TOWARDS GREATER AUTONOMY: TRAINING IN METACOGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES APPLIED TO WRITING SKILLS IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research in both cognitive psychology and second language acquisition has highlighted the fundamental role played by both conscious and unconscious strategies in the process of learning second and foreign languages. It has been suggested that good language learners have at their disposition a variety of effective strategies which, once identified, can be taught to less successful learners, with considerable potential for the ongoing development of language skills both inside and outside the classroom. In such a learner-centred approach, the teacher can also play an active role by implementing an integrated training programme in order to encourage learners to extend strategy knowledge and use in order to gain greater autonomy. This paper examines explicit training in metacognitive and affective strategies applied to writing skills in English as a Foreign Language in a university learning environment, and attempts, by means of action research undertaken in the classroom, to discover whether such an integrated programme of instruction leads to greater language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Much academic debate has lately been concerned with the processes underlying second and foreign language teaching and learning, which has led to increasingly

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important practical repercussions for the classroom. Concurrently, recent research carried out in the fields of cognitive psychology and second language acquisition has been addressing the role played by both conscious and unconscious strategies in the learning process and how these may affect the learners' quest to gain command over second or foreign language skills. Such learning strategies can be defined as behaviours, techniques, or actions used by students, often unconsciously, to enhance their learning which "are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (Oxford 1990:1). One of the seemingly indisputable conclusions which has arisen from the many investigation projects undertaken is that successful or effective second or foreign language learners invariably exploit a variety of conscious and unconscious strategies in their efforts towards improvement. It seems a logical conclusion that the learning strategies of good language learners, once identified, could therefore be taught to less competent learners, with considerable potential for the development of both second and foreign language skills.

Further empirical evidence has consolidated the emerging significance of the learner as an active participant in the learning process, which has fostered a more learner-centred approach in second/foreign language instruction, marking a shift in focus from theoretical, prescriptive teaching methodology, revolving around the tools or strategies available to the teacher, to a much more informed consideration of the varying characteristics of the learners themselves, and their possible influence on not only the process of second language acquisition,[1] but also the specific ways in which both teachers and learners achieve their learning objectives inside and outside the classroom environment. This relatively new area of investigation recognises, above all, the importance of training learners in the exploitation of conscious learning strategies, with teachers now adopting a valuable role, in directing students how to apply conscious language learning strategies to a variety of tasks, and, more significantly, how to extend these strategies to new activities both in the language learning classroom and also in other content areas requiring language skills.

The rapidly strengthening research area addressing language learning processes and strategies has also recently seen the active collaboration of practising teachers themselves in the process of enquiry as researchers, contributing valuable empirical evidence from real, rather than theoretical, classrooms about what teachers and learners themselves do to achieve their goals and how they contribute to the teaching/learning process. More recent action research in language learning strategies especially highlights the importance of out-of-class strategies employed voluntarily by learners outside the language classroom (Pickard 1996: 150), with responsibility for progress now seen to lie clearly with the individual learner. In particular, interest is growing in the area of learner autonomy and the ways in which teachers can encourage learners to become more autonomous beyond the confines of the formal classroom environment. It is the intention of the present study to briefly examine, by means of action research undertaken in our own university learning context, the influence on the learning process of explicit training in metacognitive and affective learning strategies, specifically applied to the development of writing skills, but integrated with the formal instruction of English as a Foreign Language.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

As stated above, investigation into second, and more latterly, foreign language learning strategies has, in the main, been stimulated by the confluence of theoretical concerns in second language acquisition and cognitive psychology, two fields of investigation with, until recently, little mutual interest and at first a somewhat vague role assigned to the role of strategies. It now seems a logical conclusion that second language acquisition can only be understood with a description of the interaction between language and cognition[2] with findings in cognitive science amply demonstrating that language learning can be considered a complex cognitive skill (O'Malley and Chamot 1990), parallel to other skills involving information processing and encoding in both short-term and long-term memory which utilise a variety of strategies that can be developed at different learning stages and in different ways depending on the learning situation, differing learning styles and learners' needs or objectives. The major implication of cognitive theory is that the way in which individuals process information must be taken into account along with teaching methodology in order to understand and maximise the process of formal instruction.

Parallel to the findings in cognition, research in second language acquisition has also demonstrated the fundamental role of learning strategies as procedural knowledge in the language learning process.[3] More significantly, a variety of factors have been found to influence the success of the learning process, and the level of mastery achieved by the learner, which may relate to either the learning context, for example the teaching method employed or length of exposure to the target language, or to the characteristics of the learners themselves, such as language learning aptitude, attitude, personality, or motivation (Bialystok 1981: 24). While many of these factors may be difficult, or even impossible to modify, recent investigation has focused on those variables, like attitude and motivation, which individual learners are able, and should indeed be encouraged, to modify.[4] This has given rise to the question of what learners can do independently to facilitate the learning process with respect to these more modifiable characteristics that they are able to influence themselves.

As a result, much pioneering research has been carried out into the nature and role of individual learning strategies[5] leading to recent explorations of autonomous learning, one of the dominant topics in language teaching research in the last 15 or 20 years,[6] and the resultant importance of learner training to equip learners with necessary skills and strategies in order to render the independent learning process more effective. Huttenen (1986) defines autonomy as "the willingness and ability of the learner to take responsibility for his own learning" (Tudor 1996: 20), whereas Dickinson (1993) goes further by identifying five basic characteristics of autonomous learning, including the selection, appropriate use and monitoring of learning strategies (Tudor 1996: 20). An autonomous learner is defined by Wenden (1991: 163) as "one who has acquired the strategies and knowledge to take some (if not yet all) responsibility for her language learning and is willing and self-confident enough to do so".

There does, however, exist a certain ambiguity between learner autonomy as a mode of study or, more currently, the qualitative involvement of learners in their learning, with efforts being made to raise learners' awareness of their learning goals, encourage a more personal assumption of responsibility and to provide the opportunity for greater participation in decision making in the instruction process. As a result, developments in learner autonomy have stimulated research into the ways in which learners can learn more about the processes of language learning, and thus adopt the desirable attitudes and strategies that are necessary in order to achieve greater self-direction. Such learner training is a key feature of the more learner-centred direction that language teaching methodology is currently adopting. Similarly, more learner-centred activities are being advocated as a means to counter difficulties caused by large classes, inappropriate materials or inadequate coursebooks that fail to meet the needs or interests of learners, along with the systematic development of the understanding of what the learning process actually entails, culminating in increased learner involvement in programme development and activity organisation (Tudor 1996).

RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

It is necessary to define at this point what we understand by language learning strategies, and to establish the different types which have so far been identified. In general terms, a learning strategy is a tactic, behaviour or technique that a learner employs, consciously or unconsciously, to facilitate or advance learning. In the words of Oxford and Crookall (1989: 404), learning strategies are defined as: "[...] learning techniques, behaviours, or actions; or learning-to-learn, problem-solving, or study skills. No matter what they are called, strategies can make learning more efficient and effective."[7] Another useful definition is this:

> Learning strategies, in general terms, are purposeful activities undertaken by learners with the goal of promoting their knowledge of and ability to use the TL. These activities may relate to very detailed aspects of learning, such as the organisation of vocabulary, or may be much broader in focus, such as deciding whether to follow a language course or to seek out social contacts with TL speakers. (Tudor 1996:10)

The concept of "learning strategy" was introduced into L2 teaching terminology as a consequence of research into the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of successful L2 learners described in seminal studies by researchers such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), Naiman, Frölich and Todesco (1975), Naiman *et al.* (1978), Reiss (1983), Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and Cohen (1990). The use of appropriate language learning strategies after explicit training has also been extensively demonstrated as contributing to improved language proficiency, greater learner autonomy or achievement both in general and in specific skills areas, for example Oxford and Crookall (1989), Oxford *et al.* (1990), Wenden and Rubin (1987), Wenden (1991), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), with the effective selection of strategies for particular learning tasks further highlighted by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Successful language learners were indeed discovered to use more and better learning strategies than poorer learners and, as a result, several researchers in this area have offered various typologies detailing numerous strategies which have been identified at work in effective language learners. One of the major obstacles in comparing research results on language learning strategies is the lack of agreement on the classification to be employed when describing strategy types: more than twenty typologies or classifications of strategies have been proposed, among the most well-known being those offered by O`Malley and Chamot (1990), Wenden (1991) and Oxford (1990).

Specific learning strategies have been claimed to be differentially appropriate for the four skills areas (Bialystok 1981: 25). Bialystok (1981) proposes four distinct categories of learning strategies in her model of second language learning: inferencing, monitoring, formal practising and functional practising. The type of strategy to be employed depends on three types of knowledge: explicit linguistic knowledge, implicit linguistic knowledge and general knowledge of the world (O'Malley and Chamot 1990:10). Bialystok's (1981) four-cell classification has been used for the identification of appropriate strategies for different language areas employed by our learners as a basis for subsequent training. This classification refers to formal/functional dimensions and oral or written modalities, corresponding to four different types of language. The current research project to be described intends to focus on the development of the writing skill in both the formal and functional dimensions.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY TYPES

Although the research addressing learning strategies in second language acquisition has been an offshoot of research in cognitive psychology and has developed independently, one of the important contributions of cognitive psychology was the distinction between metacognitive and cognitive strategies, albeit with some fruitful discussion as to the differentiation between these two principal types which, in O'Malley and Chamot's terms "served to sharpen the discussion of how strategies function, who uses them, and the conditions under which they can be taught" (1990: 99). Metacognitive (self-management) strategies correspond to strategies that are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning, and are sometimes referred to as management or executive strategies. Social/Affective strategies, a category added later by some researchers (e.g. O'Malley et al. 1985, Oxford 1990) involve interacting with others to improve learning or using affective control to assist a learning task, with affective strategies embracing concepts such as anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, attitudes motivation and risk-taking (Oxford 1990:140). Cognitive, or direct, learning strategies, are according to some authors,[8] the most frequently reported strategies at work in language learners, and they correspond to those skills involving direct manipulation or transformation of the second or foreign language.[9] These strategies are naturally fundamental for successful learning and are the ones which are most exploited by published teaching materials: they have also been the most frequently investigated type on an empirical basis. Less research, however, has been carried out on metacognitive and especially social/affective strategies since learners are not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process (Oxford 1990). This will be the focus of the present investigation, conducted in the less well-researched context of foreign language learning, in this case English as a Foreign Language in the Canary Islands, Spain since most published research to date has concentrated more on second learning processes rather than in a foreign language environment (Allwright and Bailey 1991, Chapter 8).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The two strategy types of particular interest in this study are metacognitive and affective strategies, typically classified as indirect strategies since they do not directly involve the target language, but instead provide the learner with ways to coordinate and improve their learning process. Metacognitive strategies refer to strategies underpinning learning which go "beyond the cognitive" and which exercise a kind of control over cognition and learning, i.e those strategies which correspond to planning, monitoring, or evaluating learning, whereas affective strategies are those which help learners regulate or gain better control over their emotions, attitudes and motivations related to language learning. Both these types of strategies have been found to be particularly effective and frequently employed after training with our learners in previous informal studies, and form the basis of a much longer research project, currently in progress. However, due to the brief nature of this study, we shall mention only one or two strategies (adapted and selected from classification schemes in O'Malley and Chamot 1990 and Oxford 1990) from each category which are applicable to our context and which have yielded initial results after an explicit training period. The particular strategies to be focused on are listed below (Table 1).

Table 1

METACOGNITIVE (SELF-MANAGEMENT) STRATEGIES:

Planning

1. Learning about language learning and English as a Foreign Language
2. Seeking practice opportunities (out of class)

Monitoring

3. Awareness of strengths and weaknesses
4. Awareness of progress
5. Checking appropriateness of written production (peer/self-evaluation)

Evaluation

6. Checking outcomes of one's language learning
7. Self-evaluation (production, performance, ability, strategy and language repertoire)

AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES:

8. Lowering anxiety
9. Self-encouragement (making positive statements/taking risks wisely/rewarding yourself)
10. Sharing and reflecting on language learning difficulties
11. Taking your emotional temperature (listening to your body/using a checklist/writing a language learning diary/discussing your feelings with someone else)

WRITING SKILLS

These strategies have been principally analysed when exploited in the development of one language skills area, that of writing skills, although explicit training in language learning strategies has also been carried out in all language areas as an integrated component of the general instruction process. The objective of the present study is to see how explicit training in learning strategies affects written activities and the way in which particular strategies contribute to the development of the writing skill in foreign language learning, especially since, in our experience, writing skills constitute an appropriate area for training in metacognitive and affective strategies such as anxiety lowering and self-monitoring. Relatively little research has been carried out so far on instruction in writing strategies in comparison with the large amount of work completed on direct instruction in reading strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990:151)

In recent years, the process approach to writing has replaced the traditional product-oriented approach in numerous second and foreign language programmes. Writing is now viewed as a process wherein the finished product emerges after a series of drafts, involving both peer-evaluation and self-assessment as part of the process. This contrasts with the previous instructional focus, which tended to focus solely on the surface mechanical features of single-draft work. Theoretical attention is now being directed to creativity, imagination and the role of the student in the thinking-writing process. Along with the focus on process, there is also a welcome de-emphasis of grammar and mechanics, valuable since motivation can be negatively affected by inappropriate or exclusive focus on surface or mechanical issues.

The process approach calls for a positive, encouraging and collaborative environment within which learners can work through the composing process, corresponding to training in affective learning strategies. The teacher's role is also to help students develop viable metacognitive strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information), focusing, planning structure and procedure, for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas); and for editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics) (Kroll 1990: 15), along with training in other metacognitive strategies such as monitoring progress and self-evaluation. Both formal and functional writing tasks are included in the instruction process, including the realization of controlled compositions and fluency development in dialogue journals.

Becoming a writer is a complex and ongoing process, and instruction in this skill involves varying roles for the teacher. For instance, four basic roles described by Tribble (1996)[10] are those of audience, assistant, evaluator, and examiner. In addition, teachers assign writing tasks for different instructional purposes (Raimes 1987, quoted in Cohen 1994: 304), for example to improve learners' writing fluency or, more significantly, to encourage authentic communication whereby the writer really wants to impart the information and the reader is genuinely interested in receiving such as the writing of dialogue journals, which are often purely anecdotal in nature with the teacher adopting the role of participating audience in what can be described as a true communicative context. This is also reflected in the process of peer evaluation, the writer now openly directing their writing to a real audience, which can positively affect the clarity of the message rather than merely relying on the teacher's expertise to decipher or unravel unclear or ambiguous meaning. There are also learners' objectives and personal learning goals to be catered for, with, for example, Cohen (1994: 304) describing three kinds of learning put forward by Cumming (1990) that students may wish to derive from their writing: assessing and seeking out improved uses of language, testing functional hypotheses and comparing cross-linguistic equivalents. It is our main intention here to train our learners in metacognitive and affective strategies for learning in order to improve their writing skills both in formal composition tasks and fluency-based informal tasks.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND SUBJECTS

It is thus proposed to contribute to recent learner-centred investigation by means of action research undertaken in our English Language classroom in a university learning context in order to determine whether such explicit, conscious training in metacognitive and affective strategies does indeed positively affect the learning process applied to writing skills, working from the principle that the "[...] use of language-learning strategies can have a great influence on the quality and success of language learning experiences" (Oxford 1989: 447). Metacognitive strategies are generally considered essential for successful language learning in their executive capacity of coordinating the learning process by means of centering, planning and evaluating learning. It has also been found that while learners exploit some metacognitive strategies consciously, such as planning and evaluating learning, they fail to employ other crucial metacognitive strategies related to, for example, evaluating progress, or seeking practice opportunities (Oxford 1990: 138). Affective factors are also highly influential on language learning success or failure, since good language learners are, according to Oxford (1990: 140), often those learners who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning. It is thus our hypothesis that explicit training in metacognitive and affective learning strategies as an integrated part of the formal language teaching programme facilitates more effective learning, especially since the development of writing skills typically produces a certain amount of anxiety and demotivation and is highly appropriate for the exercising of metacognitive control.

The classroom as the site for investigating language teaching and learning is a research context still in its infancy (beginning in the 1950s with teacher training in an attempt to discover what effective teaching consisted of), but it is nevertheless well established. The crucial aspect here is that the participating teacher can decide what to research and how, in contrast to the more detached out-of-class researcher. Learning environment also exerts an important influence on the process of learning and the use of appropriate learning strategies, but although the learning context is an important factor in the language learning process, it is one which is often largely unmodifiable. It is our intention in this paper to focus on one learning context, in this case that of English as a Foreign Language in a Spanish university context, in order to examine how explicit training in learning strategies, integrated with formal EFL/language instruction, can improve and facilitate performance. The learning environment in this study is that of a university EFL course corresponding to a compulsory component of the degree in English Philology, offered in this case by the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, but nevertheless a common learning environment to be found all over Spain. Our learning context is characterised by various problematic elements including overcrowded classes, only five contact hours per week in English Language, mixed levels and lack of time for individual practice and study in view of all the other subjects to be passed, which increases the desirability of fostering learner autonomy. In his article "EFL Courses in the English Philology Syllabus: A Proposal for Basic Modular Design" (1993), Coletes Blanco points out that English Philology syllabuses in Spain are structured around three main fields, namely "linguistics", "literature" and "culture and civilization studies", with English Language constituting a fourth area which affects and is complementary to the others, but which enjoys less academic prestige, and, as a result, less attention from students, in particular beyond the classroom context.

The subjects in this longitudinal study (October 1997 - July 1998) correspond to a group of approximately 50 first-year Canarian students embarking on a degree in English Philology at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. These learners receive only 5 contact hours a week in English Language instruction, with one of these hours devoted specifically to the development of writing skills. It is our experience that skills training sometimes tends to be passed over in favour of more analytic or linguistically-focused language study in such a university context, with learners required to magically become competent in language use and strategies or techniques for learning by themselves. Rubin (1975: 44-5) points out the tendency of some teachers to plough ahead with the lesson

> [...] seemingly with little awareness of what is going on in each student and often without directing the attention of the poorer students to how the successful student arrived at his answer. That is, many foreign language teachers are so concerned with getting the correct answer that they fail to attend to the learning process.

In the current four-year degree syllabus in English Philology at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, English Language courses only exist in the first two years of the degree course, and it is the first year course that we are addressing here. Inevitably, learners in their first year of university studies arrive with widely varying levels of proficiency and experiences of learning, with the level of English of a great majority of first-year students disappointingly low (Coletes Blanco 1993: 53). The "Lengua Inglesa I" course consists of improving linguistic ability in the target language (including grammar, lexis and discourse) within the four language skills areas based on a communicative, task-based approach, with the incorporation of a large amount of authentic material and training in language learning strategies.

INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Techniques for assessing learners' strategy use include informal observation, formal observational rating scales, informal and formal interviews, group discussions, think-aloud procedures, language learning diaries, dialogue journals between students and teacher and surveys of strategy frequency (either open-end narrative or structured questionnaires). Different techniques lead to different conclusions about character and use of strategies, so some investigators have used multiple data collection procedures (e.g Naiman *et al.* 1978). The instruments for data collection in this project consist of formal interviews, group discussions, dialogue journals, free writing assignments and structured questionnaires, but the data for the present brief study originate from two of these instruments: structured questionnaires and dialogue journals. Questionnaires are often specific to task, in this case focusing on work on writing skills done both in class and in learners' own time. Self-reporting techniques like questionnaires, or even surveys, may not always be answered truthfully and the wording of the questions or instructions needs to be prepared with the utmost care in order to avoid direct elicitation,[11] with such a high degree of structure liable to influence the content of the informants' report (Oxford 1996, Politzer and McGroarty 1985). In contrast, in a diary or dialogue journal, the learner probably describes strategies for isolated tasks which are difficult or important, or functional tasks described in context. These more open, unprompted techniques are often more useful and infinitely more revealing, with reflection in a diary or dialogue journal leaving specific learning tasks or settings open, which is our reason for combining structured surveys and pre-set questions with largely free and unprompted dialogue journals.

Data collection may, however, be somewhat difficult for low structure procedures like taped interviews which require transcribing and later direct coding, with questionnaires undoubtedly more manageable as they delimit information and simplify data manipulation. Such techniques may even result in an excess of information, rather more than is needed for straightforward analysis, which is discussed in detail in relation to studies with learner diaries by Rubin (1981). Rubin used a variety of procedures for strategy identification, but found that the more productive reports came from the diaries of second language learners. This is certainly true of the present project. It is difficult to deny the advantages of such richness of description and, more significantly, the learners themselves seem extremely pleased to respond as someone is taking an interest in their learning process.[12] Bailey (1983) further claims that diary-keeping leads diarists to identify and overcome variables which have harmful effects on their learning.

The temporal relationship between strategy use and data collection is also fundamental, described by Faerch and Kasper (1987) as three options: (i) simultaneous introspection (talk-aloud or think-aloud) (ii) immediate retrospection and (iii) delayed retrospection (diary studies, questionnaires, some interviews). The present study utilises mainly overt delayed retrospection with retrospective self-reporting tasks in order to reflect upon the classroom experience of learning and raise awareness of foreign language learning. As for the elicitation procedures, the language of data collection is the target language, English, with both oral and written responses elicited. All classes have recorded and detailed plans carefully kept up to date in a teaching log to help with subsequent investigation.

Although the strategy types to be focused on here are metacognitive and affective learning strategies, it is of course usual to generate information on all strategy types. Investigators sometimes try to determine the way a specific strategy is used with a specific task (e.g. Wenden 1983 and her work on metacognitive strategies used in second language acquisition), which is the case of strategy applications with writing skills in the present study. The language modality to be focused on in this case, then, is writing, although in published research findings usually focus on all four (e.g. Naiman et al. 1978), and although here the main focus is the development of writing skills, other modalities are also implied. The importance of finding out the meaning given to classroom events by learners is invaluable and may be reflected in Stevick's (1982) "personal competence" (quoted in Sharkey 1994/1995:18) which refers to "students' well-informed awareness of their personal learning process coupled with skills enabling them to be in command of that learning process: learning not by accident but through awareness and conscious decision making."

STRATEGY TRAINING PROCEDURE

The steps taken in the strategy training procedure are to be consolidated. In the first place, we determine our own particular learners' needs, particularly with reference to their need for the development of greater autonomy, and take into account the characteristics of their learning environment, described above. After selecting strategies for training, either by establishing those which have already been adopted and are therefore already taking effect by means of diagnostic questionnaires such as Oxford's SIL,[13] or simply by merit of past experience and the more frequently used strategies, materials and activities are then prepared for explicit, but gradual integration as strategy training. The effectiveness of such training is to be established at the end of the course by means of diagnostic questionnaires, checklists or interviews. Previous research and strategy training projects have yielded three important principles to be followed in any strategy training procedure. The first of these claims that affective factors are fundamental (Oxford 1990) and the second that the strategies selected for training should not only support each other but respond to the learners' needs, goals and different learning styles (Oxford 1993:181). Finally, strategy training should be explicitly integrated into L2 activities during the language course (ibid.). This is what has been attempted here.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 158-9) propose four frameworks with guidelines for strategy training for both first and second language contexts:[14] their own guidelines are also the ones adopted here. The first stage is preparation and developing student awareness (group discussion, awareness-raising tasks, retrospective writing tasks about previous learning experiences, questionnaires and strategy inventory), followed by the initial presentation of strategies (modelling by teacher, describing or naming strategy and providing rationale for strategy use). The third step is practice in order to develop learners' skills in using strategies for academic learning through cooperative learning tasks or group discussions, leading on to the learners' evaluation of their own strategy use by discussing strategy use, filling in checklists or questionnaires and writing a dialogue journal with their teacher, finishing with expansion or the transfer of strategies to new tasks.

We have found it highly desirable to incorporate an integrated programme of strategy training in tandem with the formal instruction in English as a Foreign Language in order to prepare learners for greater learning autonomy outside class time, desirable in such a learning context with limited contact time and competition for our learners' attention from other demanding academic subjects. Students are also receiving instruction in several core subjects in the target language, which is a further reason for improving language proficiency. Training is based on students' needs and explicitly integrated into regular foreign language instruction with plenty of opportunities for strategy training during classes. At the beginning of their First Year English Language studies, our learners are required to examine their own attitudes to learning through a variety of awareness raising activities, including free writing assignments on language learning background, objectives and weaknesses, and are progressively trained in metacognitive strategies, such as organising their notes, seeking further practice opportunities outside class time in order to facilitate the acquisition[15] of language, and planning and evaluating their own learning.

These initial awareness-raising techniques correspond to the metacognitive strategy of arranging or planning learning, and training in this strategy can be conducted in conjunction with further sensitisation in the process of language learning, such as thinking about language learning, and the processes involved, by means of group discussion or reading/listening exercises based on the subject. Using questionnaire activities,[16] learners can compare, for example, how much contact with English they have as a part of their lives both inside and outside class, and subsequently discuss how they propose to increase their contact time with the target language and in what ways (watching films, chatting to native speakers or reading, for example). This is where the role of the teacher corresponds more to that of facilitator, in this case of metacognitive learning strategies, rather than the sole organiser of learning activities. Responsibility for learning has been found to shift to the learner quite painlessly after such awareness raising, leading to greater success and more efficient learning techniques. Thus, initial language learning awareness activities gradually integrated explicitly into regular instruction in both Use of English classes (including grammar, vocabulary, reading, speaking and listening work) and separate Writing Skills classes.

Training in the metacognitive strategies of planning and also monitoring learning are fundamental at the beginning of the English Language course at university level, due to the mixture of experiences, proficiency levels and motivation jostling for position in the classroom, along with the unfamiliarity and possible inhibition of such a random group of learners from different and possibly more traditional teacher-centred learning environments. Students are encouraged to think about what foreign language learning involves and subsequently examine their own strengths and weaknesses. One example of this is a task concerning the "good language learner", hopefully the role model of all the participating subjects, which is a particularly successful brainstorming activity for initial sensitisation to the complexities of language learning, and which can be accompanied or preceded by listening or reading input before group discussion.[17] A further technique is to enable learners to identify their perceived strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of a course in specific skills areas, for example by means of questionnaire or discussion activities, in this case centering on writing skills. Learners here are able to compare, share and discover their own preferred learning strategies as well as difficulties. Later on during the course, they will be able to gauge their progress by means of questionnaire activities aimed at discovering their perceived proficiency[18] or improvement rate corresponding to the metacognitive strategy of evaluating learning.

As suggested by previous research, affective strategies can also be applied to language skills, as a way to enhance and enrich the learning process. Addressing affective issues such as learners' anxiety, motivation and interests, which may affect strategy choice in other areas, is particularly recommended by Oxford (1990). One important principle to have arisen from research studies claims that strategy training should take into account affective factors since, according to Oxford (1990:140) "It is impossible to overstate the importance of the affective factors influencing language learning. Language learners can gain control over these factors through affective strategies". Language anxiety may cause many potentially good language learners to be more inhibited and consequently, less successful. Such anxiety and inhibition, exacerbated by the fear of competition and apparent inequality of proficiency level, are present in varying quantities at the outset of such academic courses and it is our experience that training in strategies to combat such inhibition, like encouraging positive attitudes (removing fear from mistakes/cooperation etc.) and providing motivating practice in communicative situations, has a positive effect on learning. The use of music, as a relaxing element or as noise to hide behind in pair or group speaking activities, is one suggestion for lowering anxiety. Along with this, encouraging learners to be more positive about their abilities, rather than allowing them to take refuge in such statements as "my grammar is very bad" or "I find writing so difficult", frequently reiterated in initial diagnostic free writing exercises or interviews, is a further useful affective strategy for students to adopt. The teacher can also design tasks which involve teacher modelling of affective strategies or the sharing of experiences in order to break down traditional hierarchical barriers. Throughout the course, learners can gradually learn to make more positive statements about their progress in learning, either by ticking off checklists (e.g. "I'm taking more risks and doing well" –Oxford 1990:165) or comparing strategies with each other. Checklists can also be used for learners to gauge their own emotions in relation to their learning, as well as writing a language learning diary, or even better, by participating in a dialogue journal with the teacher.

As we have shown, we have aimed for the integration of explicit training in selected metacognitive and affective strategies in the instruction of writing skills including planning, generating ideas, lowering anxiety, cooperative learning, peer editing, peer evaluation, and student-generated assignments (five of them graded for the final evaluation). Strategy use was analysed by means of the administration of 3 questionnaires (January, April and June), a self evaluation questionnaire (January), the initiation of dialogue journal between teacher and learners from February to July, two semi-structured interviews (taped) with each student in February and July, and a final proficiency test in Use of English, reading and writing skills.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH DATA

Although this project is in its early days, we have been able to reach some conclusions and initial impressions after the period of strategy training, which has contributed to the development of the subsequent course, currently in progress. Undoubtedly, the instruction in both metacognitive and affective training strategies as described above has been successful and greatly contributed to improved proficiency in written English.

The most revealing source of data on the learners' impressions of the strategy training has been the retrospective self-reporting in the dialogue journals,[19] an activity of genuine communication between teacher and learner in the target language which itself has proved to be much more than a mere instrument for data collection, but a technique in itself for strategy training, both on a metacognitive level, by encouraging reflection about the learning process, and on an affective level, by lowering anxiety, raising motivation and providing the opportunity to share thoughts, feelings and worries. This unburdening in the target language has interestingly not only embraced language learning, but also more personal affective and emotional concerns. It is also interesting to note that this is an unfamiliar learning activity for almost all the subjects as more than two thirds stated that they had never written down their feelings in a language learning diary in the SILL questionnaire administered at the outset of the training programme.

We must not forget also the didactic value of such an autonomous writing activity, shown in learners improving greatly in writing fluency and also acquiring language from the teacher's own language. In the words of one learner:

> This way of writing English is very useful for me. I'll give you an example: I notice that you use sometimes the expression "It sounds like..." and I've never seen this before, so I ask a friend for its meaning and she told me it. So now when I have the opportunity I will use it.

Motivation is also raised considerably: in the words of another learner, "Have you ever thought what we feel when you return our diaries to us? Its almost indescribable. It's like a mixture of pride and curiosity (An English native writes you!)." 88.6% of the subjects who completed the questionnaire also informed that they had learnt new language from this activity.

What follows is samples of both quantitative and qualitative data corresponding to the strategies selected (Table 1) in the form of examples of verbatim learners' comments taken from their dialogue journals relevant to each strategy selected for this particular study (Table 2), and selected questions from the final questionnaire (Table 3) administered at the end of the training period.

Table 2
DIALOGUE JOURNALS

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Planning

1. Learning about language learning and English as a Foreign Language
   "I have been reading this diary and I have noticed a lot of mistakes I have done, but the most important thing is that I have noticed them and I know the correct form, isn't it? And I have found many useful constructions in your writing. Thanks"
2. Seeking practice opportunities (out of class)
   "I have also written short stories in English.....I went to the bar and pretended to be studying but what I was really doing was writing what people said, but they spoke in Spanish and I wrote it in English"

Monitoring

3. Awareness of strengths and weaknesses
   "My worst mistake is think a lot in Spanish. For this reason [student's name] and I are speaking more and more in English when we have a free hour [...] Furthermore, I love reading interesting books and this year I have read English books because I need to practise this language"
4. Awareness of progress
   "I have recently noticed that I have improved on my written English. It must be because I have started to write freely, to write about what I want when it suits me. There are no barriers or limits to express myself and I enjoy doing this...there are certain moments in which I prefer writing to speaking"
5. Checking appropriateness of written production
   "It is a great idea to write a diary in English, I learn much with this, because if I don't know how to write something, I will look in the dictionary and this will help me to learn vocabulary"

Evaluation

6. Self-evaluation
   "I am satisfied with my marks but I know I can improve my results ... I have decided to correspond with an English or American person"
7. Checking outcomes of one's language learning
   "In any case I am happy with my marks, I think they are the ones I deserve. I know in the next exam I have to study more to get a higher mark"

AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

8. Lowering anxiety
   "At the beginning of the career I was not happy with English, because I not meet too many people in class, but later I find beautiful people for speaking in class, for example when we speak in pairs and the class is more interesting too, there is more variety [...] This year of degree was wonderful, I met many wonderful people[...]they help me when I couldn't come to class"
9. Self-encouragement
   "I spoke with an English man in my job, and it was wonderful, because what he said I understood [...]Today I know that learn a foreign language is something very important, always I have known it, but today much more"
10. Sharing and reflecting on language learning difficulties
   "I think I've got a very big problem about my speaking. When I was in London I spoke in English, but I got very nervous when I did with native people, I didn't like to chat with them because I worried if I made a mistake. However with the people of my class I just talked and talked. I guess I felt more confident with them"
11. Taking your emotional temperature
   "I don't know why but today I feel very tired. Every day I see that university isn't what I thought first. Anyway, I'm happy because I'm meeting different kinds of people"

Table 3
QUESTIONNAIRE III

The numbers correspond to previously selected strategies for training (see Table 1).
T=True F=False DK=Don't Know

	T	F	DK
METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES			
1. I have learnt a lot about the process of writing this year	97.1	0	2.9
2. I write in my diary as much as possible	68.6	20	11.4
3. I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses as a writer	71.4	8.6	20
4. I have noticed improvement in my written English	91.4	0	8.6
5. I like giving my work to a classmate to read before I write the final draft	42.9	34.5	22.9
6. I am finding it easier to write in English	65.7	28.6	5.7
7. I do not feel prepared for the writing exam	14.3	54.3	31.4
AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES			
8. I am more relaxed about writing in English than at the beginning of the course	88.6	0	11.4
9. I am happy with my progress in writing	91.4	5.7	2.9
10. Writing a diary is a useful way of communicating with my teacher	88.6	0	11.4
11. I find writing a diary helps me improve my writing	85.7	0	14.3
Total sample: 35 (expressed as %) * 3 questionnaires were left completely blank on one side			

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that these initial data speak for themselves and support our hypothesis that integrated training in metacognitive and affective strategies has positive results in our particular learning environment, especially in the strong results for questions 1, 3, 4, 8 and 9. The diary (dialogue journal) has also enjoyed a particularly favourable reaction, whereas, perhaps not surprisingly, the process of peer evaluation has encountered more resistance, due perhaps to the highly competitive atmosphere of such an academic context. This is an area for future exploration, to be supported by data from dialogue journals and questionnaires and there still remains much work to be done on the large amount of data waiting to be analysed. The dialogue journals also need to be categorised for strategy types and transcripts completed of both class and interview recordings.

In this brief study, we have applied the findings of recent research focusing on the learning strategies exploited by successful language learners to our own particular university learning environment. We have shown that strategy training should include explicit preparation in not only direct (cognitive) learning strategies, but also in indirect (metacognitive and affective) strategies, especially since the latter category is all too often passed over in favour of more cognitively demanding learning activities. Explicit training in the exploitation of conscious metacognitive and affective learning strategies, integrated with formal language instruction, has, in this context, been found to play a fundamental role in successful language learning and acquisition applied here to the development of writing skill. In our quest for greater student autonomy, such a strategy training programme should form an integrated part of the regular language teaching schedule in order to facilitate and enhance the learning process from a more learner-centred perspective, and equip our students with the tools they need to become effective language learners: learning how to learn is indeed the best way forward.

Notes

[1] The terms "learning" and "acquisition" are used here to refer to conscious and unconscious language learning processes after Krashen (1982). From this point onwards, the term "learning" will refer to both learning and acquisition with no rigid distinction between the two.

[2] For further discussion of this argument see O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Chapter 2.

[3] For the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge, see J. Anderson (1985) or Faerch and Kasper (1987).

[4] For example, Gardner and Lambert's seminal research on attitude and motivation and the importance of affective factors: *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning* (Rowley, Mass.:Newbury House, 1972).

[5] For a full account of individualisation, see Tudor (1996).

[6] See, for example A. Brookes and P. Grundy (Eds.) *Individualisation and Autonomy in Language Learning* (London: Modern English Publications, (1988) or A. Wenden and L. Dickinson (Eds.) *Autonomy, Self Direction and Self Access in Language Teaching and Learning: The History of an Idea* (Special Issue of *System* 3.2, 1995).

[7] This is just one of a multitude of offered definitions, and is not to be taken as definitive.

[8] For example, L. Wong Fillmore and B. McLaughlin cited O'Malley and Chamot (1990) 11.

[9] This has not been the case with our learners after administering diagnostic questionnaires.

[10] See especially Chapter 11.

[11] For helpful information concerning research techniques and instruments, see Allwright and Bailey (1991) , Chaudron 1988 and O' Malley and Chamot (1990), Chapter 4: "Learning Strategies: Methods and Research".

[12] See diary studies by Lavine and Oxford (1990).

[13] In this study, the highest scoring strategy types were "managing your emotions" (affective strategy), "compensating for missing knowledge" (compensation strategy) and "organizing and evaluating your learning" (metacognitive strategy), with cognitive strategies less frequent as in the previous study with a smaller sample.

[14] Also see Wenden (1991) for a very useful action plan for strategies.

[15] Acquisition is used here to refer to the informal, conscious learning of foreign languages through activities such as reading for pleasure, listening to the radio and watching films.

[16] Oxford's *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1990) contains some useful examples (e.g. 179, 183) as do a wide variety of published materials these days.

[17] For listening materials or other useful learner training ideas and activities, see G. Ellis and B. Sinclair *Learning To Learn English* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). This invaluable

resource also includes a typology of learning strategies in a final appendix which covers the strategies included in their material.

[18] See Oxford (1990) 183 for a useful example.

[19] For further positive attitudes to self-reporting in diaries see Matsumoto (1996).

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