

## Helping Students Learn Study Skills

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Josefina M. is the ideal student. She seems to do everything right. She always raises her hand to volunteer answers and she has a certain eager look in her eyes. Even when she has not been called on, you can see her moving her lips, repeating the correct answer. When she does not understand something, she is not afraid to ask questions, in English. She always brings a notebook to class and she uses it to take clear class notes and do her homework. Of course, her exam scores are the highest in the class.

Ricardo F. does not do as well in class. Although he studies a lot and volunteers in class, his exam results are just average. His notebooks are full of English-Spanish vocabulary lists and his book is full of various marks and arrows in ten different colors, but he complains that he cannot remember anything on exam day.

Jorge N. has never studied a foreign language before and on the first day of class he admitted that he really did not know where to start. He often fails to understand homework assignments, but never asks questions in class because he is afraid of being thought dumb. He tries to disappear into his book during oral practice and he has a sort of empty, confused look in his eyes. He rarely brings a notebook to class and usually forgets his pencil. Not surprisingly, he does not do at all well in exams.

Most of our classes are made up of similar students. There are the good students like Josefina who always do everything right, the mediocre students like Ricardo who try hard, but for some reason cannot seem to do well and there are students like Jorge who are lost from the first day of class. As teachers, part of our duty is to help the students like Ricardo and Jorge become more like Josefina - successful language learners who enjoy what they are doing and who see the learning of another language as an adventure into another culture, another world. We have to determine which study techniques successful

students use that unsuccessful ones do not, and then help the unsuccessful ones to learn to use them.

Obviously, a student's success in a language class depends on many variables such as aptitude, motivation and transient psychological and physiological states, caused by, for example, family problems or illness. Not every student seems to have the same aptitude or motivation to learn a foreign language. Exams have been developed to measure aptitude and motivation, but not much has been done to help students develop techniques conducive to successful foreign language learning. Besides, most teachers do not have time to test each student individually to determine his/her aptitude or motivation before beginning a course. Even if it were possible, would it be a good idea to label a student as "not apt" or "unmotivated" even before giving them a chance in class, just because of the result of one exam?

In a landmark article published in 1975, Joan Rubin addressed the problem of "What the Good Language Learner Can Teach Us". She listed seven characteristics of successful language learners

that have, in recent years, led to the study of which strategies "good" learners use that separate them from "bad" learners.

According to Rubin, successful language learners are good "guessers"; they are comfortable with uncertainty and are willing to try out guesses; they remember new information well and are able to infer from different situations. They usually have a broader background in their native language, especially in grammar.

Successful learners have a strong drive to communicate or receive information from communication. They are willing to use many techniques such as circumlocution, paraphrase, gestures and cognate expressions to get a message across.

They are less inhibited than the unsuccessful students. They are willing to look foolish and to make mistakes. They volunteer in class and try to speak English; even though they know they might not be understood.

Successful learners attend to grammatical form and look for patterns. As a result they construct a strong "monitor" (self-correction

device) and by looking for grammatical patterns are often able to form generalizations and understand grammar rules even before they are explained in class.

Good learners seek opportunities to practice and to use the new language. They join clubs, talk to tourists, write down the lyrics to songs and initiate conversations in the target language with teachers and other students.

They also monitor their own speech; they listen for and correct their own errors and those of others and they ask about what they do not understand.

Finally, successful learners pay attention to meaning, to semantics and to language functions. They are interested in social register and when to use certain expressions. In general they are more culturally-oriented.

Since the original Rubin article, much research has been done in learner strategies. Different experiments have been carried out, mostly in university EFL and children's ESL classes in the United States. For example, research has indicated that strategies are important in language

learning and that learners at all levels use language learning strategies of some kind. However, some learners are relatively unaware of their strategies and do not take advantage of the diversity of possible strategies available to them. More proficient learners, logically, use a wider range of strategies in more varied language learning situations and there is a difference in the types of strategies that are used at higher course levels than at lower levels. Apparently, there are also differences in the choice of strategies based on sex or ethnic differences and on both type and intensity of motivation. Since not everyone has the same learning style, it has also been suggested that people with different learning styles often choose different types of strategies. (Oxford, 1988)

Not surprisingly, it has also been discovered that teachers generally do not know which strategies individual students habitually use. (Do you know how your students study?) However, research has shown that language learning strategies can be taught. Therefore our duty as teachers is to become more aware of how our

students learn, how they study. Not every student is going to learn or study the same way, but the teacher should serve as a facilitator, helping students find the strategies that will help them the most. We should help students become aware of the different strategies that are available (See Appendix One) and encourage them to experiment freely until they find the strategies that combine best with their own particular learning styles.

Teachers should encourage students to share the knowledge they have of study skills that they have learned and used in other classes in their English class. Specifically, teachers should use successful learners as examples and sources of study techniques.

Ask the Josefinas (i.e., the best students) how they learned that list of vocabulary you assigned last night, or how they studied for yesterday's quiz. In order to do this, of course, you must first build a non-threatening classroom atmosphere where students will feel free to speak out and share their ideas.

It is also a good idea when giving an assignment to give students specific ideas on how

to go about doing it. For example, if you expect students to learn the past tense of a list of verbs, suggest they cut out small pieces of paper and write the present tense form on one side and the past tense on the other and then carry these cards with them in their purse or pocket so they can look through them during those "dead" moments of the day (riding on the bus, waiting in a dentist's office).

If you do give suggestions, always make it clear that your idea is not the only possible technique. Remember, not everyone learns in the same way; give options and encourage students to find what works best for them. Appendix Two gives a list of suggested learning strategies that could be discussed with the students in class, either all at once at the beginning of the course or little by little throughout the course.

No matter which method you choose, try to become aware of how your students learn or, as in the case of Ricardo and Jorge at the beginning of this article, why they are not learning optimally.



## Appendix One

### Some Learning Strategies

(Oxford, 1988)

#### A) Strategies used in the classroom:

1. Taking note of new words.
2. Guessing word meaning from context.
3. Guessing word meaning from actions.
4. Interrupting self when in error.
5. Saying answers to self.
6. Going over errors in homework.
7. Integrating new material with English knowledge.
8. Asking teacher to repeat words or phrases.
9. Repeating corrected forms to self.
10. Discussing lessons in English.
11. Comparing responses with others.

12. Asking teacher to explain exceptions.
13. Going over previous lessons before class.
14. Repeating new words aloud.
15. Correcting other's mistakes aloud.
16. Using English voluntarily in class.
17. Asking teacher for examples of rules.

B) Strategies used in individual study:

1. Looking up words in the dictionary.
2. Reading sample sentences in the dictionary.
3. Pronouncing new words in dictionary.
4. Correcting own pronunciation.
5. Making vocabulary lists or cards.
6. Associating new words with images.
7. Memorizing words with Spanish associations.

8. Memorizing words by English groupings.
9. Spending extra time practicing new forms.
10. Analyzing contrasts between English and Spanish.
11. Describing actions or things in English.
12. Watching TV or movies in English.
13. Reading newspapers, magazines in English.
14. Listening to the radio in English.
15. Writing own diary or journal in English.

Some Suggestions for Students

ORAL PRACTICE

In class:

1. Constantly repeat after the teacher.
2. Do considerable oral practice in class.
3. Participate in groups.
4. Help others in groups when they are having problems.
5. Correct yourself and others in groups.
6. If you do not understand something. ASK.
7. If you are not sure of the answer. GUESS.
8. If you are not being understood, try to find another way to express what you want to say.
9. Avoid translation: it just slows up your English.

Out of Class:

1. Practice before class with a classmate.
2. Form a routine for practicing that never varies.
3. Tape yourself and listen critically.
4. Take advantage of every opportunity you have to use English.
5. Join a conversation club or other extracurricular language related activity.

#### WRITTEN PRACTICE

1. Always bring a notebook to class for all new vocabulary and grammar explanations.
2. Do your homework in your notebook, not in your textbook.
3. Practice sentences, questions and vocabulary using pictures and/or flashcards.
4. Test yourself often.

5. Practice copying English conversations or exercises to accustom yourself to the spelling.
6. Look for patterns. English is not arbitrary.
7. Avoid translation; it is misleading and will hinder fluency.

#### " AT HOME" PRACTICE

1. Watch undubbed old movies on TV and cover subtitles.
2. Go to English movies.
3. Listen to music in English and try to write down the words you hear.
4. Use an English-English dictionary whenever possible.

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