

The New Mentor

December 2011

Volume 1, Issue 1



Adult ESL Class Program



“Research has shown that all students can benefit from instruction in learning strategies.”

- Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen & Peyton, 2002

Opening Remarks

Welcome to the first edition of *The New Mentor*. With this inaugural edition, I hope to reach a broader audience and to promote professional development among English as a second language (ESL) instructors throughout Montgomery County. Thanks to MCAEL, this periodical will be distributed to all its coalition partners. In particular, I would like to thank Heather Ritchie for her encouragement and support in this endeavor.

This newsletter will be published four times a year, early in each of the four seasons. In future issues, I will be including articles from guest writers on topics germane to the field; however, for this first issue, I have written both offerings. It is my sincere hope that this newsletter is both timely and informative; its aim is to offer a balance of theory and practice, and thus meet the needs of a wide range of readers.

Some readers may question the use of the first person in these articles, wondering whether the tone of this newsletter is formal or personal. I would like to tread that fine line and publish articles by practitioners for practitioners. This first edition will explore the themes of learning strategies and critical thinking in the adult ESL classroom. Specifically, we will explore integrating learning strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive, as well as critical thinking, into our teaching.

The primary goal for me with this newsletter-ette is to spark ideas – ideas on how we can improve our teaching, ideas on how we can better prepare our students for the academic and vocational rigors that lie ahead, and ideas on how we can better serve Montgomery County’s large and diverse population of adult ESL learners. Hopefully, these ideas – and your ideas – will lead to discussion and then to action. I know I will have hit the target if these pages lead to beneficial changes, even in small ways, in our teaching and our students’ learning.

Philip Bonner

Editor-in-Chief

The New Mentor

December 19, 2011

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies in the Adult ESL Classroom
by Philip Bonner, Literacy Council of Montgomery County

“Cognition can be defined as thinking. Metacognition can be defined as thinking about our thinking (Anderson, 2003, p.75).”

As I began this article, I was reminded of the adage about teaching a man to fish. If you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. By analogy, if you teach a student learning strategies, he will become a lifelong learner. Arguably, one function of a teacher is to provide or promote the requisite skills

learners need for success, and the direct and explicit teaching of learning strategies is one way of doing so. This is as true in second language learning as it is in any other adult education class.

The value of learning strategies is well-established in the literature of the field. Oxford (1994) states that “[the] use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas.” Cohen (2008) writes, “Second language (L2) teachers are likely to agree in principle with the statement that it is important not only to teach the L2, but also to support students in being strategic in their learning and use of the L2.”

At this point, a working definition of *learning strategy* is needed. There has been disagreement in the field about how exactly to define a learning strategy, though there is certainly enough consensus for the purposes of this article. Oxford (1994) writes, “Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use – often consciously – to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2.” Cohen (2003) states, “*Language learning strategies* [author’s emphasis] are conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language.” Finally, Christison (2003) writes, “Strategies are specific means that learners use to learn or improve their language (p. 269).” Please note that in all cases the definition hinges on the idea of the student or learner using the strategy; the emphasis here is on what the learners can do to facilitate language learning, not on what the teachers can or should do.

Learning strategies can be divided into three broad categories: cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective (Christison, 2003, p. 269). This article will explore the first two types of learning strategies. Cognitive strategies are those employed by language learners to learn more effectively. These strategies involve language manipulation for the express purpose of language improvement. Metacognitive strategies are those which promote consideration of the learning process itself – planning to learn, monitoring the process, and evaluating how well that process has occurred (Christison, 2003, p. 271).

Cognitive Strategies

As teachers of English as a second language, we know the importance of explicitly teaching cognitive strategies, including such standards as identifying the main idea in an oral or written text; classifying words, terms or ideas; and connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge. These learning strategies, for me, are often the take-away in my teaching. In the ESL reading and writing courses which I have taught, what I often want the learners to gain from a lesson is greater facility with one or more of these strategies.

One very useful cognitive strategy I have taught over the years is summarizing, which is expressing the main idea from a given text. Admittedly, I have used this primarily in the more advanced courses I have taught and in the context of reading, but the skill can be introduced even in beginning level classes as well as used for listening work. “For

example, a common task teachers use is to ask students to make a written summary of information acquired from listening to or reading text. The task is to say or write the main idea. This is a cognitive strategy known as summarizing (Christison, 2003, p. 268).”

Being able to sift through the information in a text and express the essence of it is not just a language skill – it’s a critical thinking skill, one that will serve the learners well in all future academic or vocational learning opportunities. What is key in being able to summarize well is being able to identify the elements within a text which are most relevant. Undoubtedly, we have all worked with students who seem to have trouble seeing the forest for the trees. Hudson (2007), in referencing a study of both good and poor readers, writes the following, “The poor readers appeared to find sentences full of rich visual details to be important more than the good readers, who related importance to textual salience (p. 272).” Therefore, when teaching students to summarize, it is vital that we help our learners see this “textual salience.”

A good way to scaffold summarizing is to start with a partially completed table or chart which lists some of the major details of a text but not all of them. The students, perhaps working in pairs, would then complete the chart. From there, the class as a whole could construct a main idea statement for the text based on the identified major details. This statement would, of course, need to be general enough to encompass all of those major details. As the session goes on, these charts would have less and less of the major details listed, until the students were finally presented with a blank chart. This gradual release of the scaffolding coupled with good modeling on the teacher’s part ensures that the students have sufficient facility with the strategy before they are expected to use it on their own.

Induction, another powerful cognitive strategy, is one of my favorites with which to work. I think this mode of thought lends itself well to the study of grammar. Working from language samples supplied by the teacher, learners can construct language rules for themselves with guidance as needed.

A good example from my own experience comes from teaching the difference between the simple past and the present perfect verb tenses. For this activity, I ask learners to separate sentences with specific time references (e.g., *yesterday*, *last night*, *last April*) from sentences without any such references. After they have done so, I ask them what they notice about the verbs. Quickly enough, someone will point out that past tense verbs are paired with words like *yesterday* or *last night* (past tense markers), while present perfect verbs are not. From there, the students, perhaps with a bit of guidance, can construct the rule that the present perfect refers to the past but only in an indefinite way. This construction of a language rule is very empowering to learners. I have had classes over the years where students actually get excited about this kind of “discovery.”

Metacognitive Strategies

The use of metacognitive strategies can lead to a deeper, more profound understanding of how to learn a language. “Rather than focus students’ attention solely on learning the

language, second language teachers can help students learn to think about what happens during the language learning process, which will lead them to develop stronger learning skills (Anderson, 2002).”

Lam (2010) defines metacognitive strategies as “thoughts or behaviours consciously employed by the learner to think about the learning task, plan for the task, monitor the task, and evaluate how well he/she has completed the task (p.02.2).” This definition dovetails nicely with Anderson’s thoughts. Anderson (2002) outlines five distinct processes to metacognition: preparing and planning for learning; selecting and using learning strategies; monitoring strategy use; orchestrating various strategies; and evaluating strategy use and learning. I would now like to explore these five skills as they relate to my own teaching or to classes which I have observed.

Preparing and Planning for Learning: Arguably, the first step in preparing and planning to learn is to have a clear idea of what it is one is going to learn. By setting clear learning goals at the outset of a course, students can help guide themselves towards those goals. For instance, if a student sets a personal goal of getting his driver’s license before the end of the course, he would also determine that mastering vocabulary related to driving is essential to meeting that goal. The teacher, by being aware of this student’s goal, can help him in this by providing some of the vocabulary he would need or leading him to appropriate resources. If there are other students in the same class with that same goal, it would offer the opportunity for collaboration, and I am a firm believer in the power of synergy when it comes to learning.

Selecting and Using Learning Strategies: “The metacognitive ability to select and use particular strategies in a given context for a specific purpose means that the learner can think and make decisions about the learning process (Anderson, 2002).” As learners become more proficient in their employment of cognitive learning strategies, the metacognitive skill of selecting the right strategy in the right context becomes more urgent. In other words, students must learn to choose the right tool for the job.

Here is an example from a class I observed recently. In this class, the teacher had brought in several types of reading materials: a phone book, a resort brochure, a novel, a newspaper, and other things. Working in small groups, the students classified the items by which reading strategy – skimming, scanning, or close, careful reading – they would likely employ for the given item. For instance, all the groups agreed that one would scan the phone book and skim the brochure, though there was disagreement on the newspaper. It was finally decided that one skims headlines and captions and carefully reads the articles.

Like with any strategy, modeling is key to effective use by the learners. Walking a class through the process of how you, the teacher, would approach a challenging text or task and what strategies you would select and why is paramount to the learners’ eventual mastery of successful strategy selection.

Monitoring Strategy Use: Anderson (2002) states that learners need to determine if they are using their chosen strategies “as intended” as they work on a given task or project. This is done by having the students ask themselves if they are still utilizing the strategy effectively. A good example of this from my own experience is with a double-entry journal. Admittedly, I used this strategy in a developmental reading class, not an ESL class, but the example still works.

With a double-entry journal, the students create split pages for their journal by drawing a line down the middle of the pages. The left column is used for writing brief passages verbatim from the text; the right side is used for writing their reactions to those passages. Students are supposed to copy down passages which they find particularly challenging or provocative in some way and then respond to these passages, thus engaging with the text.

However, the students’ reactions need to indicate more than just comprehension – their reactions should demonstrate comprehension as well as a higher level of engagement. Their responses need to indicate that they disagree (or agree) with the text, that they find the author’s point of view unsupported, or that they can connect what they have read with something from their own lives or from another text. To put this in the context of Bloom’s taxonomy, the strategy requires the reader to engage with the text on the level of analysis or evaluation.

What I found the first time I introduced double-entry journals was that many of the students were merely jotting down passages and then providing paraphrases of them. While paraphrasing is certainly a valuable skill, that was not the point of the exercise. I was looking for that deeper interaction. If I had taught the metacognitive strategy of self-monitoring along with this reading strategy, I might have had better results.

It is also important to make sure that the strategy is appropriate to a given task. Different types of tasks lend themselves to different strategies. For instance, a Venn diagram may not be the best visual aid for a piece of narrative text, though a timeline probably would be useful. That same Venn diagram would likely be very helpful with a piece of expository writing in which two people, places or objects are being contrasted.

Orchestrating Various Strategies: Anderson (2002) writes, “The ability to coordinate, organize, and make associations among the various strategies available is a major distinction between strong and weak second language learners.” We can aid our learners in this by periodically reviewing or revisiting learning strategies and by modeling how strategies can be used in tandem or sequentially as learners complete tasks or negotiate meaning.

In my own teaching, after the strategies have been introduced and modeled, I have often incorporated two of them into the same lesson later in the term. Two reading strategies which work well together, in my opinion, are word analysis and using context to determine meaning. As students dismantle new words into roots, prefixes and suffixes in order to ascertain word meaning and part of speech, they are also using the context to aid their comprehension. For instance, the word *infidelity* came up in a class I was teaching

recently. My students, working in pairs, concluded that it had to be a noun based on the suffix *-ity* (which had been taught previously) and that, whatever its meaning, it was likely something negative based on its prefix. From there, it was not hard to determine its meaning given that the article we were reading was about how the institution of marriage has changed in the last couple of generations.

Evaluating Strategy Use and Learning:

Students engage in metacognition when they evaluate the efficacy of their own strategy use. According to Anderson (2002), this evaluation can be accomplished through a series of four self-directed questions: (1) What am I trying to accomplish? (2) What strategies am I using? (3) How well am I using them? and (4) What else could I do? Answering these questions incorporates the metacognitive strategies discussed thus far, creating a reflective cycle of learning for the students. Once students can plan for learning, select from among various strategies, and assess their own learning results, they are well on their way to greater independence as learners.

Conclusion

As the learners become more proficient with the use of the reading strategies they learn, their use becomes more automatic. In doing so, the strategy becomes a skill, which is a strategy readers perform without deliberation. "Strategies can be defined as conscious actions that learners take to achieve desired goals or objectives, while a skill is a strategy that has become automatic (Anderson, 2003, p. 77)." While Anderson was speaking specifically of reading strategies in this quote, I think this is applicable to learning strategies on the whole. It is this greater degree of automaticity with the strategy that we as teachers should strive to inculcate in our learners.

References

- Anderson, N. (2002). The role of metacognition in second language teaching and learning. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0110anderson.html>.
- Anderson, N. (2003). Reading. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Practical English language teaching* (pp. 67-86). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Christison, M.A. (2003). Learning styles and strategies. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Practical English language teaching* (pp. 267-288). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Cohen, A. (2008, March). Considering learner strategy instruction. *TEIS News*, 23(1). Retrieved August 30, 2011 from http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/article.asp?SID=1&NID=3091&DID=10703&vid=167&C
[L...](#)

Hudson, T. (2007). *Teaching second language reading*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Lam, W. (2010). Metacognitive strategy teaching in the ESL oral classroom. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33 (1), 02.1-02.19. Retrieved December 27, 2011 from <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aral/article/viewFile/2036/2419>

Oxford, R. (1994). *Language learning strategies: an update*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/oxford01.html>.

Helping Adult ESL Students Become Strategic Readers by Philip Bonner, Literacy Council of Montgomery County

“The notion that effective reading-strategy use is a hallmark of the good reader is now widely accepted among both L1 and L2 reading researchers (Grabe, 2009, p. 208).”

If adult educators are serious about facilitating the transition from adult education classes to higher or vocational education settings, then the importance of reading cannot be overstated. According to Mathews-Aydinli (2006), research tells us “that reading is the most important skill for adult learners moving into academic contexts.” If we start with this premise, teaching our learners to be strategic readers in English will clearly benefit them in their current classes as well as their future ones.

Teaching reading strategies requires a sustained effort. Long after the strategy has been presented in class, you will find yourself revisiting it in order to provide the necessary student application. “Teaching for strategic reading involves consistent modeling, scaffolding, extensive practice, and eventually independent use of the strategies by students (Grabe, 2009, p. 240).” Neil Anderson (2008) of Brigham Young University states, “We cannot hope that readers will improve in their use of strategies if the strategies are simply addressed sporadically (p.138).” Thus, if the ultimate goal of teaching reading strategies is the learners’ autonomous use of these strategies, it is incumbent on the teacher to provide a controlled and gradual release of support through modeling and scaffolded activities.

Which reading strategies, however, are best? William Grabe (2009) of Northern Arizona University identifies eight strategies which provide “the strongest support for reading comprehension (p. 209).” These eight strategies are: summarizing; forming questions; answering questions and Elaborative Interrogation; activating prior knowledge; monitoring comprehension; using text-structure awareness; using visual graphics and graphic organizers; and inferencing. Similarly, Betsy Parrish and Kimberly Johnson (2010) of Hamline University state, “In particular, research has shown that skilled readers determine the importance of specific statements, monitor their comprehension, make predictions, and ask questions while reading.” Finally, Van Duzer (1999) writes, “...

such strategies as skimming for the main idea, scanning for specific information, predicting what a text is about or what will happen next, and making use of the context and illustrations to discover word meanings are critical for English language learners beyond the beginning level.”

Of these many skills and strategies, I would like to explore four I have utilized extensively in my own teaching. Activating prior knowledge, forming questions, using graphic organizers, and inferencing are strategies I have found to be effective in increasing reading comprehension and retention of new ideas and vocabulary.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Good readers associate new information with knowledge they already have (Anderson, 2008, p.32). These connections improve both the comprehension and retention of new information (Grabe, 2009, p. 210-211). This, in essence, is schema theory. Making connections, integrating new ideas with old, weaving strands between nodes of knowledge – this is comprehension. But how can ESL teachers help their students do this more effectively? The answer, at least in part, is to help the learners build background knowledge (Anderson, 2008, p.32).

If ESL students are given a text to read with concepts or cultural references unfamiliar to them, they are more likely to struggle. We cannot always assume that our students have had similar experiences or share the same points of reference. In fact, we can safely assume that many of the cultural icons present in our vernacular will be new for them.

For instance, some years ago, I was teaching an intermediate level reading and writing class in which we read an article about the *Radio Flyer* little red wagon. To generations of American children, *Radio Flyer* conjures nostalgic memories of childhood, while to adults of other cultures, the reference may hold no meaning. To activate the students’ background knowledge prior to reading this article, I asked them to think about a favorite toy from childhood. I called on a number of students to share their memories and then shared with them a story about a cherished toy of my own – a *Radio Flyer* red wagon. Doing this set the stage for reading the article and facilitated their understanding of it. As Anderson (2008) states, “You can facilitate comprehension by building a simple foundation from which students can continue to learn as they read (p.32).”

Forming Questions

Generating questions about a text is another strategy I have promoted in my classes. By doing so prior to reading, it creates a purpose *for* reading. If the students themselves have generated the questions, they have provided their own incentive for reading, as opposed to having a teacher-generated list of comprehension questions. Self-generated reading comprehension questions, by virtue of being intrinsically motivational, help learners build self-efficacy and autonomy as learners. One way learners can monitor their own comprehension is to “[have] a reason for reading and [be] aware of it (Grabe, 2009,

p.211).” One quick and easy way to start students asking their own questions is to have them turn headings and sub-headings in a reading sample into questions.

Having students form questions in conjunction with other strategies is especially effective, I think. As Grabe (2009) points out, “The strategic reader is one who automatically and routinely applies combinations of effective and appropriate strategies depending on reader goals, reading tasks, and strategic processing abilities (p. 220).” In many of my classes, I ask my students to quickly skim the title or headline of an article, look at any pictures and read their captions, and scan tables or graphs to find a specific number or statistic. However, they should not read the body of the text yet. Based on this brief preview, I ask them to predict what the story or article is most likely about. After writing their prediction(s) on the board, I then have the class work in pairs to generate a short series of questions they would like to have answered. Very often, the questions speak to the main idea of the piece, so the answers to these questions can usually provide a main idea statement. After the pairs have finished reading the text, have answered their questions, and generated a main idea statement, we then discuss our predictions to see how closely they align with what we have learned.

Using Graphic Organizers

According to Anderson (2008), “A graphic organizer allows the reader to make a visual representation of the relationships among ideas in the text (p. 111).” These relationships include but are not limited to cause-and-effect, sequences, contrast and opposition, either/or scenarios, and classification. Charts and tables, Venn diagrams, timelines, word and idea webs, and story maps are some of the more common types of graphic organizers. The choice of graphic organizer is dependent largely on what information the teacher wants his or her learners to capture. “Graphic organizers can help teachers clarify their instructional goals. Teachers can ask themselves what they want their students to learn and how they can display this information graphically to help their students connect ideas (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2002).”

I have long been a devotee of graphic organizers; I confess that I love them. This is likely due to my being such a strongly visual learner, and I have amassed quite a collection over the years. After deciding what type of graphic organizer is most appropriate for a given text, I enjoy modeling their use for my students. Of course, the goal here is to lead the students to greater independence as readers of English, so as the term progresses, I eventually stop providing graphic organizers with the reading assignments and ask my students to create their own.

Inferencing

Making inferences is a strategy covered in most ESL texts with any reading component. It is an important strategy and one which is not restricted to the venue of reading (Grabe, 2009, p. 68). Readers, and others, infer when they guess, deduce or surmise based on available information. This is often done by filling in missing information with background knowledge or by using context clues in a text. In other words, the reader is

compensating for the gaps in the text. Because there is so much information that is not directly stated, both in written texts and in conversations, this is a critical thinking skill which can serve our learners well in many aspects of life. “Our fundamental drive to generate coherent interpretations of the world and people’s actions demands a considerable set of inferencing skills (Grabe, 2009, p. 69).”

While it is important to model all strategies, I feel it is especially so for inferencing. It is one that does not always come naturally, especially in an academic context. “Such academic inferencing requires the evaluation of many different linguistic cues, the recognition of sometimes subtle textual cues, the prioritization of potentially conflicting cues, or the synthesis of evidence from multiple texts to build critical reading comprehension abilities (Grabe, 2009, p. 70).”

The first time I introduce the strategy in a class, I walk the students through it. For instance, in the advanced level reading and writing classes I teach, I often bring in short articles from newspapers or magazines. After some preliminary schema activation, I would then pose a few questions whose answers can be inferred from the text. During a think-aloud, I ask myself why I reach certain conclusions – in other words, I challenge myself to provide the evidence from the text which supports my answers. This degree of scaffolding may or may not be necessary for the more competent readers, but skills which for strong readers occur almost without conscious thought need to be explicitly taught for more challenged readers.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that for individuals who have already learned to read in their native language, the strategies discussed here are ones which they most likely employ with considerable skill and frequency when reading in their first language. In helping our learners become strategic readers of English, our goal should be to guide our students in drawing on these skills, refining them, and employing them effectively with English language texts. “Like learning how to ride a bicycle, you only have to learn to read once. Once you have learned how to read in one language, you do not learn how to read again in a second or foreign language. Rather you need to learn how to transfer skills that you have already learned in your first language to new reading contexts in a new language (Anderson, 2008, p. 4).”

However, not all of the students whom you encounter in adult ESL classes will be literate in their first language. In fact, even within the same class, there may be significant variation in literacy levels, even among speakers of the same language. You will need to gauge the literacy level of your students in their native language(s) through whatever assessments or surveys your program uses and determine what reading strategies are most appropriate to cover in your class. In lower-level ESL classes or classes with students who are weak readers in their first language, you may need to work on more fundamental skills, such as decoding and prosody. Ultimately, helping our learners become strategic readers entails choosing the proper strategies and fostering their development with your learners.

References

Anderson, N. (2003). Reading. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Practical English language teaching* (pp. 67-86). New York: McGraw Hill.

Anderson, N. (2008). *Practical English language teaching: reading*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Crandall, J., Jaramillo, A., Olsen, L., & Peyton, J.K. (2002). Using cognitive strategies to develop English language and literacy. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0205crandall.pdf.

Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Mathews-Aydinli, J. (2006). Supporting adult English language learners' transitions to postsecondary education. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/transition.html.

Parrish, B. and Johnson, K. (2010). Promoting learner transitions to postsecondary education and work: developing academic readiness skills from the beginning. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from <http://www.cal.org/caelanetwork/resources/transitions.html>.

Van Duzer, C. (1999). Reading and the adult English language learner. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved August 30, 2011 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/Read.html.