitudes/group dynamics	writing	monitoring

Communication strategies can then be looked at in greater detail, with strategies relating to each of the four skills:

Communication strategies

Speaking: -paralinguistic features, mime gesture.

- conversation management: active listening/changing direction
- gaining time: hesitation/lubricators/waffling
- avoidance: synonyms/circumlocution
- repair strategies: dealing with error
- practice/rehearsal
- risk-taking
- affective factors

Listening: -affective factors: dealing with uncertainty

- goal setting/ prediction / using personal knowledge
- awareness of extensive listening
- awareness of context/style/register
- guessing: use of paralinguistic clues
- use of cohesive devices/key words
- summarising/chunking/note-taking
- expressing misunderstanding

Reading: -goal setting/prediction/using personal knowledge

- awareness of extensive reading
- awareness of text types/style/register

- use of visual clues/diagrams, etc
- use of cohesive devices/anaphoric/cataphoric reference
- chunking/note taking
- dictionary use
- inference of meaning from context

- Writing:**
- goal setting: content/audience
 - brainstorming/mind maps
 - planning: text coherence/paragraphs
 - drafting: cohesive devices/dictionary use/avoidance
 - strategies: simplification/paraphrase
 - self/peer editing

In the same way, strategies for dealing with linguistic content can be sub-divided:

Language Strategies

- Assimilation:**
- deduction/induction (of language rules/patterns)
 - metalinguistic awareness (eg: grammatical terminology)
 - translation/transfer (L1-L2)
 - grouping/classification (of new language)

- Memory:**
- grouping/classification of language
 - use of images/sounds
 - word association
 - practice/rehearsal
 - transfer

- Editing/monitoring:**
- self-editing
 - peer/group editing
 - self/peer/group monitoring
 - awareness of error

Let us look briefly at each of the four main areas outlined in this strategy framework:

1- Learner organisation:

This area deals with the more practical areas of self-management of learning. It is concerned with establishing the mechanics of learner independence. Firstly, students need to be aware of the resources at their disposal: for example the textbook, activity book, bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, and simplified readers. Secondly they need to build up their own resources or "learner infrastructures". These may include class notebooks, vocabulary books, grammar banks and learner diaries. Thirdly, they need to think about how they can practise or study outside the class and what

options they have available to them.

2- Learner awareness:

This involves both awareness of learning in general and awareness of individual learning. In general terms it can be useful for learners to think about different learning styles and strategies at their disposal. In more specific terms, learners then need to think about their own learning. Establishing needs, setting goals and then assessing progress are the three basic steps involved here. Self-assessment is a particularly crucial strategy around which many other strategies hang. Learners need to be able to assess their own learning styles and reflect on the strategies they use. In addition: to these metacognitive strategies, other factors are also touched upon here, what Oxford refers to as "affective" and "social" strategies. Affective factors or feelings are very important in language learning where students have to deal with frequent uncertainty and frustration. Social factors are also important and reflection on class and group dynamics can improve students' learning environments.

3- Communication strategies:

These are "direct" cognitive strategies related to communication. They can be best classified according to the four skills and in syllabus design there is an overlap between communicative objectives (or skills) and learner training objectives. The difference between the two is that skills development is not done consciously, students are not made aware of the sub-skills that they are using. When students are encouraged to think consciously about the way that they communicate we can talk about communication strategies. Activities developing sub-skills, such as listening for gist, have for a long time been a common feature of material for secondary students. Activities discussing the strategies we use for listening and making students aware of gist listening are not so common.

4- Language strategies:

There are three areas involved in helping students to develop strategies to deal with language. The first is assimilation, when learners are faced with working out rules of structure or usage of new language that is presented to them. After the initial assimilation of new language comes the need to memorise language and rules (memory strategies) and at the same time to iron out any problems or mistakes in performance (editing/monitoring strategies).

IV. SYLLABUS DESIGN

Having worked out a overall framework of a learner training programme we need to move on to the stage of syllabus design. In terms of syllabus design there is a continuum between two poles: "traditional" syllabus design on the one hand where objectives are clearly prescribed beforehand and "learner-centred" syllabus design on the other, where objectives come out of a process of negotiation between learners and teacher.

Learner training would seem to be much more suitable for a "negotiated" syllabus, where individualisation and autonomy have a much greater influence. The very process of negotiation can activate students' metacognitive strategies. However, as Nunan points out, the degree of negotiation possible depends on the educational context⁷. Individual or small group learning in tertiary or adult contexts can allow a much greater degree of autonomy than secondary schools. In most secondary school situations only a limited degree of negotiation is possible, due to the curricular objectives clearly laid out by the ministry as well as to the practical difficulties. A certain degree of negotiation is possible, but students are obliged by law to cover the key objectives outlined in the ministry document.

One approach (suggested by the Spanish ministry) is that based on task-based units, planned by teachers with a degree of input from students. Therefore, for the implementation of the learner training objectives in the curriculum, it is important for teachers to interweave them with other elements such as skills development and linguistic content. The task becomes the organising principle around which other objectives are planned (Estaire/Zanon)⁸.

Another, slightly different approach is for the organising principle of syllabus design to be thematic. This approach can be used not only for individual units, but for complete courses. A thematic approach to syllabus design (Harris/Mower)⁹:

⁷ Nunan, D. (1988) *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. CUP

⁸ Estaire, S. and Zanon, J. (Forthcoming) *A task-based approach*. Heinemann.

⁹ Harris, M. and Mower, D. (1991) *World Class*. Longman. Diagram from: Harris/Murcia et al. (1993) Aspectos didácticos de inglés 4. Educación abierta, 104, ICE Universidad de Zaragoza.

ORGANISING PRINCIPLE

Language is both learnt
and acquired. Student
motivation is paramount.

THEMES

SKILLS

listening
reading
speaking
writing

LANGUAGE

grammar
functions
lexis
pronunciation

LEARNER TRAINING

Learner awareness/organisation
Communication strategies
Language strategies

In this content-based model learner training serves as a "service syllabus", feeding into both language and skills as well as focussing on learning itself.

V. LEARNER TRAINING PROGRAMMES

From overall models of syllabus design, the next step is to use the syllabus inventory (or in the case of Spanish secondary schools the objectives laid out in the DCB) to work out a sequence or programme of implementation and to begin to think about the kind of tasks that can be used to carry it out. Three phases can be distinguished:

Phase 1: Setting things in motion

While learner training should be integrated throughout a whole course, and at syllabus design level learner training objectives should be closely interweaved with others, there is a need to spend more time on it at the start of a course. Thus it is possible to think of a zero module, where there is a high concentration of learner training activities. It is particularly important for students to organise themselves, to be aware of the resources at their disposal and begin to establish their own "infrastructures", which can include learner diaries, vocabulary books, grammar notes etc. They can also think about learning styles in general terms and carry out an initial self-assessment. This period can vary according to the time available in the course.

Phase 2: Dealing with performance

The next stage is to integrate learner training activities into day to day classroom tasks. Here

the more direct cognitive strategies can be focussed on and discussed consciously. For example, strategies for dealing with speaking, listening, reading and writing can be discussed and put into practice. Dictionary work is particularly important for reading and writing.

Phase 3: Reviewing progress

The final stage is the review or revision stage, when a series of learner training activities can help students deal with their problems and assess their own progress. Memory strategies, self-editing and self-assessment are the most important strategies.

Here is an example of a learner training syllabus used in an intermediate coursebook for secondary learners:

Extract from: Learner training syllabus plan (*World Class 4*¹⁰):

Zero module: Learning to learn

A. Organising your learning:

Using the textbook. Using the resources available to you.

Evaluating learning styles: classroom activity survey.

Metalinguistic awareness: revision of terms.

Planning grammar notes. Learner diaries (teacher's book)

B. Understanding English:

Strategies for listening: discussion of goal setting/prediction/ extensive listening.

Strategies for dictionary use.

Organising vocabulary books.

Learner awareness: talking about learning problems

C. Speaking and writing:

Strategies for speaking: discussion of avoidance strategies/ simplification of discourse/affective factors

Writing strategies: editing/brainstorming/planning

Module 1: Fashion

Reading: dictionary use

Speaking: shopping strategies: avoidance/non-linguistic communication/repair/rehearsal

Writing: editing/self-editing/assessment

Vocabulary: storage and grouping of lexis

Language: deduction/induction: rule completion
editing/problem areas

Learning: self-assessment of progress so far/self-check

¹⁰ Harris and Mower, op. cit.

VI. LEARNER TRAINING TASKS

Having established a clear programme to develop learner training throughout the academic year, we then need to think about suitable tasks. Here is a breakdown of some of the actual tasks that could be used to start students off at the beginning of the year.

Familiarisation with textbook: students match pictures with the topics dealt with in the book; students answer a quiz about the textbook (eg: What is in the picture on page 23?); students work out their own quizzes in pairs or groups for others in the class to answer.

Awareness of resources: students match descriptions (eg: monolingual dictionary) and drawing (of dictionary) in a diagram; students list the learning resources at their disposal and then think about which are the most important.

Awareness of learning styles: in pairs students do a survey activity about what classroom activities are most useful for them; students answer a learner questionnaire about what kind of learner they are.

Listening strategies: students evaluate advice about listening: good/bad (Example: Stop listening if you don't understand every word = bad advice); students list the strategies they have used during a listening activity; students order strategies.

Speaking strategies: students match advice with problems; students think of advice to give to solve problems; students select appropriate speaking strategies for specific situations (eg: telephoning/shopping)¹¹.

Perhaps, it might be useful for teachers to provide them with task typologies, listing the tasks which can be used to develop different strategies. In this way teachers can then produce their own tasks and integrate learner training into their task-based units. Here is an example of a typology, listing activities that can be used to develop self-assessment of learning and self-monitoring and editing.

Activity types for self-assessment¹²:

DESCRIPTIONS:

1. Profiles -students write reports about their English and give them to the teacher.
2. Learner diaries -students keep learner diaries: records of what they have done in class, what they have learnt and what problems they have had.
3. Counselling -teacher talks to students individually about their own progress.

¹¹ Examples of the learner training activities above can be seen in Harris and Mower (1991) *World Class 1.2.3 and 4*. Longman.

¹² Harris, M. and McCann, P. (forthcoming) *Assessment*. Heinemann.

RATING:

4. Rating scales -students rate their performance or progress using a rating scale with descriptors (eg- 5- Can use this structure with no problems at all).
5. Peer rating -students rate partner's performance.
6. General rating -students give themselves an impression mark for different areas (eg: reading).
7. Graphs -students rate how much they have understood by using a graph.
8. Adjectives -students choose from lists of adjectives to describe their own attitudes or performance.

MONITORING/EDITING

9. Peer editing -students look through their partners' compositions and try to correct mistakes.
10. Correction codes -students use the teacher's correction code to try and correct their own mistakes in writing.
11. Taping -students listen to a recording of themselves and try to correct mistakes.
12. Grading mistakes -students grade mistakes in order of seriousness.
13. Test yourself -students do short tests to check how much they know.

QUESTIONNAIRES:

14. Listing -students list specific problems for them, like words that they have difficulty pronouncing.
15. Ranking preferences -students rank activities in terms of which they enjoy.
16. Ranking problems -students rank areas that are difficult for them.
17. Multiple choice questions -students ask questions about their styles/learning habits/attitudes, etc.
18. Agreeing/disagreeing -students agree or disagree with statements about learning.
19. Can/cannot questions -students answer questions about what they can or cannot do.
20. Short answer questions -students answer questions about their preferences, performance or progress.

SURVEYS:

21. Group surveys -students find out about each other's learning preferences or problems and then report the group results to the rest of the class.
22. Class surveys -students go around the class and ask questions about learning to the others.

Compiling such task typologies is time consuming, but could form a basis on which teachers could start to create their own learner training materials.

CONCLUSIONS

Implementation of training in learning strategies is perhaps not as easy as many researchers and educational planners might think. The implementation of learner training in secondary schools will take both time and effort. Here are some suggested pointers for the way forward.

1. Teacher training in this field needs to be practical and not only in terms of cognitive theory. Training should be conducted by people who have done learner training of students themselves and should include examples of learner training activities.
2. Teachers need to be supplied with clear frameworks of learner training objectives, to get an overview of the areas involved.
3. In terms of syllabus design, teachers need clear models of how to interweave learner training objectives with other syllabus components.
4. In terms of programming learner training activities over the academic year, three stages can be identified:
 - a: Preparation: at the start of the year.
 - b: Performance: linked to classroom activities throughout the year.
 - c: Review: revision and review of progress at periodic intervals throughout the year
5. Task typologies of learner training activities should be worked out for major strategies, to provide teachers with a springboard for producing their own materials.
6. Research is urgently needed on the effectiveness of learning strategy instruction for EFL learners in the Spanish context.

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