

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# Study Skills in the EFL Classroom

by **Roisin Keane** ( Babel Academy of English, Academic Manager)

I have to admit, I have only recently come to put a very conscious focus on teaching students how to study into my EFL course planning. I have always in some way incorporated study skills into lesson planning and classroom activities. However, it was often unconsciously and perhaps an add-on to the ‘real stuff’ of language learning such as practicing target language, dissecting grammatical structures or honing in on common pronunciation errors. Now, as I reflect on my practice as an educator, I realise some truths which make me think ‘Duh!’ (with Homer Simpson inflection). Sure, I often nagged students for stuffing class handouts into their bags or not taking down vocabulary from the board. I brought up incomplete homework exercises when students asked me ‘How can I improve my English more quickly?’, but I didn’t stop to think about why some students engage in (or don’t engage in as the case may be) these relatively simple tasks which would no doubt have such a positive effect on their language learning progress.

## Reasons for Incorporating Study Skills into EFL Courses

I had been guilty of making the assumption that learners who arrived in my class, the majority of whom were adults, came to me already having the skills necessary to approach language learning in a systematic and organised way, i.e. they had the language learning skills, study skills, already intact. My assumptions proved to be incorrect.

No more evident to me was it that we must remember to teach students ‘how to learn’ as well as ‘what to learn’ when I taught on ESOL programmes run by the CDETB (City of Dublin Education and Training Board). I commonly came into contact with students who had literacy difficulties, who had little or no educational background or who came from educational backgrounds very different from my own previous teaching and learning experience. While this is extreme compared to typical learners in the EFL classroom it really brought home to me that adults don’t just automatically know how to learn. Learners may be extremely knowledgeable in other areas and adept at very complex skills in other areas of their lives, but study skills necessary to make significant progress in language learning in a short space of time, can sometimes be lacking or in need of support and development.

**“ A2 level teachers could focus on strategies for asking for something without knowing the exact word during a role play activity to develop speaking skills.”**

Basic study skills such as using a dictionary, effectively recording vocabulary, revising, are recognised as essential in the learning of a foreign language. Yet we often consider them a natural consequence of attending school for a certain number of years (Mariani, 1988). I have no doubt that teachers reading this article will have noticed, as I have, adult learners with large folders of unorganised handouts which they can’t navigate and use again for self-study and revision and notebooks filled with vocabulary and grammar notes scrawled with illegible explanations. Of course, there are students who are very good at employing effective study techniques but there are always some who have difficulty. Study skills are not automatic.

Studies have shown that successful language learners share a number of characteristics which their less successful counterparts do not, including study habits, learning styles and language learning strategies (Lemmer, 2007). I would argue, in accordance with Lemmer, that providing explicit instruction and information regarding study habits and learning strategies would make students better equipped for language acquisition and provide them with a greater opportunity for success.

## Study Skills, Knowledge Areas and Competencies Useful in the EFL Classroom

At the end of this article you will find a list of topic areas and techniques useful in the EFL classroom. You may find that some of these skills and knowledge areas are not relevant to your cohort of students. However, this may provide a useful starting point when considering the kinds of study skills relevant to your language learners and which would be beneficial to include in a course planning at each (CEFR) level.

Specific study skills can often be quite easily incorporated into target language practice at a particular level. At A1 level, for example, activities to familiarise learners with a bilingual dictionary could form part of a task focusing on alphabet practice. A2 level teachers could focus on strategies for asking for something without knowing the exact word during a role play activity to develop speaking skills. Guessing the meaning

of unknown words via context is a useful reading task at B1 level. Teachers at B2 level may like to use a student’s vocabulary and collocations notebook to revise target language with the class as a whole. Choosing a well-organised notebook is a positive way to reinforce good practice. At higher levels, encouraging students to write English explanations in their personal notebooks (as opposed to translations) could be reinforced with a half-a-crossword type activity where students must explain the meaning of a word or phrase to the other group. Not only does this offer students a chance to review useful vocabulary items, it also gives the teacher an opportunity to highlight ways of clearly recording the meaning of words and phrases in vocabulary notebooks.

Additionally, we must also remember the importance of developing individual student's awareness of his/her learning strategies, together with the ability to discover autonomous ways of assessing and improving their own learning (Mariani, 1988). It is vital in learning that we develop the ability to self-evaluate and make responsible choices about our own learning if we are to become independent learners. To this end, teachers may like to include weekly time in their lessons for reflection and discussion on students' experiences of learning. Moreover, learners may encounter common obstacles and difficulties in their learning. I have found that classmates can be as good a source of advice for learners on becoming a more effective language learner as their teacher!



A neglected skills: How to study takes practice

### Methods EFL teachers can use to incorporate study skills into lessons

As discussed, the content of lessons can be directed towards appropriate reflection, discussion, input on and practice of study skills in order to aid language learning.

Methodological principles on how to do this are offered by Mariani (1988). Study skills activities may be structured into four main learning stages:

- Encouraging students to identify and be aware of specific problems.

- Providing students with a variety of study skills techniques, giving them the opportunity to put these techniques into practice followed by an evaluation of their advantages and disadvantages.

- Encourage students to apply what they have learned to their own individual situations.

- Supporting students in evaluating the impact of their learning, perhaps prompting discussion on their motivations for learning English and the contexts in which they will apply their learning in the future.

Hopefully this article will have provided you with some food for thought when considering how best to support your learners in progressing effectively in their language learning.

### Study skills topic areas and techniques useful in the EFL classroom

St. Giles International provide this useful list of 'learner training' topics and techniques in their level descriptors:

#### A1 Level

- Familiarity with bilingual dictionary
- Awareness of style - formal / informal
- Awareness of communication aims
- Names of activities - listening, vocabulary etc.
- Awareness of register - informal / formal
- Accuracy vs fluency
- Classroom language (e.g. "what do you call...?" / "what does ..... mean?")
- Names of activities e.g. reading, grammar
- Vocabulary storage techniques
- Recognition of many phonemic symbols
- Recognition of stress mark
- Familiarity with using dictionary
- Phonetic symbols for individual problem sounds
- Methods of storing vocab – spider diagrams, word maps, collocation, etc.)

#### A2 Level

- Increased familiarity with a (probably bilingual) dictionary
- Increased familiarity with phonemic chart - layout, voice, main simple vowel sounds
- Revision of vocabulary learning techniques
- Guessing the meaning of unknown words
- Strategies for asking for something without knowing the exact word
- Awareness of skimming and scanning reading skills
- Awareness of note taking skills

#### B1 Level

- Attempts to increase vocabulary via word building
- Use of grammar reference
- Awareness of phrasal verb types and identifying a concept for recording
- Increased familiarity with monolingual dictionary
- Guessing the meaning of unknown words via context

**“Providing students with a variety of study skills techniques, giving them the opportunity to put these techniques into practice followed by an evaluation of their advantages and disadvantages.”**

**B2 Level**

Alternative memory / associative techniques  
Word building  
Synonyms / antonyms  
Keeping a record of collocation  
Use of dictionary to distinguish separability of multi-word verbs

**Further Reading:**

Lemmer, Richard (2007); A Case for Integrating Study Skills and Learning Strategies into an EFL Curriculum; Chugokugakuen Journal, vol. 6, pp. 17-22.

Mariani, Luciano (1988); Study Skills and the EFL Syllabus: A Cross-Curricular Approach; Perspectives, a Journal of TESOL – Italy – Vol XIV, No.1, May 1988.

St Giles International; English Language Level Descriptors [www.stgiles-international.com/student-services/level-descriptors](http://www.stgiles-international.com/student-services/level-descriptors)

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