Very simply, this article is about what educators call learning strategies (see Figure 1). They are significant in general education theory, but in this article we will focus specifically on their use in foreign language learning.

In my classes, in an effort to make students aware of the learning strategies that are available to them, I have introduced and described them like this:

“Imagine all the different routes you could take from our university to the train station! There are many, and at different times you will go different ways for different reasons—for example, picking up a friend, getting something to eat before your train, purchasing a gift for the friend you will meet when you arrive at your destination, or buying flowers for the person whom you are picking up. Well, learning strategies are like all those different routes to the train station. When you are faced with language learning tasks, there are many different things you can do to help yourself accomplish the tasks, and for different tasks you will use different learning strategies, as appropriate. My job as a teacher is to show you all the different ‘routes’ or strategies that are available to you, and teach you how to decide which ones to use for various tasks.”

While working on my M.A. in TESOL and Intercultural Studies, I became interested in the use of language learning strategies and researched their use among my students at Vinh University. What follows is the study, an analysis of the data, curriculum ideas I developed as a result of the study and an M.A. class on the same topic, and finally, an analysis of the curriculum following initial implementation.

The Study

The goal of my study was to gain an understanding of what strategies, if any, my students use regularly. Specifically, I was interested in finding out which strategies my students use, when they use them, and if they use them across skill levels. I was also interested in looking at whether or not students plan, monitor, problem-solve, and evaluate their learning activities.

The study was carried out in two parts. The first part was a strategies use survey, based on the “Sample Learning Strategies Questionnaire” on page 72 of The Learning Strategies Handbook. It included five parts, one for each of the four communicative skills, plus a general section. Students were asked to read statements about how often they participated in certain behaviors when learning or doing tasks in English. (My specific survey is found on pages 22-23.)

The second part of the study was ten oral or “talk aloud” interviews. Some students did a role-play with a native-speaking teacher, while others completed a reading assignment that included a newspaper article and comprehension questions. Certain students did both activities, while some participated only in the reading task. All participants were instructed beforehand, during a separate preparatory meeting, in how to participate in “talk aloud” interviews, and were given the opportunity to practice talking aloud while they worked. Those working on role-plays were given a situation written on an index card, then allowed as much time as they desired to prepare. During that time, or before they began role-playing, they were asked to verbalize what they did mentally to prepare. During the role-play, I took notes. Afterward, I asked them to review what they had thought about during the performance. I also asked questions from my notes about such items as long pauses, corrections, errors, and word choice. The role-plays were situations that had been previously used in class to prepare for final oral exams, so students may or may not have previously watched someone perform their particular role-play. However, no one performed a role-play that they had already done in class.

During the process of this study, these oral interviews contributed in two major ways. First, they allowed me the opportunity to actually observe my students individually as they completed reading and oral tasks. I was able to ask them questions as they worked and listen to their thought processes. The second was
the ability to compare their surveys with the notes I took on their interviews. The oral interviews to some extent acted as a verification of the truthfulness of students’ answers on the survey.

The survey was administered to a total of 146 students at Vinh University: 58 fourth-year females, 24 fourth-year males, 47 first-year females, and 17 first-year males. The students had one 45-minute class period to listen to the instructions and complete the survey. All students had studied speaking with a foreign teacher for the semester prior to the survey. All of the students were English majors, studying to become English teachers in provinces throughout central Vietnam.

The ten oral interviews were conducted with eight females and two males, all of whom were fourth-year students who had already completed the survey. Only these ten students were asked to identify themselves on their surveys—the other 136 were asked only to identify their class and sex. The interviews—both the role-play and the reading task—lasted for one hour each. Participants were assured before starting that completing the assignment was not the purpose—I was more interested in how they did what they had time to do than in whether they finished all the reading comprehension questions.

Analysis

I began analyzing the study by first formatting the data to be able to compare males to females, first-year to fourth-year students, and also each of these categories to the total percentages. (The complete data tables may be obtained by writing to Teacher’s Edition. My discussion here picks out key information and trends.)

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**Learning strategies are:**
- actions
- behaviors
- steps
- techniques
- procedures
- tricks

**They include, but are not limited to:**
- Organizing information into categories (chunking).
- Organizing information visually through maps, charts, and frames.
- Planning or preparing before a task.
- Evaluating after a task.
- Activating background knowledge.
- Predicting or guessing.
- Summarizing.
- Paraphrasing.
- Using mnemonics and imagery to memorize lists or information.
- Clarifying techniques.
- Drawing pictures.
- Circumlocution.
- Monitoring speech while speaking.
- Correcting errors.
- Rehearsing or repetition.
- Cooperation.
- Visualization.
- Journaling or keeping a learning log.
- Setting language learning goals.

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Figure 1. Learning strategies overview.

Learning strategies are: They include, but are not limited to:

- actions
- behaviors
- steps
- techniques
- procedures
- tricks

that

facilitate
improve
enhance

the

comprehension
internalization
storage
retention
use
application

of language.
Overall, my impression of the results is that my students do use learning strategies, but on a very limited basis. This makes sense because they have been learning English for between four and ten years. In that amount of time, it seems only natural that they would have developed some sort of system for remembering and accomplishing language learning tasks. Another overall impression, though not a scientific observation by any means, is that I believe students overestimated their frequency of strategy use.

Specifically, the first major trend I noticed about my students’ use of learning strategies is that it would not be considered strategic. In fact, it might even be seen as inappropriate for truly becoming competent in a foreign language. They need to be shown how to choose appropriate strategies for different tasks and for their personal growth. For example, the strategy of cooperation is used constantly in any Asian classroom, which sometimes makes it difficult to stop cheating or keep students quiet. If a student does not understand, they will simply turn and ask a friend. Despite this, only 2% of respondents said they always have a friend read what they have written before they turn it in. And only 7% said they often have a friend proofread their work. The only respondents who always have a friend read their homework were first-year females.

The second specific trend I noted is the use of “strategies” that might actually hinder students’ learning because of overuse. For example, 46% of the students said they often or always begin reading right away and look up every word they do not know. Most teachers would agree that a little preparation before reading, even in a first language, helps with comprehension. Good pedagogy also tells us that students who excel in a foreign language do not look up every word they do not know. In the “talk aloud” interviews, my strongest student never even got out her dictionary and finished reading the article in 20 minutes, with comprehension as good as or better than others who took 45-60 minutes to read the article while using their dictionary.

Forty-six percent of the students reported that they always explain again or correct themselves if they make a mistake. Such a high percentage tells me that students are not strategically correcting themselves. They are focused on grammatical perfection, not communication. They need training in when to correct and when to continue.

In writing tasks, 33% of students said they often or always begin writing immediately with no preparation. Combine that with the fact that 39% of them never, rarely, or only sometimes draft and revise, and that 54% never or rarely have a friend proofread, and it is certain that many of these students could be producing written work of much higher quality.

Another problem I noticed in watching students complete the reading tasks during the “talk aloud” interviews was that they have physical habits which hinder their learning. For example, a few of the students who were slower in reading and used their dictionary a lot tended to touch each word, either with their finger or a pencil, as they read it, making each word a unit, instead of reading longer phrases as single units of meaning.

A third trend was that first-year and fourth-year students showed very little difference in their survey responses. One would guess that responses would be somewhat haphazard during the first year at university, and become more focused on sometimes or often by the fourth year. But there really was no trend, which suggests one of two conclusions. Either students received great training in secondary school and needed no further training at university, in which case their answers would remain about the same. Or they received no specific training during secondary school or university on what learning strategies are and how to use them strategically. Based on my experience, I believe the second conclusion is the correct one. Students are perhaps taught to use certain skills, such as using context to comprehend meaning when reading, but they are not expected to transfer them to other skills (such as listening), nor are they trained to use them strategically.

A fourth trend was the lack of preparatory and evaluative skills. By looking at the surveys in comparison with the “talk aloud” interviews, I concluded that students reported using preparation and evaluation learning strategies at a rate that was much higher than they actually did. In looking through the survey data, I also

“My job as a teacher is to show you all the different ‘routes’ or strategies that are available to you, and teach you how to decide which ones to use for various tasks.”
got a sense that students were more likely to answer that they never or rarely use the preparatory or evaluative skills than they were for skills they could use while actually performing a task. The *Learning Strategies Handbook* calls these skills monitoring or problem-solving skills. This observation was reinforced in the “talk aloud” interviews: Some students did not read the directions at all, only one student read through all the questions before reading, and only one other student took the time to complete the vocabulary exercises prior to reading, as was suggested in the directions.

The fifth trend, seen in the oral interviews, is that students are capable of using preparatory and evaluative learning strategies well, but they have never been expected or taught to use them. After the role-plays, participants were capable of verbalizing thoughts about what they would have changed and why they made certain choices during the role-play. They also demonstrated excellent capability for using preparation strategies in role-plays during their final oral exams, which occurred the week after the surveys and interviews were conducted.

The sixth trend, also taken from the oral interviews, is that the two skills most students made more effective use of than I had expected were (1) using context to guess meaning; and (2) periodic summarizing to check comprehension. Students who participated in the oral interviews were some of the highest-level students, and so this finding could be what sets them apart from the average student. The lowest-level student who participated in the oral interviews told me that during a timed reading task, she usually reads the text again and again until there are five or ten minutes remaining, then guesses at the answers. She also explained that during an exam, she omits all new words (hoping their meaning is not significant to comprehending the text) and guesses at the answers. But at home she looks up every new word in the dictionary. All the other students demonstrated a fairly well-developed ability to use contextual clues for determining meanings. Most surprisingly, they all stopped periodically to summarize for comprehension, though they would probably not be able to identify that as a specific learning strategy.

**Curriculum Proposal**

As one result of what I had learned through my research—another was leading a learning strategies workshop for newer English teachers—I formulated a plan for a speaking curriculum that would focus on and help students develop their use of learning strategies.

In my speaking course that preceded implementation of the new curriculum, I focused on explicit learning strategies training (for example, circumlocution, summarizing, thinking about what you already know, and predicting); correcting the most common and detrimental speaking errors (for example, agreeing and disagreeing with positive and negative statements, pronouncing final consonants, article use, and word stress); and group oral presentations. However, when it came time to prepare my students for their final oral exam, I noticed that my teaching was heavily weighted toward accuracy and lacked the proper balance of fluency training. I saw that I needed to make my curriculum more holistic. I also subsequently learned the necessity for incorporating the accuracy components into the content of the curriculum, instead of centering my curriculum on the accuracy skills themselves.

With these realizations and the results of my research, I designed a semester-long curriculum based on role-playing and group presentations. (My one-semester curriculum plan is found on pages 24-25.) The first half contains training in verbal skills such as persuading, conflict resolution, making complaints, and giving advice, while at the same time teaching students to use learning strategies to accomplish the communicative tasks. The second half of the curriculum is devoted to a Deserted Island unit which begins with the very familiar “deserted island activity” and culminates in students presenting an island nation they create (since they are not rescued from their deserted islands). I was attempting to incorporate my previous explicit strategies training and error correcting into the larger picture of completing communicative role-plays and group presentations.

The very beginning of the curriculum is designed to allow for certain practices I always do, such as learning my students’ names, as well as new features, such as an explicit introduction to what learning strategies are. The learning strategies specifically incorporated into the curriculum are:

- Chunking—organizing information visually through maps, charts, and frames.
- Preparing, monitoring, and evaluating (PME).
- Goal-setting.
- Linear thinking.
- Predicting.
- Visualizing.
- Self-talk, for example, “I can do this.”
I chose these strategies specifically because I believed they would be fairly basic, able to be used across skills and subjects, and a good foundation for students’ future learning.

After my introduction, which focused on PME, my goal was to teach students what the strategies are and how to choose appropriate strategies for various language tasks. Students from then on were held accountable for participating in PME for each language task and choosing appropriate strategies for each of the three steps.

Curriculum Analysis

For the most part, the new curriculum succeeded very well. I taught students to organize information visually through frames, maps, and charts at the beginning of the semester. This proved to be an invaluable help to them throughout the semester, as I presented all information both orally and in a visual format. This was possibly the greatest benefit of the curriculum. In fact, they learned to organize information in this way so well that some even began using this strategy in their phonology course. Due to increased comprehension and information retention, their marks went up significantly, and other students took notice and began to do the same.

This small triumph with one learning strategy prompts me to want to continue learning strategy training in all future teaching endeavors. However, there were changes I would make, and in my analysis here I will focus on these so that we all can attempt to use learning strategies in the most applicable ways for Vietnamese students learning English.

First, I realized that I tried to accomplish too many goals in one semester. Students are capable of grasping the entire curriculum, but they need more time.

Second, I discovered that I ordered my strategies incorrectly. I rightly began with chunking, as discussed above, but I followed that immediately with goal-setting, which was a mistake.

My intention for students to choose one specific strategy to work on throughout the semester was a great intention. However, they do not have the thinking skills to be specific and intentional about focusing on one aspect of English at a time. This can be seen vividly in listening to students discuss, “How can I learn English better?” They encourage one another, “Try harder. Study more. Do more exercises.” But they cannot comprehend a specific suggestion, such as, “Put all the root words you need to know for the TOEFL exam on cards and review them every night for three minutes before you go to bed.” They also lacked the skills, even if they were specific about what to study, to correlate which activities they would do to accomplish which goal. For example, several students said they wanted to work on developing correct intonation for simple questions in English, but they then listed their objective as: Do exercises in the workbook. They failed to see that to accomplish a speaking goal, doing exercises in a book is not an effective or appropriate plan.

Third, in reflecting on my first two evaluations and watching a colleague adapt my curriculum for use in her class, I saw that although the thought processes needed for my purposes are indeed lacking in my students, they can be developed by ordering the learning strategies in my curriculum differently.

My colleague added two major components to the curriculum, brainstorming and storytelling, which have the potential to be the missing link between my theoretically correct proposal for implementing learning strategies and the actual needs students have. These additions got her students to the place they needed to be to start my curriculum. She had students brainstorm a topic at the start of every class, a skill they desperately needed to develop since they are traditionally not coached in thinking outside the box. With simple brainstorming activities, she introduced an essential ingredient for learning strategies: possibility. She drilled it into them so effectively that when the entire department gathered to hear us explain the final oral exams, and she asked the students, “What’s the first thing you do before a role-play?”, her students responded in unison, “BRAINSTORM!”

She also taught storytelling. It sounds simple, but proper storytelling in English requires students to think linearly, something they do not do in Vietnamese. Once they learned to do it with stories, they could transfer the skill to giving directions, explaining processes, or other

Learning strategies have the potential to lift Vietnamese English education into a new era in which students know how to learn and have a repertoire of skills to make them increasingly independent.
communicative tasks. This linear or cause-and-effect thinking process is essential to effective use of learning strategies.

The bottom line: I plan to revise the curriculum to be two semesters instead of one. In terms of learning strategies, in the first semester I will focus on organizing information visually (chunking), brainstorming, storytelling, and other preparatory skills such as prediction. A large portion of my original curriculum will be used in the second semester and include such strategies as goal-setting, monitoring, evaluating, self-talk, and visualization. I will also spread out more the speaking functions I taught—including persuading, giving opinions, and giving directions—over the two semesters, perhaps adding one or two more, but mostly just allowing more time for students to practice and become confident in each area.

Conclusion

My interest in and commitment to implementing learning strategies in the language classroom is heightened because of the need recognized through my research; my curriculum, which offered some significant, though small, successes; and the potential for the future, seen by looking at realistic improvements and adaptations to the curriculum. Learning strategies have the potential to lift Vietnamese English education into a new era in which students know how to learn and have a repertoire of skills to make them increasingly independent, free to develop at their own pace. Truly, the need for students to take ownership and responsibility for their own education cannot be understated. Through developing and using the analytic skills necessary to accomplish language learning tasks, our students can become the English speakers they long to be.

References


The complete curriculum developed by Jody Gilbert is available via e-mail upon request. The files are documents created in Microsoft Word. Please contact: VTEACHER@elic.org.

Thank you to Dr. Melissa Smith, my professor and friend, who willingly helped me develop my curriculum; and to Brandelle Courville, my teammate and friend, who taught the curriculum with me, helped me wrestle through the issues, and gave me great ideas for improvements. I am indebted to both of you.

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LEARNING SURVEY

Note: There are no right answers for this survey. It is only for gathering information about students in Vietnam. Please answer the questions truthfully, as best you can. Your teacher is not looking for certain answers. Please be honest.

Directions: Please circle the answer that tells how often you do the following things in order to help you learn, remember, and use English. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

**If you want to explain why you chose an answer, please write on the back of the paper.

**Reading**

(1) Before I read in English, I decide what my purpose in reading is.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(2) When I read in English, I begin reading immediately and look up any words I don’t know.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(3) Before I read in English, I think about what I already know about the topic.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(4) When I have something to read in English, I try to predict what the text will be about.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(5) While reading, I stop to periodically summarize what I’ve already read to make sure it makes sense.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(6) I imagine or draw pictures of what I read.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(7) I use the context—like familiar words, pictures, and what has already happened—to help me guess the meaning of unfamiliar words I read.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(8) After I read something, I check to see if my predictions were correct.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(9) After I read something, I think about what I could have done to help me understand better.  
   Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

**Speaking**

(10) Before I speak in English, I think about what I already know about the topic.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(11) Before I speak in English, I think about what I want to say.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(12) If I realize I said something wrong or confusing in English, I explain it again or correct myself.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(13) If I can’t think of the word I want to use in English, I think of another way to say it.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

**Listening**

(14) Before I listen in English, I think about what I might hear, and what I already know about the topic.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(15) After I listen to something, I think about what I could have done to help me understand better.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always

(16) If I don’t understand something someone said, I ask them a question.  
    Never    Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always
(17) I imagine or draw pictures of what I hear.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(18) I use the context—like familiar words and what has already been said—to help me guess the meaning of unfamiliar words I hear.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(19) After I have a conversation, or listen to someone in English, I check to see if I heard what I predicted.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(20) After I have a conversation, I think about what I could have done differently to help me understand the other person, or to help the other person understand me, better.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

Writing

(21) Before I write something, I make a list of words I can use, or topics I want to include.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(22) Before I write something, I plan exactly how I want to communicate my point.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(23) When I have to write in English, I start writing immediately and put whatever I think first on the paper.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(24) When I write in English, I write a draft and then revise it.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(25) I have a friend read what I write in English.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

General

(26) While reading, writing, speaking, or listening, I encourage myself by saying things like, “Keep going. You can do it!”

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(27) I work with my classmates to complete assignments or figure out something I don’t understand.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(28) I use reference materials (such as a dictionary, textbook, grammar book, computer programs, or the Internet) to help me if I don’t understand.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(29) When I don’t understand something in class, I ask the teacher for help or clarification.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

Use the back of this paper if you need extra room to answer the following questions.

Please tell me about anything else you do that helps you to learn, remember, and use English well.

Can you think of a vocabulary word you learned recently that you did not forget? How did you remember it?

How do you normally learn new vocabulary?