Learner training: integrating language and learning strategies

Imagine you are trying to solve a very peculiar jigsaw puzzle — one for which you haven't got the complete final picture. This is hard enough as a task in itself but suddenly, halfway through the task, you begin to suspect that the pieces of the puzzle have been mixed up with pieces from other puzzles ...

Working on a puzzle like this is a bit like teaching a language — we don't really know how learning in general takes place, but, on top of that, we feel that each student has her or his own way of learning — just like solving several different puzzles at the same time.

In this paper I will argue that one possibly helpful way to work on our language learning puzzles is to look both at what our learners do or could do to solve their own puzzles (learning strategies), and at what we as teachers do or could do to create opportunities for them to learn how to learn (teaching strategies). My main concern will be how to integrate this learner training approach within the context of our EFL curriculum.

To begin with, what are learning strategies? How are they similar to teaching strategies? How are they different? Perhaps the best way to approach these questions is to actually look at a few examples of learning strategies. The following (translated from Italian) refer to listening comprehension tasks:

> **ANNAMARIA** (aged 17): 'Sure, sometimes I just haven't got a clue! However, if I don't understand, I carry on listening. What I have missed is sometimes repeated, and I eventually manage to grasp it somehow!'
>
> **MASSIMO** (aged 17): 'Before listening to a cassette or watching a video, I check the topic and try to think of what I can expect to hear.'
>
> **FAUSTO** (aged 16): 'I find it very useful to share what I understand with my friends. But then, if I don't understand, I've learnt to ask the teacher or my friends to repeat, or to speak more slowly, or to give me an example ...'

What do these students show through their use of these strategies? Well, as a first general remark, all of them seem to be actively involved in their learning; they don't seem to be waiting for a teacher or a textbook to suggest what they should do next. Then they seem to know quite a lot about the language and about ways of coping with language tasks; they appear to be aware of problems and of what works for them; and they seem to have positive attitudes towards language and language learning.

If we look more closely at these statements, we will note that Annamaria, for example, shows a considerable degree of self-confidence: she is ready to take risks and to tolerate ambiguity, because she relies on inference and

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deduction to make up for her linguistic limitations. Massimo seems to have learned how to plan a language task beforehand: he relies on prediction, and makes an effort to relate the new material he is going to hear to what he already knows. Finally, Fausto appears to have developed an ability to cooperate with his classmates, even to negotiate with the teacher. He tries to make the best of the little he has got by using, presumably, some classroom language, even if in terms of easy-to-use formulae.

Let's now look briefly at some teaching strategies, again in the area of listening comprehension:

TEACHER A: 'I pre-teach some essential or difficult vocabulary before playing the tape.'

TEACHER B: 'As a preparation, I set the scene of the recording and lead students to make predictions on what they are going to hear.'

TEACHER C: 'I teach some useful "classroom language" right from the start to enable students, for example, to ask me or their classmates questions about the meaning of unknown words.'

If we look more carefully at Teachers B and C, it is not difficult to draw comparisons between their strategies and some corresponding learning strategies: leading students to make predictions, as Teacher B does, reminds us of what Massimo does to activate expectations. Teacher C teaches classroom language and promotes students' cooperation, and this fits in nicely with Fausto's positive attitude in working with classmates. Learning and teaching strategies do not seem to be so different in terms of actual content: of course, we as teachers certainly have a different degree of awareness and tend to be more systematic in the use of strategies, and we also have our own range of teaching techniques to introduce and practise them. 'Good' language learners, on the other hand, may have 'picked up' these strategies thanks to their better processing abilities, even without any sort of explicit training. The main question then becomes: can all learners learn strategies and thus become better learners? Or, in other words, can strategies be taught? Can we as teachers teach how to learn?

In a certain sense, this is a false question. We do teach how to learn: indeed, whether we intend it or not, we, and the materials and techniques we use, are all models for our students. However, the learning strategies we introduce often remain embedded, so to say, in our teaching strategies, so that our students do not easily maintain them over time; they do not easily transfer them to other tasks on different occasions; and they must often be prompted to use them, rather than be ready to use them on their own autonomous initiative.

I think that the first thing we have to recognize is that we already do a lot in terms of strategy training. What we need is mainly a way of turning isolated attempts and occasional experiences into a more explicit, systematic, deliberate learner training programme. This programme will require a few basic assumptions on our part: first, that, while we won't be able to turn all our students into good or even better language learners, there is nothing magic or mysterious in the way good students use good strategies; second, that the keys to better learning can be identified and described, as we have seen with a few examples, and can be made available to everybody; and

third, that individual differences and different learning styles do exist, so that it is not just a question of presenting and practising recipes for success, that is, standardized ways of solving problems.

When I first got involved in observing and studying learning strategies, it was like landing on a mysterious, undiscovered island, full of unknown resources, but also of unknown dangers. I felt the need to make a tentative map of this territory, so that I could orientate myself, make choices and establish priorities, for me and for my students. This, of course, has often been done in the past by a number of researchers (1), but I needed to build my own map, based on my own experiences with adolescent students at secondary school level.

I found it productive to arrange learning strategies into four groups — cognitive, metacognitive, socio-affective and communication strategies (2). This simply reflects the fact that what students use — or need to learn to use — are not just cognitive, mental processes like inference and deduction, but also metacognitive behaviours, like self-monitoring and self-assessing. They need to realize what learning a language implies in terms of feelings and attitudes; and they need to make the most of the little language they have got by, for example, adjusting their messages, getting help or using conversational techniques.

Having thus established a sort of framework, we can more safely venture out into the problem of integrating learning strategies into the EFL curriculum. My modest proposal is divided into two different but complementary approaches. On one hand, I have identified some specific areas of learner activities, which have traditionally been regarded as particularly useful to increase the knowledge and awareness of the learner as a learner. These areas can be developed through specific tasks, which call for specific students' materials. I am referring to areas such as 'reflecting on language' (or developing language awareness), organizing new vocabulary, self-monitoring and self-evaluating, using reference materials, and the perhaps more recent area of using communication strategies.

My second approach is based on the need I have felt to integrate language and learning strategies even more closely, within the context of what we do in the classroom, day by day. In our general language practice, I thought it would be useful to identify listening, reading, speaking, writing tasks which would lend themselves particularly well to highlighting the learning strategies at work behind them, as the first necessary step to make our students more aware of strategies and to provide relevant learner training activities.

As for my first approach, some examples of materials for students' own use are shown in *Figs. 1-3* (3) You will notice that the emphasis in these materials is always on giving students independent tools for autonomous use. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that students will have to work individually; although I think that individual work is essential, this can be the starting point for pair, group or class comparison and discussion.

Fig. 1 refers to organizing vocabulary, a vital area of learner training: not just a question of practising words — rather a question of showing students a wide range of strategies for storing and retrieving vocabulary. Each of us has her or his own ways of doing this — by making lists with translations or synonyms, by drawing diagrams, charts and pictures, by making personal associations ... the only way to find out what works best for each of us is to experience these strategies. And this is why we give students opportunities to experiment and choose. In doing so, we are developing basic cognitive

strategies like classifying and relating new information to background knowledge, but we are also promoting metacognitive strategies like self-management skills.

Fig. 2 refers to self-assessment — another 'classical' area for promoting learner autonomy. In the approach we are now discussing we want students, not just to provide some evidence of what they have learnt, but also to actively decide where they stand in terms of quality and quantity of their performance. How many objectives set for a unit of work have they achieved? And also, what's the qualitative standard of their performance? This self-test is certainly not the end, but rather the beginning of self-assessment: students can be invited to compare their work with their classmates and with the teacher: The evaluation of the work done in a unit then comes as a negotiation between one's own personal, subjective judgment and the feedback provided by external, more objective sources.

However, in a learner training approach this assessment of the product must be complemented by regular opportunities to think about and discuss the process of learning — the kind of problems students have experienced throughout a unit of work in various areas. How have they found listening tasks, reading tasks or new grammatical structures? Very easy? Rather difficult? Very difficult? What are the specific activities which they have found most difficult or most useful? What specific language points demand their most urgent attention? Again, the real dimension of personal problems becomes clear only when we share our reflections with the people around us, and compare our findings with others .

Self-monitoring *(Fig. 3)* is in a way similar to — but in other ways also different from — self-assessment. Here we are not directly concerned with the result of a unit of work, but rather with what we know, believe and feel about learning a language and about our own personal image as a language learner. What kind of problems do we experience in writing or speaking, in using vocabulary or dealing with pronunciation? What kind of strategies do we use? As a starting point, we can ask students to read about a variety of different learning strategies as reported by fellow students in specific areas — in *Fig. 3*, for example, we are concerned with reading comprehension skills — and ask them to assess how they feel about each of these strategies. Do they find them useful? Can they suggest different ones? Again, the activity implies sharing opinions and experiences in the classroom.

These are all examples of materials meant for students' direct use. Let's now turn to my second approach to strategy integration, the one which relies on the identification of — and subsequent explicit training in — learning strategies embedded in tasks and exercises.

Exercises 6, 7 and 8 shown in *Fig. 4* are straightforward skimming exercises. In Exercise 6 we ask students to skim three short texts in order to identify text types, that is, to find out whether they belong to a letter, a doctor's report or a story. In Exercise 7 we similarly ask them to skim the texts again to match each pair of pictures with one of the three texts. And in Exercise 8 we practise skimming in order to identify qualities and feelings that are not explicitly stated in the texts: who is handsome? rich? ugly? Who is worried? frightened? happy? and so on.

The linguistic objectives for these exercises therefore fall into the basic area of practising skimming. We could check that students find the correct and appropriate answers to the questions set in the tasks. And this would be enough as far as the product of the activity is concerned. However, an

integrated learner training approach, as we have been discussing it so far, requires that the process should be brought to the students' attention too. As a matter of fact, the linguistic tasks of skimming involved in Exercises 6, 7 and 8 can only be carried out by setting in motion cognitive strategies like inference and deduction. A useful learner training application in this case could then be to ask students to reflect on the stages that they went through to provide the answers to the exercises.

As a general activity, we could simply ask them to justify and defend their answers in their own words, working in pairs or small groups, by referring to the texts. Or, more specifically, we could give them more help by asking them to consider which particular features of the texts gave them the most obvious clues: for example, why and how do we recognize a letter from a story? What are our expectations as regards what a story or a doctor's report should look like? What linguistic features of the texts trigger off these expectations? Typographical layout? Levels of formality? Use of dialogues? Word fields? What words and expressions, explicitly mentioned in the texts, enable us to use our knowledge of the world to activate our inferring skills? We don't find the word 'tired' in the story, but we are able to infer this feeling from clues like 'eyes ... closing ... go to bed'. We don't find the words 'strong' and 'angry' in the story, and yet it is not difficult to infer these qualities and feelings from clues such as 'a big man ... tall ... boxer ... aggressive ... nervously ... furious'. And we know that the Rupert of the letter is young and possibly handsome not because we are explicitly told, but by implication, that is, because the woman writing the letter is desperately unhappy and says she's not young and beautiful.

Other useful strategies that might be highlighted in these tasks, with a view to possible learner training applications, could fall into the area of transferring knowledge across languages (L1/L2). This can lead to language awareness activities which stimulate students to activate their knowledge of the L1 to understand and process the L2. If, for example, we introduce the concepts of 'true' and 'false' friends, we can then link these vocabulary considerations with the previous work on text types. We might first ask students to make a rough quantitative analysis: How many English words similar to L1 words (in this case, Italian) can you find in the texts? Which text contains more 'friends', the story, the doctor's report or the letter? Then we might lead students to decide which type of text shows more words of Latin origin (therefore reminding the reader more directly of Italian words): informal texts and conversations, or formal, maybe specialised texts?

To sum up, what are we trying to do with this kind of activities? I think we are trying to integrate the learning of a language with the awareness of what a language is, how it works and how it can be learnt. We do this because we believe that a good language learner is not just the one who can perform well, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the one who knows how to go about the task of learning.

I'd like to finish with a quotation from *Freedom to Learn* by Carl Rogers (1969):

'The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.'

Notes

1) Cf. the References following.
2) The full taxonomy appears in Mariani & O'Malley (1991), Teacher's Book 1.
3) All the examples are taken from Mariani & O'Malley (1991).

References

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Fig. 1 — Organizing vocabulary

Copy each of the following diagrams into a page of your notebook and complete them with words and expressions you have met in this Unit. Use the same diagrams to add words from the next Units.
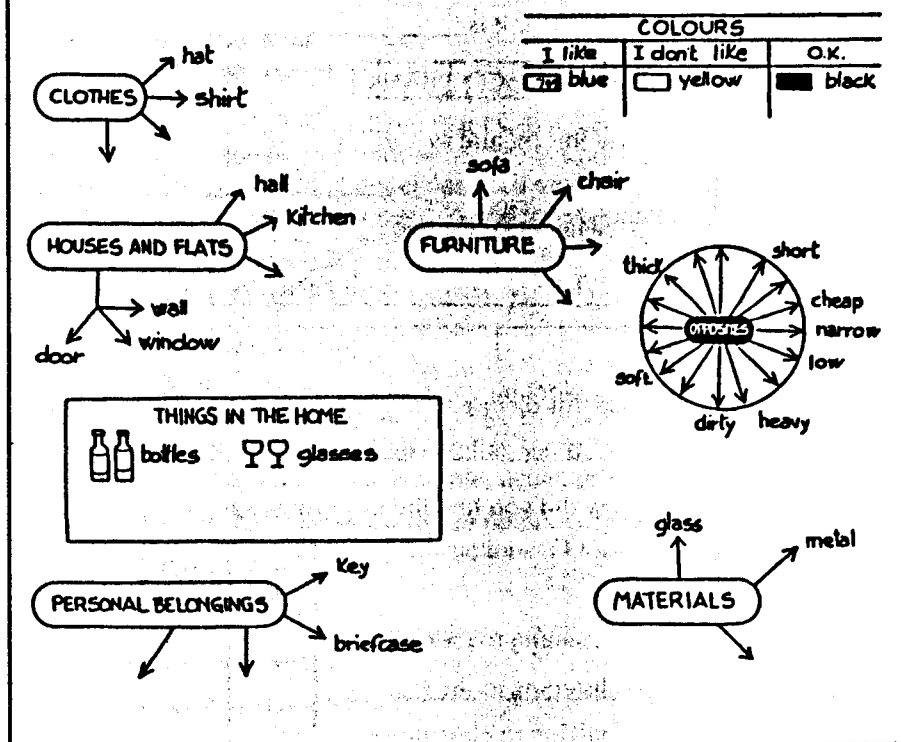
Fig. 2 — Self-evaluating

1. Write what you would say in the following situations and tick the boxes corresponding to what you can do.

A. Ask somebody if there is a post office nearby.

   _____ ☐

   and where it is _____ ☐

B. | PUB | DISCO | BANK |

   Use this picture to say

   — where the bank is _____ ☐

   — where the disco is _____ ☐

C. |_____| CINEMA |

   |_____|_____| MUSEUM |

   Use this picture to direct somebody to the museum

   _____ ☐

2. How did you find the following aspects of this Unit?

	Very easy	Quite easy	Just right	Rather difficult	Very difficult
— listening to cassettes					
— listening to the teacher					
— talking to classmates					
— reading					
— writing					
— new grammar					
— new words					
— pronounciation					

The exercises which I found most difficult were _____

The ones which I found most useful were _____

The items which I should revise in the next few days are _____

Fig. 3 — Self-monitoring

A. Read how the following students are trying to solve their problems in reading English. Do you think these strategies could be useful to you? Write a number in the box next to each strategy:

5 — very useful
4 — quite useful
3 — no idea
2 — not very useful
1 — definitely useless

MONICA (aged 15): 'I've realized that I will never be able to learn all the English words! However, it's not necessary to understand everything, word by word ... I mean, it depends ... it's not necessary if I want to get the main idea of a text, or if I need to find some details, say, a date or a name.' ☐
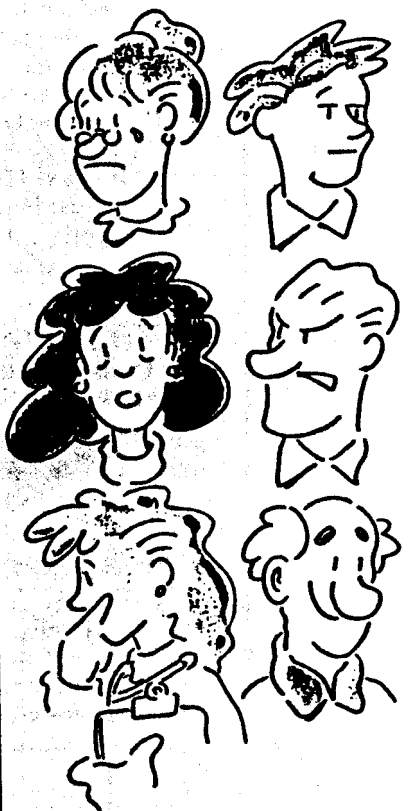
SERGIO (aged 16): 'When I meet a new word, I don't immediately look it up in the dictionary. First I try to decide if it's really necessary to understand what I'm reading ...' ☐

SIMONA (aged 17): 'If I can, I try to avoid looking words up in the dictionary ... it's so time-consuming! I try to guess the meaning. Sometimes English words look like Italian words, and then, many words are related to one another, for example, usual, usually, unusual ...' ☐

ROBERTA (aged 15): 'Some words are particularly helpful ... for example, I find it easier to read instructions if I look for words like first, then, next, finally ...' ☐

B. Can you suggest other useful strategies? Discuss them with your classmates and with your teacher.

Fig. 4

6 Which of these extracts is from
  – a letter?
  – a doctor's report?
  – a story?

A. Chris worked in the office all day. By seven o'clock in the evening her eyes were closing. She wanted to go home and go to bed. Suddenly the door opened and a man appeared. He was a big man, tall and with a boxer's shoulders and arms. The expression on his face was aggressive.
"Where is it? Where's my cheque?" he shouted.
Chris looked nervously at the man. His eyes were furious.
"I'm ... I'm sorry. I don't understand".

B. Mr Lambert is causing concern. He has a very serious stomach condition and it may be necessary to operate. The patient does not understand the seriousness of the situation. His psychological state is abnormal. He appears to be happy and unconcerned.

C. When you say that you don't love me, you make me feel desperately unhappy. Please don't be cold to me, Rupert. I love you. I know that I'm not young and beautiful, but we can be happy together. I have money. We can go to Paris, to Rio, anywhere you want. Come with me. Please.

7 Which picture corresponds to each extract?

8 Who is...
handsome? rich? ugly? ill? young?
Who feels...
worried? frightened? happy?
unhappy? angry? tired? bored?

e.g. Mr Lambert is ill.
  The woman in the letter feels unhappy.