Title: **Learner Training: Towards improving secondary students' writing skills**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years more emphasis has been placed on training learners to take charge of their own learning. Guided teaching is gradually decreased and more responsibility is transferred to learners themselves by giving them opportunities to develop skills and strategies and to realize their potential. This new attitude is based on the notion that it is not possible for teachers to teach everything so they better train their students to teach themselves. Learner training increases motivation, helps learners to gain abilities and knowledge that can be transferred to other subjects and assists students in developing skills for the 21st century. Also this approach guides students towards lifelong learning and how to become autonomous and independent. This paper provides a framework that focuses on developing secondary students' writing skills through learner training.

Learner Training: Towards improving secondary students' writing skills

Introduction

In recent years more emphasis has been placed on training learners to take charge of their own learning. Guided teaching is gradually decreased and more responsibility is transferred to learners. This new attitude is based on the notion that it is not possible for teachers to teach everything they have to train learners to teach themselves. As Trim (1988) puts it:

> No school or even university can provide its pupils or students with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives. It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned to think how to learn.
>
> *(Trim 1988:3, cited in Dam 1995:3)*

Therefore, it is essential that learner training is intergraded into everyday activities of all school subjects in order to assist learners in finding their own way towards learning.

Learner training

The term learner training is one among numerous other terms, used in the literature of learner training, such as learner development, learning to learn, learning learning, strategy training, promoting autonomy, and promoting independence. The objective of learner training is "to improve the effectiveness of language learning" and to "make everyone a better learner and more capable of independent learning" (Dickinson 1992:17). Learner training is also viewed as a means for promoting learner autonomy - "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981:30, cited in Lee 1998:283). It is therefore very important to help students become aware of the value of autonomous learning inside and outside the classroom, so that they

achieve the habit of learning continuously and maintain that after they have completed school.

Benefits of learner training

A considerable amount of experts, writers and educators claim that learner training can be beneficial because it encourages learners to become more actively involved in the learning process, increases motivation and helps learners to gain abilities and knowledge that can be transferred to other subjects (Dickinson 1987, 1992, 1993; Dam 1995; Ellis 1992; Ellis and Sinclair 1989; Lake 1997; Lee 1998; Savignon 2002; Sheerin 1989; Tarone and Yule 1989). As Ellis and Sinclair (1989) argue learner training aims at helping learners consider the factors that affect their learning and explore the learning strategies that suit them best so that they develop to more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning. Learner training draws learners' attention towards the process of learning by giving emphasis on *how* to learn rather than on *what* to learn. Also Holec (1985:264, cited in Lake 1997:170) observes that 'to teach the learner to learn is considered as the best way of ensuring that learning takes place'. Moreover, learner training may help learners reduce inferiority and shyness and promotes cooperation and empathy between learners and teachers (Dickinson 1987). Thus, learner training "can lead to more effective classroom learning, self- access learning, and independent learning at home (Hedge 2000:86). Knowing about the language learning process as well as knowing about their abilities and responsibilities, learners are benefited "in later life, not only in the context of foreign language learning but also in other contexts". (Dam 1995:80).

Language Learning Strategies

The term 'strategy' has been used in the literature with reference to skills, techniques, behaviours, plans, cognitive abilities, problem solving procedures etc. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growing amount of research into learning strategies, mostly deriving from the developments in cognitive psychology. The research investigates how individuals go about the task of learning something, and attempts to discover which of the strategies that learners use are the most effective for the particular type of learning involved. Also the Common European Framework for Languages, among other competences, includes a section called 'Ability to learn', along with a series of 'study skills' that students need to acquire.

Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

Rubin (1987:23) defines learning strategies as skills that "contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly". In their study on second language acquisition O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) define learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". Also, Oxford (1992:18) defines second or foreign language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques" that learners use to develop L2 skills. Strategies are instruments for the 'self-directed involvement' which is essential for the development of communicative ability.

Language Learning Strategies Framework

A number of frameworks of language strategies have been developed, the best known being probably Oxford's (1990) which identifies 6 kinds of strategies,

distinguished in two groups: those that contribute directly to learning and are closely related to the subject matter (i.e. the second or foreign language) and those that contribute indirectly to learning, which do not directly involve the subject matter itself, but are essential to language learning. Direct strategies are memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Types of Language Learning Strategies

Cognitive strategies are problem-solving operations that require processes of analysis, synthesis and transformation of the learning material. Rubin and Wenden (1987) identify 6 cognitive learning strategies: a) clarification /verification, b) guessing/inductive inferrencing, c) deductive reasoning, d) practice, e) memorization, f) monitoring.

Metacognitive strategies allow students to regulate their own cognition. They are used to plan, monitor and evaluate learning. To put it simply, they make learners step outside their learning and look at it from above. Wenden (1982,1986, cited in Rubin 1987:25) explains that during the metacognition phase students assess their needs and preferences, they choose what they want to learn and how, they decide how to use resources, they plan what their learning strategies should be and change them if they are not successful. Metacognition also includes affective aspects of learning and a knowledge of the feeling evoked by learning; it must therefore include knowledge of the self. thus, an awareness of one's personality, feelings, motivation, attitudes and learning style; knowledge about what one knows and does not know,

what one can and cannot do, and an awareness of one's progress, are all elements of metacognitive abilities.

Affective and Social strategies are of paramount importance, because they involve the learner in the learning process as a whole person and are closely interrelated to all the other types of strategies. Affective strategies help students to control their emotions, and motivation. Social strategies are those activities in which learners deliberately try to find opportunities to be exposed to and practise their knowledge.

Communication strategies are very important in the learning process because they allow the learner to remain in the conversation by guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speech and writing.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is an important metacognitive strategy aiming at helping learners develops the ability of the 'good language learner' to assess their own performance. It is concerned with getting the learners to think about what they are doing. It is therefore, one of the keys to both learner training and learner autonomy. Thinking about their progress and how they are doing, students can begin to take control of how they are learning. Self-assessment has also the advantage of involving learners in the assessment procedure, creating this way more positive feelings towards assessment. Various tools can be used for self-assessment as checklists, learners' diaries, needs analysis forms, contracts, Portfolios, and evaluation sheets.

The "good language learner" and language learning strategies"

Successful learners are well aware of the strategies they use and why they use them (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Wenden and Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990). Ellis and Sinclair describe the 'good language learner' as: "self aware, inquisitive and tolerant, self-critical, realistic, willing to experiment, actively involved in the learning process and organised" (1989:6). Consequently, it is crucial that students are equipped with various techniques and skills. Without strategies students are "essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990:8)

Preparation For Learner Training

As in every training psychological and practical preparation are essential to "undertake self-instruction" (Dickinson 1987:121). *Psychological* preparation aims to develop learners' confidence and their ability to work independently. *Methodological* preparation involves acquiring a range of techniques with which learners can improve their learning. Learners should also be provided with opportunities for practicing techniques in order to find out the ones that suit them best.

Not only learners but also teachers need "initial preparation and continuing support" as well. They need to be given "the confidence and the tools" to be able to facilitate learner training (McGrath 2000:102). They need to be convinced that learners are capable of undertaking responsibility and they have to recognise and adopt the new roles. In learner training learners and teachers are partners. The teacher is the language learning 'expert' and the learner 'the expert' on him or herself." (Ellis and

Sinclair 1989:10). Therefore, both, students and teachers, need to be trained and change attitudes.

A Practical Example

Helping Students Develop Writing Strategies

The system in Cyprus is exam-oriented and students' expectations are mainly to get high grades and pass the end-of-year and university entrance exams. Classes are usually mixed-ability and consist of 20-25 boys and girls. Students are mainly used to traditional teacher-centred learning environment but inside English and other language subjects, they have the opportunity to work in groups in special language rooms.

The problem

An area that causes many problems to Cypriot students is writing compositions. By observing students at work and studying their papers one obviously realises that the problem is specified mainly on the first stage of the writing process – generating ideas and organising their writing. As writing essays is the main feature of end-of-year exams, most of the students consider this a boring chore they have to go through only to pass the exams or to get a high grade. This has a psychological effect and causes a lot of stress and anxiety. A possible cause of the problem is the students' unawareness of writing strategies (planning, drafting, and reviewing) and the limited time they are provided for practicing writing in the classroom. A writing task is usually assigned for homework and students remain helpless to struggle alone or with parents and friends; this demotivates students and creates negative feelings and attitudes.

A short course of language training which would introduce students to writing strategies used by 'good learners' and mainly strategies of self-assessment, might help them to discover the strategies that suit them best and lead them to better achievement. This would increase their self-confidence and self-esteem.

A short Learner Training Course: Developing Writing Strategies

Goals of the course:

This learner training course aims to help students to:
- diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in writing.
- become aware of a range of writing strategies
- experiment with familiar and unfamiliar strategies
- monitor and self-evaluate their learning
- develop the ability to produce the types of writing needed for which they will be assessed through written examinations.
- become more effective and creative writers

Rationale of the short 'learner training course'

The short 'learner training course', suggested in this paper (see Table), is based on the belief that writing is facilitated by making the students aware of a range of strategies and the rationale and benefits behind them (Oxford 1990). This means that students will be provided with explicit instruction on *how* each strategy works, *why* and *when* it can be useful and relevant to their purposes.

The 'learner training course' begins by finding out the students' needs along with their beliefs and attitudes towards writing. There are at least three good reasons why teachers should become more aware of their students' situation at the beginning of the course. The first is that there are so many different strategies one could teach, that a decision needs to be made about the particular students' most urgent needs - in other words, it is a question of establishing priorities. Second, if a teacher gains a

better insight into their students' needs, they will be in a position to provide more individualised instruction by designing a number of special tasks for a particular group of students. Thirdly - and considerably most important - if students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they can start working on problems that are perceived as real and relevant to them, and this is likely to motivate students to work better.

During this first 'learner training course', a component of a small number of key strategies is introduced. Obviously, introducing a small number of strategies and giving the students time to experiment is more profitable than introducing many of them insufficiently. As Ellis and Sinclair (1989) recommend instruction should be descriptive rather than prescriptive. This means that students should be led to discover the techniques that suit them best and then they should be guided to develop and extend them the way they consider more appropriate.

This short 'learner training course' consists of 5 consecutive lessons, 45 minutes each, and is planned to be implemented at the beginning of the school year. Students work in groups and pairs and are given opportunities not only to familiarise themselves but also to select and practise the techniques that suit them best. An example from the 'course' with the teacher's notes and the students' task sheets are provided below.

Description of the 'learner training course'

Bearing in mind Dickinson's (1987) suggestions for learners' preparation the 'learner training course' provides three ways to help the students to become more effective learners:

a) During the first stage students are given *psychological* preparation (see Lesson One). Affective, Communication and Social strategies are expected to develop first because they are related to basic human needs. Students will be introduced to the rationale and benefits of learner training. Afterwards they will have the opportunity, with the use of checklists, to reflect on their writing experience and the strategies they have used so far. This way they will understand that writing is a complex process that takes time; it is the result of employing various strategies that are developed gradually. Hearing about other people's problems will lower their anxiety and make them more willing to try again.

b) *Methodological* preparation. At the second stage cognitive and memory strategies will be developed, which are directly linked to specific tasks of writing. A description of each strategy (*why, when, how*) is provided. Students will be given opportunities to familiarise themselves and experiment with various writing strategies (such as brainstorming, making maps, loop writing, drafting, revising, editing). They will be given time to find out the strategies that suit them best and build up their compositions step by step with the teacher's and their group's assistance. Working in groups will help them develop communication and social strategies and overcome problems of stress and shyness.

c) During the *metacognitive* stage students will have the opportunity to reflect on what they have composed, the strategies they have used, the benefits and problems they have faced using the particular strategies. They will evaluate their peer's piece of writing first and then they will develop, with the help of the teacher and the whole class, their Evaluation Criteria list. Efforts will be made to make students understand

that it is not the teacher's responsibility to decide whether the text, they have produced, satisfies the aims but it is their own task. They should be able to be the critics of themselves. A class discussion will follow in which the students will exchange ideas and suggest ways about the organisation and monitoring of their writing.

Evaluating the 'learner training course'

The 'course' will be evaluated through students' self-evaluation and diaries, as well as the teacher's observation. The students' progress, feelings and attitudes will be recorded and the whole attempt will be evaluated again in four months. Soon after a second 'learner training course' will follow, in which, students will have the opportunity to discover and develop more writing strategies.

Conclusion

It is a firm belief that, all individuals involved in the learning process could benefit from learner training: the students, the teachers and the whole school. The unmotivated and unsuccessful students will become more interested in language classes if they realise that, in order to meet with more success at school, they do not necessarily need to work more, but simply to organise their efforts in a more effective way. Through learner training they will be led into a process of self-discovery in order to develop an awareness of themselves and start exploiting their potential inner resources as 'good' and responsible learners. Learner training can broaden their horizons and empower them to become autonomous in their life. Additionally, learner training helps teachers understand their students' needs; this results to students becoming more effective and increase their awareness of their own language learning strategies.

Obviously, the promotion and development of learner autonomy in the traditional classrooms of Cyprus public schools requires radical changes in the curriculum and the role of teachers and students. As it happens with all innovations and changes, learner training needs to be integrated into the daily activities and implemented gradually. Both teachers and students need psychological and methodological preparation; for this reason teacher training and in-service courses on relevant research and theory, not only in language, but also in all school subjects, are urgently required.

Conclusively, learner training should be seen as the most important educational objective and the means for promoting learner autonomy. As Rogers (1969:104, cited in Dickinson 1987:34) clearly declares:

> *The only man who is educated is the man who has leaned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.*

Learner Training:

A short course on writing strategies

Lesson	Aims	Tasks	Time	Strategies
One Psychological Preparation	- to introduce learner training and discuss with students the benefits and rationale - to introduce learners' diaries - to give students the opportunity to reflect on their writing experience and self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses - to lower anxiety and enhance students' willingness to learn by giving them the opportunity to work with others - to increase motivation.	1. Introducing Learner Training T→ SS, Class Discussion 2. Introducing Learners' Diaries (use of samples) T→ SS, Class Discussion 3. Learners' attitudes towards writing (use of checklists) T→ SS, S→ S, Class Discussion	15 m 10 m 20 m	**Affective** **Communication** **Social**
Two Methodological Preparation --------- Workshop	- to make students realise that writing is a complex cyclical process - to make them understand that writing process is a result of employing various strategies - to familiarise students with techniques 'skilled writers' use at the first stage of writing (eg generating ideas - brainstorming, making spidergrammes/mind maps, taking notes) - to give them the opportunity to practise these techniques and find the ones that suit them best.	1. Discovering the features of a well-written text T→ SS, Class Discussion 2. Writing- a complex process T→ SS, Class Discussion 3 Familiarising students with writing strategies of generating ideas (brainstorming, note-taking, making mind maps) 4. Experimenting with strategies **Group Work**	10 m 5-10m 15 m 10´-15´	**Cognitive** **Memory** **Communication** **Social**

Three Methodological Preparation (continued) ---------- Practice	- to familiarise students with techniques of drafting and revising (loopwriting, considering purpose and audience, re-viewing, etc.) - to practise the techniques mentioned above - to lower anxiety and enhance students' willingness to learn by giving them the opportunity to work with others.	1. Familiarising SS with writing strategies (loopwriting- drafting- revising considering purpose and audience) T→ SS, Class Discussion 2. Experimenting with strategies Group Work	20 m 25 m	**Cognitive** **Memory** **Social** **Communication** **Affective**
HOMEWORK		Students work at home and finish writing the composition ✦ Diaries		
Four Metacognitive Stage Evaluation Self-assessment	- to help students reconsider their perception on evaluating a piece of writing - to help students realise that they are responsible for their work - to help students develop the capacity to evaluate their work - to help students develop Criteria for Evaluation - to give practice on revising and editing	1. Evaluating other people's work T→SS, Class Discussion (using sample Criteria Lists) 2. Developing Evaluation Criteria Group Discussion, Class Discussion	25 m 20 m	**Metacognitive** **Social** **Communication**
HOMEWORK		3. Self-assessment Revising – Editing work Individual work ✦ Diaries		**Metacognitive**
Five Metacognitive Stage Reflecting Evaluating the course	- to get students reflect on their experience on experimenting with writing strategies - to find ways of organising writing	1. Students reflect on the activities Evaluation of strategies used (using feedback from Diaries) Group Discussion, Class Discussion 2. Useful Tips on organising and improving writing	25 m 20 m	**Metacognitive** **Social** **Communication** **Affective**

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