Metacognitive Learning Strategies in Reading and Writing: Helping Learners Learn in the Content Areas

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A common problem confronting secondary and tertiary learners nowadays is on how to comprehend vast of information that they are required to learn and to remember for actual application. Obviously, the comprehending and composing skills demanded of them to succeed at these levels are substantially far different from those in their earlier years in school. Learners are now required to develop their comprehending skills primarily "to learn specific information in order to perform some criterion task" (Anderson & Armbuster, 1984). In a similar manner, they are expected to manifest their understanding by putting into writing the outcomes of their investigations for others to benefit from.

Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are two basic skills so much in demand in today's fast-flourishing world of science and technology. Printed materials facilitated the proliferation of knowledge which, in turn, made possible remarkable economic and industrial progress. In order to keep abreast with and contribute to this progress, one needs to be well-informed about the latest development in science and technology. In anticipating this need, a learner should be equipped with competencies in comprehending scientific texts and materials. In addition, he should be able to write about what he has comprehended and to articulate his own reactions, impressions and opinions about the issue at hand. There is a need, therefore, for learners to be able to read and write effectively.

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While there is a dire need to develop the reading and writing competencies of Filipino learners to keep them abreast with updates in science and technology, there has been an increasing number of these learners who are unable to comprehend reading materials and who find difficulty in putting across their understanding through writing. Several studies in the past have shown this dismal performance of many learners in school. This may explain why current knowledge in science and technology has remained partially tapped and human resources have so far been minimally harnessed in hastening the country's economic growth. Hence, there is a need for classroom instruction that would develop in the learners an awareness of, and control over, mental processes and dispositions for understanding as well as a motivated commitment to employ those processes and dispositions in all subject areas throughout their school years (Paris, Lipson and Wixson, 1983).

How can these learners be helped to make them eventually competitive in the world labor market and to prepare them to become catalysts for Philippine progress?

Teachers' Role

Teachers in school will certainly have a significant role in producing a more literate generation. Research here and abroad, which capitalized on cognitive theories, have paved the way for promising pedagogical approaches that will potentially develop the learners to become effective knowledge decoders and encoders. Several studies in this regard have been anchored on various learning strategies at the learners' disposal that make them aware of ways they can best approach their learning. The same studies affirmed that learners can be developed intellectually if they have learned to use a repertoire of strategies to accomplish a learning task.

One significant mission of every educator is to help instill in the learner the right attitude that learning is a lifetime task requiring a self-directed process. Thus, learners should be provided with skills that will empower them to adapt and respond to changing demands and make them continue learning independently even after they have left formal schooling. In the area of language teaching, much attention should be given to make learners aware that they will have to go on learning the language autonomously in order to independently manage and take control over the learning process.

Since it is through language that access to knowledge in science and technology is made possible, the field of language teaching is faced with the problem of finding ways to meet the needed communication skills in the academe and workplaces. This is necessary because of the greater demand for higher literacy level in both sectors.

English, the Access Language

As the world's lingua franca, English serves as the access language to science and technology developments. Many people need to use it for technical, commercial, business and industrial purposes. The Philippines, in recognizing this, maintains the use of English to gain access to scientific and technological knowledge and to establish relations with other nations.

The 1987 Bilingual Education Policy underscores the functional role of English as the medium of instruction for science, mathematics and technology. The emphasis on scientific and technological content as well as language demands much from the learners. Learners should be able to develop skills in processing information from texts and other references relevant to their field of specialization. They need to put to use their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) more than their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). CALP, a highly cognitive demanding skills is needed to deal with increasingly decontextualized language. Snow (1987) argues the CALP is the kind of language proficiency needed to understand mathematics and science problems, conduct experiments, write laboratory reports and interpret graphs, charts, maps and others. Chamot and O'Malley (1990) also underscore the importance of developing the learners' CALP in their design of an approach called the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). This is a learning program designed for students who have developed social communicative skills but are deficient in the academic language skills appropriate to their grade level.

Crandall and Tucker (1990) observe that even if students enter their classes with some proficiency in English, their proficiency is not usually sufficient for tackling complex cognitive tasks such as those demanded by science and technology courses. Wyatt (1992) affirms that many students who enter college fail to manifest advanced academic literacy and are underprepared to function successfully in an academic context.

These students, commonly referred to by Shaughnessy (1977) as basic readers and writers, fail to read and write in ways that meet the expectations of the academic community (Batholomae and Petrosky, 1986). In most instances, these students who are considered as central in the learning process have a limited knowledge of an experience with academic discourse and often are unable to function beyond a basic literacy level within this context (Spires, et. al., 1993). Thus, these learners often exhibit lack of confidence in their own inclinations and capabilities.

Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Educational planners and researchers have now turned their attention

to the role of learners in the language learning process. This is the result of the paradigm shift from a subject centered to a learner-centered approach underscoring the important role of the learners not just as passive receivers of knowledge but as active participants in the learning process. They are now looking more closely at learners' strategies in an attempt to find explanations on how successful learners meet their academic demands.

Research on learners strategies in second language learning seeks to identify the strategies employed by successful learners and then to teach those strategies to other learners in order to improve their language learning capacities (Hosenfeld 1977; Cohen and Aphek 1981; Chamot and O'Malley 1984). Specifically, pedagogic direction has so far been concerned at understanding the learner's strategies, to build on them and to cultivate self-reliance and ultimately attempt to develop learner autonomy (Wenden 1985). Phye and Andre (1986) argue that since the pivot of each learner's reaction to the learning situation is his ability to monitor either consciously or unconsciously the demands of the task and to respond appropriately in order to manage the learning situation, then this sort of awareness involves a range of what has been termed as *metacognitive learning strategies*. In short, the successful learner is one who has learned how to manage the process of learning by being aware of what he is doing or being able to bring one's mental processes under conscious control.

Blakey and Spence (1990) contend that in several studies, metacognitive strategies have been found to increase learning skills and that independent use of these strategies can be gradually developed in people.

Conclusion

Considering the urgent need to develop the comprehending and composing skills of science and technology students and drawing from the implications of the past studies, there is a need to explore the extent to which development of metacognitive strategies will help learners cope with the demands of their academic pursuits. In this manner, language educators will be able to draw more significant insights on the ways to empower learners with metacognitive strategies thereby making them more competent to tackle the demands of their academic courses and, hopefully, their future professional pursuits.

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