

Language Learning Strategies Customary: Learners and Teachers Approach and Notion

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Abstract: The study aimed at investigating how the learners and teachers at the Centre for Foundation Studies of the International Islamic University Malaysia perceive and approach language learning strategies. Data needed for the study were extracted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Strategies given to 300 randomly selected students from 2 different groups – 150 students who passed the English Placement Test (referred to as EPT-pass in this study) and 150 students who failed the English Placement Test (referred to as EPT-fail in this study), 14-week lesson plans prepared collectively by the teachers at the learning institution as well as interview sessions and lesson observations involving 4 teacher volunteers. Overall, there was a positive indication of language learning strategies in both approach and notion where learners from 'EPT-pass' group were found to have been using language learning strategies more frequently in comparison to learners from 'EPT-fail' group, which was identified through higher value of mean scores, analyzed using SPSS. Language learning strategies were also evidently nurtured in those 14-week lesson plans examined and the four teacher volunteers seemingly to have both positive notion and approach where language learning strategies are concerned and language learning strategies were positively incorporated into lesson implementations.

Keywords: language learning strategies, strategy inventory for language learning, lesson plans

INTRODUCTION

“It is quite evident, that the field of education over the last four decades witnessed gradual but significant paradigm shift from teacher-centred to learner centred” (Noor Zainab Abdul Razak & Mallam Adamu, 2012, p. 1). The term ‘learner-centered’ speaks for itself which means greater emphasis on the learners. Language learners differ as knowledge seekers in part because of the differences in ability, motivation, or effort, but a major difference lies in their knowledge about and skill in using ‘how to learn’ techniques, that is learning strategies.

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According to Eid Alhaisoni (2012), “language learning strategies are important because research suggests that training students to use language learning strategies can help them to become successful language learners” (p. 116). Zeynali (2012) takes a similar stand when it comes to language learning strategies by saying, “For a variety of reasons, language learning strategies are of great importance to language learning. Appropriate language learning strategies can lead to higher achievement, more self-confidence on the part of the learners, and greater autonomy” (p. 1614). Hence, language learning strategies ought to be made the focal points for language related researches as they do not only reflect the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered, they also concurred with the principal objective of the teaching-learning process which is successful learning.

There is no general consensus in the field of second language acquisition with respect to the appropriate way of defining language learning strategies nor is there one existing taxonomy but according to Ellis (as cited in Griffiths, 2004), Oxford’s taxonomy is “perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date” (p. 539). That is the reason why the current study adopted Oxford’s taxonomy of language learning strategies.

Oxford (1990) first defined learning strategies as “operations employed by the learners to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information” before she further expanded the definition to “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8). Within those two conflated definitions, Oxford had indirectly given hint that for a successful learning to take place, learning strategies need to be evident.

There are 62 strategies mentioned by Oxford and they are divided into direct and indirect strategies. The strategies used directly in dealing with a new language are called direct strategies. The three groups that belong to the direct strategies are memory, cognitive and compensation. The indirect strategies are used for general management of learning. The three groups belonging to this category are metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted to investigate how learners and teachers at the Centre for Foundation Studies of the International Islamic University Malaysia perceive and approach language learning strategies. Indeed, language learning strategies in general reflect what language learners do in the process of becoming successful language learners but teachers can help equip students with the knowledge of more relevant and more effective learning strategies. This can be done via several methods, one of which is through incorporation into learning. Reflecting on that, 14-week lesson plans prepared collectively by the teachers at the institution were examined and four teacher volunteers were both interviewed and their lesson implementations were observed.

The study was done in stages. Firstly, 300 learners were selected at random (150 from EPT-pass group and another 150 from EPT-fail group). The terms EPT-pass and

EPT-fail were derived from the existence of 2 different groups of students within that institution– the first one being those who passed the English Placement Test set by the institution and the second one being those who failed the test. Generally, learners enrolling at the institution are required to sit for English Placement Test (upon enrolment) in which passing the test would mean learners are exempted from following any English class throughout their study period but if they fail the test, learners would have to follow English class for 14 weeks until they reach the required proficiency. The reason for having 300 students for the study is because with the total population of approximately 3,000 students, the sample size required to be within a sampling error of .05 with a 95% level of confidence is around 300 students as suggested by Table of Sample Size by Krejcie & Morhan (as cited in Parmjit Singh, Chan & Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2009). All the 300 randomly selected learners were asked to complete questionnaires or better known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990). SILL was adopted as it is a standard measure for learners of variety languages. SILL is the most used survey which has been translated into more than 20 languages and used in dozens of published studies around the world. Studies have reported reliability coefficients for the SILL ranging from .85 to .95, making it a trusted measure for gauging student's report on language strategy use (Eid Alhaisoni, 2012). The questionnaire asked learners to answer questions by using categories like '*never true of me*', '*usually not true of me*', '*somewhat true of me*', '*usually true of me*' and '*always true of me*'. SILL contains 50 items assessing the frequency of strategy use and would normally take about 30 minutes to complete but some of the selected learners took some 45 minutes to complete answering all 50 items.

The study then proceeded into examining the 14-week lesson plans to determine whether language learning strategies are nurtured within those lesson plans. 'Lesson plan evaluation checklist' was used to examine those lesson plans and determine whether or not language learning strategies are nurtured within the lesson plans. The researchers developed the checklist based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies. In order to achieve data triangulation, 4 teacher volunteers (2 males and 2 females) were then interviewed to gain insights as to what are their notions on language learning strategies before their lesson implementations were observed as to further substantiate their notions on language learning strategies. The study managed to get only 4 teacher volunteers from the total of 57 as those 4 were the only ones who responded to 'invitation' from the researchers. The 4 teacher volunteers were interviewed in three different sessions of semi-structured interviews as the 2 female teacher volunteers wanted to be in the same interview session. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007), "this interview approach has the advantage of providing reasonably standard data across respondents, but of greater depth than can be obtained from a structured interview" and that is the reason why the researchers employed the interview approach. The analysis of the interview data started with preparing the transcriptions of all the recorded interview sessions before data or findings were summarized and reported accordingly. As for the classroom observations, the findings were documented using 'Classroom Observation Protocol' which was also developed based on Oxford (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies. The findings were recorded in the field (while observing the teacher volunteers implementing their lessons) as to avoid misinterpretations due to selective forgetting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from Questionnaire

SILL was adopted for the study not only to identify, but also to compare and contrast language learning strategies usage between EPT-pass and EPT-fail groups. The quantitative scores from the adopted five Likert scale questionnaire were calculated and tabulated according to the frequency of employment.

Table 1: Usage of Direct Strategies (Memory Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | DSMS1 | DSMS2 | DSMS3 | DSMS4 | DSMS5 | DSMS6 | DSMS7 | DSMS8 | DSMS9 |
|-----|-----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Mean | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | | | | | | | | | |
| | Std. Dev. | 4.1600 150 .66635 | 4.2600 150 .66987 | 4.7467 150 .54572 | 3.4333 150 .54854 | 1.6933 150 .63401 | 2.1000 150 .39714 | 1.0467 150 .21163 | 4.3733 150 .48531 | 3.0667 150 .29914 |
| 2 | Mean | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | | | | | | | | | |
| | Std. Dev. | 2.2733 150 .44716 | 2.5000 150 .64246 | 2.8200 150 .38547 | 1.9267 150 .61411 | 1.1867 150 .39095 | 1.3000 150 .45979 | 1.0267 150 .16165 | 3.1267 150 .33371 | 2.1333 150 .45857 |

Generally, EPT 1 group (EPT-pass students) recorded higher value of mean scores which indicate more frequent use of memory strategies (in comparison to EPT-fail students). The standard deviation final counts reflect that the responses clustered around the mean scores which only mean no extreme difference in the responses between participants from the same EPT-pass and EPT-fail students.

Table 2: Usage of Direct Strategies (Cognitive Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | DSCGS1 | DSCGS2 | DSCGS3 | DSCGS4 | DSCGS5 | DSCGS6 | DSCGS7 | DSCGS8 | DSCGS9 | DSCGS10 | DSCGS11 | DSCGS12 | DSCGS13 | DSCGS14 |
|-----|-----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Mean | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Std. Dev. | 4.1467 150 .71781 | 4.0133 150 .38402 | 4.3667 150 .53616 | 4.4067 150 .61411 | 4.0267 150 .40045 | 4.3000 150 .45979 | 3.9933 150 .40956 | 3.6533 150 .63443 | 4.1467 150 .45446 | 3.033 150 .18011 | 3.3200 150 .46804 | 4.4933 150 .55256 | 4.1267 150 .37177 | 3.9933 150 .39283 |
| 2 | Mean | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | N | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Std. Dev. | 2.4000 150 .59076 | 2.3200 150 .53495 | 2.2400 150 .56378 | 2.5267 150 .62064 | 1.6333 150 .52350 | 4.1667 150 .39146 | 1.8067 150 .48738 | 1.7267 150 .51679 | 2.9733 150 .19888 | 3.0133 150 .11508 | 1.5667 150 .49720 | 1.8000 150 .72353 | 1.5133 150 .50150 | 2.0200 150 .24495 |

With all the 14 questions meant to elicit answer on how frequent EPT-pass and EPT-fail students at CFS IIUM use cognitive strategies being answered by all the 300 respondents involved, EPT-pass students indicate higher usage of cognitive strategies overall and individual respondents from both groups gave more or less the same answer where usage of cognitive strategies is concern.

Table 3: Usage of Direct Strategies (Compensation Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | DSCM S1 | DSCM S2 | DSCM S3 | DSCM S4 | DSCM S5 | DSCM S6 |
|-----|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1 | Mean | 3.6733 | 3.4467 | 2.2133 | 3.7267 | 2.6267 | 3.8867 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. Dev. | .47057 | .53766 | .52567 | .56636 | .48531 | .47114 |
| 2 | Mean | 3.1267 | 4.4933 | 4.2533 | 2.1400 | 1.5667 | 1.9800 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. Dev. | .33371 | .50163 | .53328 | .38478 | .49720 | .44071 |

Through mean scores displayed in Table 3, EPT-pass students can be said as displaying higher usage of nearly all the compensation strategies except for ‘DSCM2-When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures’ and ‘DSCM3-I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.’ Higher mean scores in those 2 subdivisions of compensation strategies reflect on how EPT-fail students like to use gestures and come up with new words when they face difficulty in understanding or learning the language (English). Despite the difference, both EPT-pass and EPT-fail students seem to agree on making guesses in order to understand unfamiliar English words – and this can be seen through the overall mean scores for both groups indicating 3.6733 and 3.1267 respectively.

Table 4: Usage of Indirect Strategies (Metacognitive Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | ISM S1 | ISM S2 | ISM S3 | ISM S4 | ISM S5 | ISM S6 | ISM S7 | ISM S8 | ISM S9 |
|-----|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| 1 | Mean | 4.0333 | 3.8133 | 4.5133 | 4.5600 | 4.3733 | 4.4333 | 4.2667 | 4.8200 | 4.4333 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. Dev. | .40825 | .51012 | .58776 | .49805 | .57401 | .62837 | .60940 | 3.33996 | .49720 |
| 2 | Mean | 2.9467 | 2.1067 | 4.3533 | 2.2200 | 2.2133 | 2.2200 | 2.4733 | 2.8933 | 2.7733 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. Dev. | .22545 | .49354 | .60353 | .54181 | .60852 | .48976 | .52707 | .30972 | .42008 |

Altogether there were 9 questions asked related to metacognitive strategies usage and those questions were answered by all the 300 respondents from both EPT-pass and EPT-fail students. The mean scores produce similar findings to the previously discussed language learning strategies – EPT-pass students indicate higher usage of metacognitive strategies (which is proven through the higher mean scores in comparison to EPT-fail students). Respondents from both groups, however, claimed that they try to find out how to be better learners of English. This can be seen through item labeled ‘ISMS3-I try to find out how to be a better learner of English’ in which EPT-pass and EPT-fail students display mean scores of 4.5133 and 4.3533 respectively. The final counts of standard deviation for all the 9 items meant to measure usage of metacognitive strategies show small value which means the individual response for each respondent is similar to the rest of the respondent from the same group (both EPT-pass and EPT-fail).

Table 5: Usage of Indirect Strategies (Affective Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | ISAS1 | ISAS2 | ISAS3 | ISAS4 | ISAS5 | ISAS6 |
|-----|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1 | Mean | 3.9067 | 4.1133 | 3.0200 | 4.0000 | 3.8733 | 3.9533 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. | .40710 | .47114 | .53683 | .00000 | .58271 | .69838 |
| | Dev. | | | | | | |
| 2 | Mean | 2.9067 | 2.7733 | 2.7467 | 3.2400 | 2.8133 | 3.9800 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. | .37267 | .42008 | .43638 | .42851 | .43944 | .29470 |
| | Dev. | | | | | | |

Through the study of mean scores, it can be said that EPT-pass students indicate higher usage of affective strategies in general. This is reflected in the higher mean scores recorded by this group (in comparison to EPT-fail students). There was however, one item – ‘ISAS6-I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English’ in which both EPT-pass and EPT-fail students projected close mean scores of 3.9533 and 3.9800 respectively. Those mean scores reflect how those 2 groups are similar in a way that both groups admit to having needed someone to share however they feel throughout the process of learning the language (English).

Table 6: Usage of Indirect Strategies (Social Strategies) by both EPT-pass (1) and EPT-fail (2) groups

| EPT | | ISSS1 | ISSS2 | ISSS3 | ISSS4 | ISSS5 | ISSS6 |
|-----|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1 | Mean | 4.0467 | 3.9933 | 4.2133 | 4.2200 | 4.2933 | 3.7067 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. | .57155 | .37536 | .41103 | .41563 | .45682 | .60807 |
| | Dev. | | | | | | |
| 2 | Mean | 2.1200 | 2.1333 | 2.6533 | 2.5000 | 2.3000 | 2.6933 |
| | N | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| | Std. | .32605 | .34107 | .54325 | .71184 | .77503 | .49081 |
| | Dev. | | | | | | |

With the standard deviation, final counts showing the responses of individual students from each group are comparable to the rest within the same group, EPT-pass students indicate higher usage of social strategies in the 6 questions asked. That would only mean somehow EPT-pass students are more inclined to use the language (English) whenever they have the opportunity to socialize around – not only do they use the target language, they also cherish language input that could possibly come in a form of correction.

Findings from Lesson Plans

14-week lesson plans prepared collectively by the teachers of English Language Department at Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia were examined as to locate evidences on whether or not language learning strategies are made part of (nurtured within) those lesson plans.

Out of the three strategies listed under direct strategies (mental strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies), only cognitive strategies were evident in most of the lesson plans. In lesson plans meant for Week 1 and Week 2 for example, students

were expected to '*skim and scan*' information from a passage entitled 'Top 10 Weirdest University Clubs and Societies'. '*Skim and scan*' is actually one of the strategies listed under cognitive strategies in which it helps learners understand rapidly what they hear or read in the new language.

Another worth mentioning strategy evident in one of the lesson plans is lesson plans meant for Week 5 and Week 6 in which students were asked to write an introductory paragraph and produce a parallel sentence. Those two writing activities are not mere activities to make sure class hour is utilized sensibly – those two activities are clear reflection of a strategy being nurtured not only within the lesson plan but also during class hour which is '*formally practicing with sounds and writing system*'.

'*Practicing naturalistically*' was another language learning strategy which clearly being nurtured in the lesson plans. In lesson plan meant for Week 11 for example, one of the planned activities was to have students conducting group discussion ('As technology advances, written communication continues to take on various forms' being one of the questions for students to discuss) and focus was placed on using appropriate phrases used when interrupting a discussion. This strategy is especially significant in helping students build their self-confidence when it comes to using the target language.

In addition to those three strategies mentioned previously, '*repeating*' was also another strategy (still under cognitive strategies) obviously being nurtured in almost all the lesson plans. In lesson plans meant for Week 3 and Week 4 for instance, students were expected to say out and rehearse the phrases used when one needs to ask and give opinions over and over again before they were allowed to participate in an actual conversation.

'*Social strategies*' is another category of strategies which was evident in almost all the lesson plans. In comparison to cognitive strategies, social strategies are grouped under direct strategies and one such example of the strategy being nurtured in the lesson plans is lesson plan meant for Week 12 where students were asked to work together with their classmates. '*Cooperating with peers*' is one of the strategies grouped under social strategies in which it is commonly believed that if it is made a practice, students would benefit very much in the sense that they get to not only become more interested in any classroom activity (having partner to work with), they also get to exchange information and help each other in their attempt to complete any given task.

Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

Teacher volunteer 1 confided that he does incorporate language learning strategies into the execution of his lessons. While stating that language learning strategies could and should be taught to students, he also believed that students should be provided with ample room and opportunities to explore strategies that might work for them so they could work around those strategies and eventually become proficient in the language.

Teacher volunteer 2 seemed to be in agreement with teacher volunteer 1 when it comes to the question of whether or not language learning strategies should be taught to students as he believes students (especially Malaysian students) could benefit from some impulsive drive shown by their teachers. Stating language learning strategies are extremely crucial in leading students to become proficient in the language, he claimed

to have incorporated language learning strategies into the execution of his lessons, especially ones which involve interaction.

Similar to teacher volunteers 1 and 2, both teacher volunteers interviewed together during semi-structured interview session III agreed that for students to have a good command of the language, they need to be exposed and taught language learning strategies. Both also firmly believed that students need to utilize different sets of strategies for different classroom tasks or activities. One of the teacher volunteers in semi-structured interview session III stated that it has to start with the teachers introducing language learning strategies to students and guiding them through before students get to internalize those strategies into their learning process. Although both could not agree on the same scale of importance (when it comes to rating language learning strategies), both rated language learning strategies as important in order for successful language learning to take place.

Findings from Classroom Observations

Researchers observed four classrooms (lesson implementations) involving all the four teacher volunteers who were involved in the semi-structured interview sessions in order to further substantiate their notions and assertions on language learning strategies. Overall, all the language learning strategies from both direct and indirect language learning strategy categories were incorporated into the executions of lessons (except for compensation strategies which evidently was not incorporated into the execution of lesson #1 and lesson #3).

'Word-grouping' (a sub-category of memory strategies) was one of the most popular strategies being incorporated into lesson execution. In lesson #2 for instance, the teacher volunteer began the lesson with highlighting some words which could be found in the passage given out to students (namely judge, captured, imprison, legislate, implement and penalize). Students were then asked about the possible similarity that those words have. When the correct answer was finally heard from one of the students, they were then asked to change the word form of those words so they could have nouns instead of verbs. Grouping of words is one useful strategy in order to help students memorize new words better.

Another equally popular strategy being incorporated into the lesson executions was *'cooperating with peers'* which come under social strategies. Perhaps what made this strategy one of the most favored strategies is all the four teacher volunteers (like most teachers do) were aware of the importance of handling one's anxiety in learning – in this case, getting students to work with their peers would help them become less anxious while undergoing the learning process.

Perhaps it is a cliché instruction given by any teacher irrespective of gender and locality – asking students to pay attention. *'Paying attention'* in actual fact is one of the strategies grouped under metacognitive strategies and it was evident in the execution of the four lessons. This is one necessary strategy to eventually become proficient in the language as without paying attention, there is no way a language learner could grasp language input being taught during class hour and hence, it would be impossible to have a good command of the language.

Another worth mentioning strategy being incorporated into lesson executions was *'making positive statement'*. In lesson #4 for instance, the teacher volunteer uttered "You can, just have faith in yourself!" in order to encourage one of his students who seemed to second-guess his ability to write proper sentence on the whiteboard. A simple act of trying to encourage his student is actually one important enough strategy as students will have to go through trials and errors in the process of learning the target language – whether they like it or not and having a teacher who genuinely lends a helping hand would only result in the students progressing further in learning. Teacher volunteer in lesson #3 went really generous into *'rewarding'* his students who managed to use conjunctions correctly in sentences with chocolate-flavored candy. Those two actions are not mere 'generous actions', they are actually two strategies grouped under affective strategies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Despite the persistent debatable issues pertinent to definitions and taxonomy of language learning strategies, there are countless of studies that suggested the richness of language learning strategies. One of such study would be the one conducted by Juan Zhao (n.d.) in which through the study, a positive correlation was found between the use of language learning strategies and the English proficiency, which was indicated by students' grades and self-efficacy. A claim made by Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary and Robbins (as cited in Chiya, 2003) more or less reflected the finding of Juan Zhao's study when they mentioned, "Differences between more effective learners and less effective learners were found in the number and range of strategies used, in how strategies were applied to the task, and in whether they were appropriate for the task," (p. 166). Although the present study did not really go into detail (as comprehensive as the claim made by the numerous of previous researchers) studying language learning strategies usage by both EPT-pass and EPT-fail students, the current study in general did record quite significant findings – students from the former group did use language learning strategies more frequently in comparison to students from the latter group.

Perhaps in future, the researchers could consider studying which strategy is most and least used by students from both groups so suggestions (as to try out strategies mostly employed by successful language learners) could be made to less successful language learners. More than that, future researchers could also look into which strategy works best to tackle any individual language skill. It is most timely to really embrace language learning strategies (not only via notion, but also approach) for those strategies do not only reflect the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered, those strategies also help elevate learners to a whole new level of language proficiency. Indirectly, that is like helping to lift some pressure off any teachers' shoulders as seeing learners struggling to reach the supposed proficiency level is indeed pressuring enough.

The current study also found positive indication in both notion and approach of the teachers at the Centre for Foundation Studies of the International Islamic University Malaysia. Perhaps, if they ever thought of improvising their approach, maybe they could consider teaching language learning strategies directly in class. By then (perhaps), activities like *'word-grouping'*, *'repeating'* and *'cooperating with peers'* would not appear as mere classroom activities. Kind and generous gestures such like

'making positive statement' and 'rewarding' would perhaps no longer be acknowledged as the teacher being in good mood for the day. Perhaps it is time to rationalize every single 'classroom activity' taking place in the classroom to the students so they would be aware that they are actually employing language learning strategies and not mere following the teacher's instructions in class.

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