Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers

A Framework for Task-Based Learning

Jane Willis

Longman

1.2.1 Learning strategies

Different types of learners adopt different strategies for learning successfully. Good learners tend to have more strategies than weak ones, and they use them more regularly.

It is generally agreed that good language learners have a strong reason for learning the language, and will:

- seek out opportunities to use the target language and make maximum use of them, focusing on communication of meaning rather than on form;
- supplement natural learning with conscious study, e.g. by keeping a notebook for new words;
- respond positively to learning situations, avoiding anxiety and inhibitions;
- be able to analyse, categorise and remember language forms and monitor errors;
- be prepared to experiment with language and be willing to take risks;
- be flexible and capable of adapting to different learning conditions.[10]

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified three main types of strategy: 'metacognitive' (e.g. organising one's learning, monitoring and evaluating one's speech, etc.); 'cognitive' (e.g. advance preparation for a class, using a dictionary, listing/categorising new words, making comparisons with other known languages, etc.) and 'social' (e.g. asking for help, interacting with native speakers, etc.).

Teachers can help by making students aware of such strategies, and encouraging their use. Previous educational experience may have resulted in learners having a very limited range of strategies. In cases such as these, students may benefit from actual training in particular strategies. Certainly encouraging students to become self-reliant will raise the quality of their classroom learning and make it easier for them to carry on learning after their course has finished.[11]

1.2.2 Analytic and holistic learners

Learners' cognitive styles may vary, too. A distinction is often made between analytic learners who prefer a deductive approach (give them a rule and let them deduce other examples from it) and holistic learners, who prefer an inductive approach (give them examples, and let them induce the rule). However, much research on cognitive styles and second language success is, in the end, inconclusive. Indeed, it has been suggested that learners should be exposed to a variety of approaches in order to broaden their learning styles.

Task-based learning, with its holistic approach, would seem, in its purest form, to favour the styles of holistic learners. The broader framework suggested in this book tries to take all types of learners into account. Chapter 9 will give advice on helping learners who have difficulties in adapting.

No matter what strategies or styles your learners use, it is generally agreed that there are certain essential conditions to be met that are vital for all language learners. These are outlined in the next section.

1.3 Four conditions for language learning

From now on I shall use the word 'learn' in its general sense, and not distinguish between acquiring and learning, unless otherwise stated.

The many research studies into foreign language learning have, to some extent, produced conflicting results. It is often argued that we don't yet know enough to be sure that one method is better than another. However, there are