Toward Learner Autonomy: The Role of the Teacher in the English Classroom

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Abstract:

The paradigm shift in the Teaching-Learning process from being teacher-centered to learner-centered has placed great emphasis on learner autonomy. Research in the field of English as a Second Language has focused on Learning Strategies, which are 'the specific behaviours or thoughts learners use to enhance their language learning' as defined by Rebecca L. Oxford. Awareness of learning strategies will help learners to become more active and also move consciously towards a language goal. It is in this context, that the present paper attempts to study how the new English curriculum for the undergraduate programmes of Osmania University in Telangana State can be used to train the learners in language learning strategies, with specific reference to reading skills.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Language Learning Strategies, Reading Strategies.

The role of the teacher has undergone many significant changes over the past few decades. Today, the paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process has brought the learner to the centre, with more and more emphasis being placed on learner needs and learner autonomy. However, research in language learning shows that the role of the teacher has assumed greater significance as the teacher is now called upon to don the multiple roles of "advisors, facilitators, consultants, co-communicators, partners and joint problem-solvers"(Williams and Burden 164). This reorientation of roles places greater responsibility on the teacher to ensure that the learners are provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to take control of their own learning in order to achieve language proficiency. The teacher has to reflect on her methods and practices and reorient them to facilitate learner autonomy.

The term 'learner autonomy' has been defined in various ways by many researchers. However, for the purpose of this paper, Oxford's (1999) definition of 'learner autonomy' ia taken as the working definition.. According to her, learner autonomy refers to the

> . . . (a) ability and willingness to perform a language task without assistance, with adaptability related to the situational demands, with transferability to other relevant contexts, and with reflection, accompanied by (b) relevant action (the use, usually conscious and intentional, of appropriate learning strategies) reflecting both ability and willingness"(111).

The focus of the present paper is on the latter part of the above definition, "relevant action," which refers to the use of appropriate "learning strategies." Researchers and teachers in the area of language teaching and learning have been intrigued by the question "What makes a 'Good Language Learner'?" These researchers have come to the conclusion that all language learners tend to use some language learning strategy to enhance their learning. Scarcella & Oxford (1992) define learning strategies as "the specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques used by students to enhance their own learning"(163).

The relationship between learning strategies and autonomy is best summed up by Oxford (1999) who observes that "learning strategies play a key role in autonomy" and elaborates that these learning strategies "reflect the learner's degree of autonomy and are mechanisms by which the learner develops still greater autonomy"(111). Many researchers in this area have come up with taxonomies for learning strategies. For the purpose of this paper - one of the most significant of them - the six kinds of strategies identified by Oxford will be touched upon. They are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Oxford (1990) has categorised them into two main groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies are direct strategies as they "directly involve the target language and require mental processing of the language"(37), while metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies are indirect strategies as they "provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increase cooperation and empathy and other means"(151).

Alcon & Guzman (2014) emphasize that the teacher's role assumes significance as there is "a great need to help learners to become aware of their learning styles and preferences, as well as a conscious selection in the light of learning objectives and task demands"(393). For effective learning to take place, the teacher has to interweave strategy teaching into language instruction. The learners have to be trained in the "What?", "Why?" and "How? of language learning strategies. According to Rubin (2012), it is very important to help learners in this aspect because they become "better prepared to consider which strategies are appropriate for the task, the context, and their own learning styles instead of using strategies in a random fashion"(6).

Language teachers, thus, have to ensure that the learners are made aware of the range of strategies available to them and also enable them to choose the most appropriate ones from among them. Abhakorn (2014) points out that "Strategies....can be learned through formal instruction and repeated practising"(196). In this context, Oxford (1990) advises L2 teachers to "employ a broad instructional approach, notably the best version of the communicative approach that contains a combined focus on form and fluency" as this allows for "deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class"(16). Elaborating further, she stresses that L2 teachers "can and should conduct strategy instruction in their classrooms" by interweaving strategy instruction with the general communicative language teaching approach (17).

At this juncture, it would be pertinent to refer to the English Lecturers Retraining Programme jointly organized by the U. S. State Department and the Commissionerate of Collegiate Education of the combined state of Andhra Pradesh. This programme changed the way language is taught in the English classroom in degree colleges across the state. Today, the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have teachers who are trained in the communicative language teaching approach, which means that concepts like "learner autonomy", "learner-centredness" etc., are not strange or unfamiliar to us. In fact, as teachers of English, we are already using many language learning strategies in our day-to-day teaching. However, what is essential is informed and deliberate interweaving of strategy instruction into the curriculum.

The present undergraduate curriculum for Osmania University can be used to teach learning strategies in various ways. For the purpose of this paper, one unit each was taken from the English text books of I and II year in order to see how strategy instruction can be incorporated. "Hard Work and Honesty or Good

Bricks" by C. Rajagopalachari (Unit 6, I year) and "Larry Page and Sergei Brin" (Unit 2, II year) were chosen. The learners in I and II year were asked to read the first pages of the respective lessons and be prepared to answer questions on them. The learners were given enough time to read the given text at least twice. When their comprehension was tested, it was found that some of them were able to grasp the meaning of the given passage, while others could not. What was interesting was that though the classes are a heterogeneous mixture of learners from both English and Telugu medium, these 'good readers' came from both sections. Similarly, there were 'poor readers' among the learners from English medium as well as Telugu medium. From the inputs given by the 'good readers,' we were able to highlight how these learners had made use of certain reading behaviours like reading the text quickly to get the general idea; guessing the meanings of new words from the context; skipping parts which were difficult to understand; trying to comprehend these parts from clues that came in the subsequent part; etc. This small exercise demonstrated to the class that there was something like a 'good' way of reading, if not a 'bad' way and it also made them see how different learners have different styles, approaches, etc. We were able to highlight the relevance of Paris and Meyer's (1981) observation that "good readers attend to meaning more than decoding and have tactics for keeping track of the sense of the information"(6), while "poor readers adopted decoding goals and did not attend to the meaningfulness of sentences"(12).

After that, it was easy for us to introduce the concept of reading strategies and also to model them so that the learners could make use of them in their next reading assignments. Recent research in the area of reading strategies has shown that metacognitive awareness, that is, the knowledge about ourselves, the tasks we face, and the strategies we employ, plays a very important role in the reading comprehension process. According to Paris and Meyer (1981), "comprehension monitoring implies some awareness of goals and strategies for meeting them and has been considered to be an important aspect of metacognition" (I6). Carell (2014) stresses the importance of metacognitive awareness because "if learners are not aware of when comprehension is breaking down and what they can do about it, strategies introduced by the teacher will fail, and the learner will not be able to use the strategies strategically"(7).

William and Burden (1997) have suggested "individuals will choose to use certain strategies if they have a clear purpose for using them and they feel that accomplishing a particular task has value to them personally" (164). Against this backdrop, it is imperative for teachers to ensure that the learners make effective use of learning strategies in the English Classroom. We would like to conclude with what Oxford (1999) has observed about the challenge that we, language teachers, have to face:

> "The challenge is here to help create more effective language learners who will be able to use their new languages for actual communication. Three pieces of the puzzle – learning strategy use, language proficiency, and learner autonomy – must fit together closely and effectively in order for us to meet the challenge"(120).

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