

# **Teaching Language Learning Strategies to English as Second Language (ESL) Learners**

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## **Abstract**

Trends in teaching and learning of English as second language (ESL) have undergone a great transformation during the last century. The focus of ESL teachers is turning towards empowering their students to become independent learners beyond the classroom. Language educators have started realising the close link between language learning and content instruction. This concern has led to the adoption of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) instruction and cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA) to improve the teaching and learning of ESL at all levels. During the last three decades, a number of practical models and theories have been developed that create connections between ESL learning and curriculum concepts. Teaching strategies being used in ESL classrooms have also developed over time and are rendered more importance in success in ESL teaching and learning. The current essay focuses on the topic of teaching and learning strategies used in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** English as second language (ESL), teaching and learning strategies, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA)

There has been a shift in the trends in teaching and learning of English as Second Language (ESL) during the last century. The focus of English language teachers is turning towards empowering their students to become independent learners beyond the classroom (Troncale 8). Language educators have also awakened to the close link between language learning and content instruction (Lessow-Hurley 12). This concern has led to the adoption of content and language integrated learning instruction (CLIL) in English. It is widely believed today that CLIL helps in improving the teaching and learning of ESL at all levels (Madrid and Sanchez 110).

Teaching and learning context has also gained the attention of English language researchers and teachers. Context is considered to be one of the pivotal factors in learning another language (Chapman and Pyvis 293). During the last three decades, a number of practical models and theories have been developed that create connections between ESL learning and curriculum concepts (Haworth 4). Teaching strategies being used in ESL classrooms have also developed over time and are rendered more importance in success in ESL teaching and learning (Haworth 28). Throughout the world there has been a shift in the educational theories and practices towards becoming learner-centred during the post-modern age. Successful learning largely depends now on providing for the learning needs and interests of the learners (Gujjar et al. 39).

### **Topic Identification and Rationale**

Oxford (406) highlights the role good language learning strategies play in the success of language learners. Cohen (2) also supports the effectiveness of language learning strategies in learning a second language. The strategies range from metacognitive and

cognitive learning strategies to performance and affective strategies. According to Chamot (16), students of any level can use learning strategies for learning a second language. The difference lies only in the way these strategies are used.

### **Search Procedure and Range of Sources**

The search procedure included library and internet search. Information was collected from books, journal articles, newspaper articles, presentations and conference papers written and presented by various international language researchers and experts. All the three types of source materials as listed by Mutch (94) were used for this research, namely human, textual and electronic sources. The main search engine used was Google. The databases used were Google Scholar, A+ Education, ERIC via EBSCO host, Education Research Complete and Scopus. Keywords and phrases used were: English as Second language; integrated content and language instruction; cognitive academic language learning approach; cognitive academic learning proficiency; language learning strategies.

There were two major limitations faced during searching for relevant literature. First, major literature on learning strategies and CALLA has been written by Chamot. Second, no significant literature could be found specifically targeting language learning strategies instruction in higher education. Therefore, the current essay has been based on the best relevant international literature on learning strategies available through the accessible research sources.

### **Identification and Discussion of Relevant Theories and Research**

The concept of integration of language and content in an ESL classroom is a modern

trend which demands the language practitioners to shun the traditional ESL teaching practices (Rodríguez Torras 126). In a content and language integrated class, language is taught through content/curriculum. Cummins (qtd. in Baker 169) and Reyes and Vallone (20), describe this distinction as: basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP). BICS takes place in the presence of contextual supports and props for language delivery in a “context embedded situation”. Whereas, CALP occurs in "context reduced" academic situations and in the presence of high order thinking skills in the curriculum (Reyes and Vallone 20).

### **Language Learning Strategies**

Patricia et al. (148) posit that teachers find certain instructional strategies quite effective while the ESL teaching and learning is taking place. Brown defines strategies as “specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling or manipulating certain information” (113). Chamot states that learning strategies are “the techniques or procedures that facilitate a learning task” (25). She further explains that “learning strategies are directed towards a goal and, as mental procedures, are not directly observable, though some learning strategies may result in specific behaviours” (p.25).

Learning strategies are steps which can either be thoughts or actions, taken by language learners to assist and monitor their own learning. Strategies used by students include ways to understand, remember and recall information and evaluate themselves at the completion of the task. Teaching students learning strategies is an effective way of enhancing their ESL learning (Chamot and O’Malley 261; Chamot and Kupper

248; Cohen 1; Chamot 18; Chamot and Robbins; Chamot). Oxford and Crookall (405) report that CALLA has provided an effective framework for teaching language learning strategies to ESL students at all levels including higher education. Chamot and O'Malley (229) posit that in CALLA, ESL learners are instructed how to apply learning strategies derived from a cognitive model of learning. These learning strategies aid ESL learners in comprehension and retention of both language skills and concepts embedded in the content/curriculum realms.

Chamot (67) points out two major reasons that make learning strategies hold a significant place in ESL learning. First, in gaining an insight into the cognitive, social and affective processes involved in language learning. Second, in helping weak ESL learners become better language learners. Chamot further highlights two major goals in language learning strategy research: to identify and compare the learning strategies used by successful language learners and provide learning strategies instruction to less successful ESL learners to help them to be more successful in language learning. Chamot reports that English language teachers' training in teaching language learning strategies is neglected. She stresses the need for developing effective procedures to help ESL teachers make learning strategies an integral part of their teaching practice. Hence, learning strategies instruction plays a pivotal role in enhancing ESL learning.

### **Components of CALLA**

Chamot and O'Malley point out three components of CALLA: English language development integrated with content subjects, a curriculum correlated with mainstream content areas, and instruction in the use of language learning strategies (231).

## **The Content-based Curriculum**

According to Chamot and O'Malley (236) and Chamot (67), one of the major purposes of CALLA is to provide a descriptive framework for helping ESL students to learn English language through CLIL curriculum. It does not only help in developing academic language skills but it also attracts more student interest than those English language classes where focus is given to language only.

## **English Language Development**

Chamot and O'Malley (260) state that the second component of CALLA is to develop the academic language skills of ESL learners. Cummins (qtd. in Chamot, 236) indicates two dimensions that help in better describing the language learning demands of ESL learners. The first dimension is concerned with the application of non-verbal contextual cues which assist English language learners in comprehension, while the second is concerned with the complexity of the cognitive demands of language comprehension where context cues have been reduced. Non-verbal contextual cues include concrete objects, gestures, facial expressions and visual aids. Whereas, contextual cues reduced language tasks include vocabulary, grammar drills, and following directions. Hence, cognitively demanding tasks invoke "higher level reasoning and integrative language skills" (Chamot and O'Malley 237). Chamot and O' Malley (237) combined the two dimensions to classify language use task into four categories: Easy and contextualised (cognitively undemanding), difficult but contextualised (context embedded), context reduced but easy, and context reduced and difficult.

## **Learning Strategy Instruction**

According to Chamot and O'Malley (2011), in CALLA model, learning strategies instruction is used for CLIL. Learning strategy instruction is a cognitive approach to teaching which helps ESL learners in learning conscious processes and techniques which enhance the comprehension, acquisition and retention of new skills and concepts learned in the CLIL focused ESL classroom. Rubin (qtd. in Rucynski et al. 53) stresses that using a variety of learning strategies aids language learners to develop the traits required for effective language learning. Learning strategies have been categorised into three types which help teachers to identify the ways to integrate strategy instruction into ESL teaching. The categories are: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies (Chamot and O' Malley 229; Chamot and Kupper 248).

Metacognitive strategies help ESL learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning tasks for the achievement of their ESL learning goals. These are self-regulatory strategies which help an ESL learner reflect on their own thinking and learning and identify their own approaches and abilities for successful ESL learning. On the other hand, cognitive strategies help students to manipulate the learning tasks themselves and accomplish them successfully. Cognitive strategies work in alliance with the metacognitive strategies. Some of the most significant cognitive strategies are: elaboration of prior knowledge, making inferences, imagery and linguistic transfer. Social/affective strategies are used to complete a learning and comprehension task. For the affective use of social/affective strategy, English Language learners need to either interact/cooperate with their peers/teacher, ask questions for clarification or use positive

self-talk/self-dialogue to assist them in successful ESL learning (Chamot and O'Malley 265; Chamot and Kupper 248).

### **Explicit and Integrated Language Learning Strategies Instruction**

Chamot stresses that a number of aspects are associated with explicit language learning strategies instruction. It involves “the development of students’ awareness of the strategies they use, teacher modelling of strategic thinking, student practice with new strategies, student self-evaluation of the strategies used, and practice in transferring strategies to new tasks” (19). She reports after her research on explicit use of language learning strategies that most of the second language context researchers agree on the explicit being an important aspect in learning strategy instruction. Snow and Briton (qtd. in Haworth 18) identify the need of explicit strategy training along with language development and content-area instruction as integral parts of CALLA.

On the other hand, Chamot (18) reports that there is very little consensus of researchers on the decision to make strategies instruction either an integrated part of language curriculum or teach them separately. Chamot stresses on the need of creating an ideal situation of strategies instruction in which all the teachers in an institution could teach learning strategies. This practice helps students to transfer learning strategies learned in one subject class to another.

### **Models of Language Learning Strategies Instruction**

Although there are a number of models being used for language learning strategies instruction, Chamot (19) identifies three significant models of strategy instruction which are currently in use: CALLA, Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction (SSBI)



and the Gremfell and Harris model. All the three models focus on developing ESL learners' knowledge about their own thinking and strategic processes for language learning and encouraging them to adopt such strategies which help them enhance their English language learning and proficiency. Chamot (19) stresses on the need for language learning strategies researchers to determine the most effective model and type of instruction which helps ESL learners to improve their language proficiency and achievement.

Comparing the three models, Chamot (17) explains that the CALLA model is recursive in nature and provides teachers and learners with the option to revisit an instructional phase whenever required during a learning process. It helps students to reflect on their use of strategies before applying them to other tasks. SSBI which was developed by Cohen (qtd. in Chamot 18) focuses on teachers to take up a variety of roles to help and guide students to learn the most appropriate strategies related to their learning styles. On the contrary, the Grenfell and Harris model stresses on the students to work through a six-step cycle and then begin a fresh cycle. It helps students to become familiar with new language learning strategies and make independent plans for their own language development.

### **Implications**

According to Oxford (410), there exists a noticeable difference between the students who have received a formal instruction in language learning strategies and those who have not received it. The students trained in language learning strategies find it easy to determine which strategies to apply to their learning. Oxford further elaborates that

some strategies are effective only for specific tasks. Cohen (2) states that classroom teacher bears the responsibility of encouraging ESL learners to learn language learning strategies and apply them to their English language learning. The teacher's encouraging attitude enhances ESL learners' learning of language learning strategies. Chamot (68) explains that language learning strategies instruction accelerates students' language acquisition and learning. To sum up, language learning strategies instruction in ESL classes promises a number of advantages for language learners which enhance their language learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has analysed the literature available on language learning strategies instruction of ESL students. Language learning strategies are vital to the acquisition of ESL and help to enhance language learning and make it more effective and efficient. Current trends and research in learning strategies call for including language learning strategies instruction training as a part of teachers' training programmes. Teachers also need to awaken to the importance of language learning strategies for the achievement of teaching and learning goals. The literature studied points out the importance of language learning strategies and the weaknesses and strengths of existing language learning strategies. Hence, effective and planned instruction of language learning strategies in CLIL focused classrooms of ESL learners at all educational levels will result in effective and efficient teaching and learning.

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