Study skills through English

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of linking the teaching of **study skills** with the teaching of English as a foreign language, so that the two sets of objectives may integrate and support each other within the framework of a school curriculum.

We shall first consider the **motivations** for a 'study skills approach' to language teaching. We shall then investigate how students' **study needs** can be appropriately identified and analysed. We shall propose **four steps** in the development of study skills **activities** in the classroom, and we shall finally investigate the problems posed by the integration of study skills activities in the EFL syllabus and in the overall school curriculum.

1. Why a 'study skills' approach to ELT?

It is part of many teachers' day-to-day experience in the classroom to realize that a number of their students, even at the higher levels of education, cannot effectively cope with basic school tasks such as organizing their notebooks, using a dictionary, studying a textbook chapter, or taking and using notes. Such basic skills are often considered as a 'natural', and even 'automatic' output of attending school, although the evidence clearly points to the contrary. Precisely because these skills have a high **cross-curricular** value, i.e. can be useful and are indeed necessary in studying *any* school subject, all teachers usually expect students to develop and use them, but hardly anybody seems to be concerned with their actual *teaching*.

I believe that it is part of any teacher's responsibility to face this area of problems, and to find the most effective ways and means to promote the learning of general **study skills** without jeopardizing the development of the **specific syllabus** of each subject.

The term **study skills**, as used in the context of this paper, needs some clarification. By **study skills** we mean, not just a collection of techniques to cope with specific school problems such as 'how to write good essays' or 'how to pass exams'. Although the kind of issues just mentioned do form part of this area of problems, developing a study skills **approach** to language learning implies taking a broader look at the students' study methods and helping them to discover the **learning potential** that is peculiar to each individual. This means that such an approach will lead to no easy general solution valid for everybody, since it is part of each individual student's process of growing and learning to find a suitable study method. This also means that we must get inside the student's personality and consider which factors are likely to influence the way he/she sets about to **learn** something in a school environment. Thus we shall have to bear in mind

— **cognitive** factors: what kind of **mental operations** are required by a specific learning task? (e.g. recognition and discrimination? classification and organization? synthesis or transfer?);

— **affective** factors: what kind of **attitudes** does the task demand, the terms of motivation, interest and emotional states?

— **socio-cultural** factors: what kind of **influences** may affect the successful completion of the task? (e.g. is our students' familiarity

with the written language reduced by the pervasive influence of visual media? Does perception of the task as a *test* cause anxiety or demotivation?).

2. How can 'study needs' be identified and analysed?

Within the general framework provided by the basic groups of factors just mentioned, we need some more empirical guidelines to identify the **study skills areas** likely to be most useful and productive for our students. In other words, we need to look carefully at the complex network of tasks which we set in our day-to-day classroom routine, and try to define our students' study needs in terms of:

a) **learning situations:** which *specific* demands do we make on our students when we place them in a particular learning situation?

b) **materials and techniques:** which *specific* teaching/learning aids do we ask our students to use in each learning situation?

c) **skills:** which *specific* abilities do our students have to develop to make effective use of the materials and techniques we expose them to?

Thus, if we ask students to read a passage (see (a) above), and use multiple-choice or cloze exercises to help reading comprehension (b), we should then ensure that students know how the multiple choice or cloze techniques work, and know how to fully exploit their teaching potential (c). To give another example, if our students meet unknown words (a), and are perhaps prompted to use a monolingual dictionary (b), we should then make sure that they know how to make the best of this learning aid (c).

Close observation of students' activities in the classroom along these guidelines has led me to draw up a list of possible **broad areas of 'study needs'**:

> 1. **How to assess one's own study method**
> 2. **How to store and retrieve information** — the use of notebooks, tape recorders and home computers
> 3. **How to use a textbook**
> 4. **When and how to use a dictionary**
> 5. **How to make and use notes**
> 6. **How to make and use maps, tables, graphs, etc.**
> 7. **How to develop correction, revision and remedial techniques**

This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and we could certainly add more 'problem areas' or group them in different ways, according to our specific teaching/learning situations. However, I think this list does at least provide a tentative 'map' of the kind of problems and issues involved in defining a study skills syllabus.

Each of these broad skills will obviously have to be broken down into more detailed **subskills**, so that suitable training materials and techniques can be devised for each specific objective. For example, the general area of knowing when to use a dictionary (i.e. knowing how to do *without* a dictionary) may be broken down into **subskills** such as how to select the unknown words essential for text comprehension, how to deduce the meaning of selected unknown words, how to understand word formation and the use of prefixes and suffices, how to identify parts of speech, how to use contextual clues, etc. (*i*)

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3. Four steps to study skills activities

We shall now turn to **methodological issues**, and consider how study skills activities, based on the specification of objectives outlined in the second part of this paper, can be implemented in the classroom.

I think four main principles of methodology should be borne in mind when planning materials and techniques for a study skills syllabus. These four principles correspond to four teaching/learning stages:

i)   **raising the awareness of the problem:** at the outset, students should be led to realize the *exact nature* of the problems and difficulties they may experience, so that they become aware both of their limitations and of their present abilities. By 'socializing' this awareness through comparison of situations with their schoolfriends and their teacher, students should thus develop a sufficient degree of **motivation** to enquire further into the problem;

ii) **training in specific techniques:** through exercises and activities in the classroom (and possibly at home), students should now acquire new **knowledge** and new **skills**. By being exposed to a variety of different, and even contrasting, learning strategies, they should be led to realize that there is not *one*, single, perfect way of tackling a learning task, but that each of us has to find *his/her own way* by choosing from among a number of alternative techniques;

iii) **transferring the new knowledge and skills to one's own experience:** once students have been shown some possible ways of coping with a specific problem, they should be invited to try out one or more of these ways *on themselves* and select which ones most suit their personality and learning style;

iv) **evaluating one's own new level of performance:** through individual, pair and group self-assessment activities, students can now evaluate their performance after the training stages, and assess how useful the selected strategies have been *in their own situation*, and what still needs to be done in order to meet the demands of learning tasks as effectively as possible.

4. Study skills, the EFL syllabus and the school curriculum

Although it may be easily recognized that study skills have an important **cross-curricular** value and should therefore be part of the overall **formative curriculum** offered by an educational institution, the basic objection of an EFL teacher, as indeed of a teacher of *any* subject, could well be: given the limited time and energies usually available, how can I possibly develop a **study skills programme** without jeopardizing the regular development of **my(language)syllabus?**

There are obviously no easy, straightforward answers to this basic objection. However, once a teacher has chosen to take responsibility, not only for the learning of the **foreign language** as a distinct 'subject', but also for the development of students' individual and autonomous **learning strategies**, the following considerations should be found useful:

a) it is possible to select, within the range of the materials and techniques we expose our students to, those which have a higher **cross-curricular** value: when *adopting* or *adapting* course materials, for example, we may deliberately give preference to those which show a stronger bias towards the issues raised by a study skills approach;

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b) even in the day-to-day implementation of our language syllabus, it is often possible to activate one or more of the four stages (**awareness/training/transfer/evaluation**) that are an essential feature of the study skills approach as outlined above;

c) it is possible to design materials, and carry out activities, aimed at developing study skills, using **English** as the medium of instruction: the usual **techniques** of a communicative methodology, such as interviews, questionnaires, surveys, case studies, games and problem-solving tasks, can be used for most activities; **authentic materials** (including materials produced by students) can be introduced; **language skills** can be developed and **language content**, in terms of specific notions, functions, structures and lexis, can be actively practised while carrying out **study skills** tasks.

The main problem for a teacher wishing to integrate a **study skills** programme within his/her own **EFL syllabus** will thus consist in identifying points or stages in the EFL syllabus where suitable study skills activities can be naturally — and productively — inserted. I believe that the outcome will not just be a higher quality of students' learning strategies, but also a better language competence.

Note

(*i*) For a detailed specification of subskills in a study skills syllabus, and for examples of materials and techniques, cf. Mariani, L., *Study Skills through English*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1987.

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