

Learning to learn

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Learning to learn is an umbrella term for a wide variety of activities designed to develop learning strategies. Its aim is to focus pupils' attention on how they learn in addition to what they learn. Many of these strategies can be applied to whatever subject a pupil is learning and can be classified as follow:

1. Metacognitive strategies. These include planning for learning, self-assessment and monitoring and involve learners in reflecting on the learning process.
2. Cognitive strategies. These include sorting, classifying, comparing, matching, predicting, developing an awareness of visual and audio clues as aids to meaning, repeating, using a class library or dictionary.
3. Social mediation strategies. These include collaborating and peer-correction and involve pupils in co-operating together in language-learning strategies.

Most teachers have observed increased motivation and a more questioning, active and personal involvement in their learners as justifiable outcomes. Developing curiosity and positive attitudes towards foreign language learners with young learners is particularly important. Most are learning a foreign language for the first time and early foreign language learning aims to provide them with a positive experience and desire to continue.

Early foreign language learning also aims to prepare pupils for the more formal and exam-orientated courses in secondary school. Learning to learn provides them with the basic learning tools for this.

When focussing on learning to learn for young learners, for whom school and learning are central in their lives, it is particularly important that it is introduced in a meaningful learning context, in an overt and explicit way and strategies demonstrated with transfer in mind. This will help pupils to see how certain strategies can be used with different tasks or subjects.

The teacher's role plays an important role in helping children learn how to learn. Children can learn different strategies but they rarely use them spontaneously. With prompting from the teacher, they will gradually learn to use them independently. Teachers may also take on a questioning role, often using the learners' mother tongue, to encourage pupils to reflect on their basic assumptions about learning, as well as to model the types of questions about learning that pupils can gradually learn to ask themselves.

A further role for the teacher is to share with her learners, in a way which is accessible to them, information about language and language learning. This would include making sure pupils are clear about the purpose of an activity as well as discussing different learning strategies and activities. It is also extremely important that a teacher creates a learning environment where pupils feel secure so they can experiment with the new language and build up the necessary self-confidence in order to take risks.

Below is a description of some of the strategies that can be developed in the foreign language classroom.

1. METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Reviewing

Pupils can be taught to review if they are asked at the beginning of each lesson: *What did we do last lesson?* Or *What did you learn last lesson?* This type of reviewing is important as it clarifies work covered, helps pupils perceive progress, and helps them become aware of what they do and don't know so they can identify what to revise.

Self-questioning

Pupils can be taught to ask themselves questions about their learning. For example, the teacher can question them parts of the lesson they found easy or difficult and why: about activities they enjoyed or didn't enjoy and how they helped or didn't help them learn: about how they guessed the meaning of an unknown word and so on.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is an important way of encouraging pupils to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Pupils can be asked questions such as: *Did you enjoy this unit?; Why / Why not? ; What did you learn? ; How well did you do?*

Self-correction

Where possible, choose activities which allow pupils to check their own work either individually or in pairs. This helps them take on responsibility for their own learning and work out where and why they may have made a mistake.

2. COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Comparing

Pupils can be encouraged to spot differences and similarities between the foreign language and their mother tongue. This can arouse their curiosity about language and develop language awareness.

Classifying

This revises a basic concept and can be a useful memory aid when learning vocabulary. It requires pupils to think and sort words or objects into different groups determined by the teacher or the pupils themselves.

Predicting

Pupils can be encouraged to anticipate what they think might come next in a spoken or written message. When involving pupils in activities that encourage anticipation, it is important that the teacher accepts all appropriate suggestions even if they do not correspond exactly with what is said or happens. The main aim here is to encourage pupils to anticipate the general meaning. This involves pupils actively and personally in the learning process and can develop self-confidence.

Organizing work

Work related to the foreign language lesson can be organized and stored in different ways: in an exercise book or a folder and labelled and dated; as personal vocabulary sets; as personal picture dictionaries; as rhyme or song books; and so on.

Using reference materials

Pupils can learn how to use a dictionary effectively. This may be a picture dictionary, a bilingual dictionary or a dictionary with simple definitions in English. Pupils can also learn to use a book corner efficiently and to look for other books related to a particular subject, for example, animals, transports, and so on.

3. SOCIAL MEDIATION STRATEGIES

Pair or group work

Working with each other in pairs or groups provides pupils with the opportunity for taking on responsibility for their own learning by working independently of the teacher for part of a lesson. It can also involve them in planning and directing their own work.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that many of the strategies described above for learning a foreign language can also be applied to other subject areas. Pupils should be reminded of this when appropriate so that they learn to transfer strategies and develop an overall awareness of their learning across the curriculum. ●

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