

STUDY SKILLS AND THE EFL SYLLABUS: A CROSS-CURRICULAR APPROACH

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Introduction

Basic *study skills*, such as being able to use a dictionary, to take and use notes, to organize one's own notebook, or to develop effective correction, revision and remedial techniques, are often recognized as essential in the learning of a foreign language, as indeed of any subject in the school curriculum. Yet, strangely enough, students are normally supposed to develop such skills «automatically», as a sort of natural consequence of attending school for a certain number of years. Our experience as teachers, however, tells us that it is often not so, at least for a very significant proportion of our students. If we are ready to admit that one must *learn how to learn*, then it follows that study skills should be part of a *specific* and *systematic* teaching curriculum.

Because study skills are a necessary component of the successful learning of *any* subject, and thus have a very high *cross-curricular value*, one might reasonably expect that responsibility for the development of such skills should be shared by the teachers of *all* subjects in the school curriculum — and indeed this could well be the first option to be chosen. However, because interdisciplinary work and team teaching are often difficult to implement in our schools, one might consider an alternative approach, i.e. integrating the teaching of study skills *within* the syllabus of an individual subject — provided, of course, that all opportunities for cooperation with colleagues are kept open, and, if possible, even promoted.

An EFL teacher might immediately react to such a proposal by wondering where and how he/she could find the time and energies to add this extra dimension to teaching, when official syllabuses, tests and preparation for exams already seem to take up most, if not all, of class and teacher's and students' energies. But are study skills really an *additional*, even *external* component of a teaching approach, or should they rather be part of the actual overall *language* syllabus? Can't we find ways and means to *integrate* the teaching of study skills within the teaching of a *linguistic* and *communicative competence*?

Before we try to answer such vital questions, we need to look more carefully at three basic issues:

- a) what should be included in the term «study skills»?;
- b) how can we identify the areas of students' *study needs* which require most urgent consideration?;
- c) what should be the essential features of study skills *activities*, both in the classroom and for home study?

What do we mean by «study skills»?

I think we need to beware of a narrow, «technical» definition of study skills. Such skills do certainly include, for example, the abilities to raise reading speed, to write clearer, more effective essays or to devise successful strategies for exam preparation; however, such isolated skills should be part of a more general *pedagogical* approach, through which we are trying to develop, first and foremost, each student's individual awareness of his/her *learning strategies*, together with the ability to discover autonomous ways of assessing and improving one's own *learning potential*.

Thus it is not a question of simply providing students with a rich and varied range of *techniques* to cope with practical school chores; this should obviously be done, but within an approach where students's *autonomy*, *self-evaluation abilities* and *responsible choices* are constantly promoted and stimulated.

We shall soon see that this comprehensive *pedagogical concern* will have important implications both for the *selection of areas* of study skills and for the *methodology* through which we may choose to develop relevant materials and techniques.

How can we identify students' «study needs»?

Although we as teachers may have a sufficiently clear *intuition* of which abilities our students need most, I think that we can profit from *close observation* of what our students actually *do* when confronted with specific *learning tasks*. This will entail careful observation and evaluation of:

- a) the day-to-day *situations* which demand the use of study skills;
- b) the *learning materials and techniques* to which students are exposed, both in the classroom and at home, and which are supposed to help them cope with the above-mentioned situations;
- c) the specific *skills* that are required by students in order to make effective, successful use of such materials and techniques.

Thus if students are asked to understand and evaluate a *series of data* (learning *situation*) and their textbook provides *tables* and *graphs* to help understanding (learning *materials* and *techniques*), we should make sure that students have the relevant *skills* necessary to use the materials and cope with the situation. To give another example, doing *homework* (learning *situation*) implies making use of *notebooks* and *textbooks* (learning *materials*), and therefore students need to acquire the specific *skills* to make effective use of such tools in order to face the situation.

Keeping in mind such criteria, close observation of school requirements and students' relevant behaviour will permit the identification of a series of broad areas of *study needs*, which, with specific reference to foreign language learning, will include such basic issues as the assessment and improvement of *study methods*, the *storing* and *retrieving* of information, the use of *textbooks*, *dictionaries* and *reference works*, the

making and using of *notes*, the use of *non-verbal codes* (such as tables, graphs, maps, etc.), and the development of *correction*, *revision* and *remedial* strategies.

Each of these broad areas of *study needs* will then have to be further analysed in order to break it down into definite, precise *subskills*: making and using notes, for example, might include more specific components such as how to select relevant information, how to distinguish main elements from secondary ones, how to classify information, how to understand and use visual patterns for organizing information, how to understand and use symbols and abbreviations, how to evaluate the usefulness of one's own notes, etc. Without such careful breakdown of *study needs* into *operational learning objectives* it would obviously be impossible to implement them into suitable class and home *activities* (1).

Study skills activities: some methodological principles

Because we have tried to view the learning of study techniques within the broader *pedagogical* context of promoting *autonomous learning strategies*, the design of materials and techniques will have to ensure that such a basic aim is constantly taken into consideration. I believe that this can be done by structuring study skills activities into four main learning stages:

- a) *promoting the awareness of specific problems*: students need to discover the *specific nature*, not only of their learning problems and present failures, but also of their overt and hidden *learning potential*. By facing the reality of problems, they should develop a better understanding of what is implied in *learning* and a stronger *motivation* to engage themselves in study skills activities;
- b) *training in study skills techniques*: at this stage, it is important that we should *not* provide students with just *one* way of dealing with problems, thus suggesting (either explicitly or implicitly) that we are at last providing them with *the* solution they have been longing for. I think we should rather present them with a variety of different, even contrasting techniques, and invite them to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each proposed way of tackling problems;
- c) *transferring skills to ones' own situation*: students should now be encouraged to apply what they have learnt to their own specific situation, trying *on themselves* the effectiveness of the strategies they have chosen to adopt;
- d) *assessing one's own performance*: students finally evaluate the impact of the strategies they have employed on their performance, and decide on any possible improvement or change in their learning styles.

Back to the start: study skills and the EFL syllabus

Having thus briefly discussed some basic issues in the development of a study skills programme, we can now turn back to our initial problem of finding ways to *integrate*

the teaching/learning of *study skills* in our own *language syllabus*. Although each of us will have to find his/her individual solution to cope with each *specific* teaching situation, I think that some general considerations may be found useful at this stage:

a) Both our teaching experience and published materials now available on the EFL market show that it is *possible* and *desirable* to teach language and develop, at the same time, study skills; or, in other words, that we can teach study skills *through* language. Practising study skills can be done while practising language *notions* and *functions*, *structures* and *vocabulary*, and the full range of *language skills: note-taking*, for example, provides excellent opportunities of improving reading comprehension and analyzing text structure; a *class survey* on study habits, or the making and using of *questionnaires* on the use (and misuse!) of textbooks can offer good opportunities for pair-work practice of interviews; and training in the use of *dictionaries* can be linked to a reading or writing development programme.

b) Many study skills activities in the classroom can be done in the foreign language: students like talking about their problems and difficulties, so why not replace, from time to time, the often dull and stereotyped series of topics presented in textbooks with much more motivating work and discussion on *real problems* and *real needs*?

c) *Authentic* materials, including material produced by the students themselves (examples of homework, pages from notebooks, index-books and diaries, etc.) can profitably be introduced and exploited.

d) Because class time is so little and so precious, and because we need to recognize that, surely at the upper secondary school level, homework and self-study opportunities should be fully exploited, I think we should provide students with good *self-instructional materials for home study* and exploit class time particularly for *feed-in*, *checking* and *feed-back*.

e) Last but not least, not all teaching materials pay the *same* amount of attention to the development of study skills, and not all teaching materials have the *same* high concern for cross-curricular issues. If we are convinced that *cross-curricular skills* should play a vital role in learning, we should then consider *sensitivity to study skills* as an important criterion in the evaluation and selection of the materials we use — and make students use — in the classroom.