

ESL Teachers' Employment of Instructional Language Strategies: Towards Effective Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers hypothesised that teachers' roles in employing Instructional Language Strategies (ILS) could enhance students' and teachers' self-directed language learning skills. An exploratory study was conducted to examine the teachers' views about teaching English language and their frequency of employment of ILS in their ESL classroom. The eight ESL secondary school teachers were randomly selected from a few schools in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The study attempts to find out the most frequently employed strategies and how the teachers' perception determines their choice of strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were triangulated with the ILS questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data were carried out. Description of teachers' responses and descriptive statistics were used to support the findings. Data revealed that the most frequently employed strategies were metacognitive strategies, followed by memory, compensation and cognitive strategies. Social strategies and affective strategies were the two least employed strategies. Analyses also showed that teachers' choices of employment of ILS were influenced by their perception on language teaching and learning. Some recommendations for further researches and implications of teachers' choices of employment of ILS were discussed.

Keywords Instructional Language Strategies, Language Learning Strategies, English as a Second Language (ESL)

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, there has been a widespread research interest in language learning strategies of ESL learners. Basically, second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students employ-often consciously-to improve their own progress in internalizing, storing, retrieving, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990). These strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement that is necessary for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

According to Kinoshita (2003) from the perspective of teaching, language learning strategies can be taught, and that instructional strategies can contribute to improved language performance and proficiency. She also believed that language learning strategy instruction is an 'instructional paradigm' as postulated by Grunewald (1999). Students should be taught to actively choose and implement strategies that work for them. In view of that, it is crucial that the new generation of ESL teachers need to prepare self-directed 21st century learners who are able to acquire language independently. Since "individual perception and the differences teachers bring to their classroom environment are increasingly recognized as fundamental contributors influencing the way they teach, and how they motivate and engage the students" (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008), the present exploratory study attempts to examine strategies teachers employ in their ESL

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classroom and their perception on language teaching and learning. It is hoped that this study would help identify some essential instructional language strategies teachers can engage in their ESL classroom. Since self-directed learning has emerged as an important new construct in education, it is most timely to model and provide some suggestions to students on how to enhance these self-learning skills. This study in the area of instructional language strategies using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is relatively unexplored in Malaysia: therefore, investigation on learning strategies from teachers' perspective would help to strengthen the area of ESL language teaching strategies in Malaysian ESL research.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Having taught 31 years in the primary and secondary Malaysian schools, the researchers observed that teachers employ a variety of strategies in their ESL classroom. However, they found that teaching students to learn how to learn is much more fundamental than teaching them the content. There is an increasing importance to examine teachers' instructional language strategies instead of merely researching on students' language learning strategies. Guiding students to think about thinking is essential and useful. From classroom observations and sharing among teachers, the researchers deduced that students need guidance in implementing self-directed language learning strategies. It must be pointed out that the Instructional Language Strategies (ILS) in this study refers to the 'techniques' or teaching strategies teachers employ to enhance self-learning skills of students in the ESL classroom. The researchers also observed that there may not be a shortage of learning strategies or teaching strategies that may be used for the purpose of teaching in the ESL classroom. However, there is a lack of concrete evidence to show which strategy is the most useful and important to be employed and how these strategies play an important role in enhancing language learning. This exploratory study hopes to provide some insights into the ILS and further research may be conducted to investigate how ESL teachers facilitate learning of language.

In this study, the researchers proposed to determine the ESL teachers' employment of instructional language strategies in their classroom. Teachers' perceptions on successful language teaching and learning were also investigated on. Two research questions were developed to guide the study.

Specifically, the research questions asked are as follows:

1. Which groups of instructional language strategies are most frequently employed by ESL teachers in the ESL classroom?
2. How do teachers' perceptions determine the choice of employment of the strategies?

As with most exploratory research, there are a number of limitations to this study. This study on instructional language strategy (ILS) using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is relatively unexplored and it only focuses on a narrow scope of teaching strategies employed by ESL teachers. This descriptive study is based on the research subjects randomly selected from schools around Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. As such, the results are confined to the selected schools only. The employment of strategies in the ESL classroom may vary according to the proficiency level of the students in the selected schools. Additionally, this study only examined the instructional language strategies employed by eight ESL teachers. Therefore, any findings arising from this study cannot be generalised to all ESL teachers. Further investigation into the classroom activities conducted by ESL teachers would yield data of higher validity and reliability of their practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research had been conducted on language learning strategies and results have shown that successful language learners employ some self-directed strategies. Hence the idea of teaching learners these strategies is most useful to promote more successful language learners. In order to encourage effective learning, these

strategies need to be taught. As Rubin (2007, p. 282) points out, “[o]ften poor learners don’t have a clue as to how good learners arrive at their answers and feel they can never perform as good learners do. By revealing the process, this myth can be exposed.” This is in line with the aim of this study to examine what ESL teachers do and to find out about their application of instructional strategies.

Teaching strategies popularly employed consisted of two main components; firstly direct strategies which were subdivided into memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies while indirect strategies comprised of metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Past research has shown that the two most preferred strategies were the metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies refer to methods used to help students understand the way they learn; in other words they become aware of their own thinking. Through this strategy, students will learn to develop an appropriate plan for their own learning. Cognitive strategy in its simplest form is the use of the mind to complete a task. During this process, previous knowledge is engaged to help solve new problems. Other equally important strategies are the socio-affective strategies which refer to those which are non-academic in nature and involve stimulating learning through establishing a level of empathy between the instructor and student. These include considering factors such as emotions and attitudes (Oxford, 1990).

Developing skills in three areas, such as metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective can help the language learner build up learner independence and autonomy whereby he can take control of his own learning. Therefore, the goal of strategy instruction should not be rote memorization of a particular approach but instead the development of a repertoire of tools a student can access as needed. (Protheroe & Clarke, 2008). Consequently, students realise that it is sometimes the use of ineffective strategies—not lack of ability—that hinders performance. This factor is especially important because it may help to increase motivation.

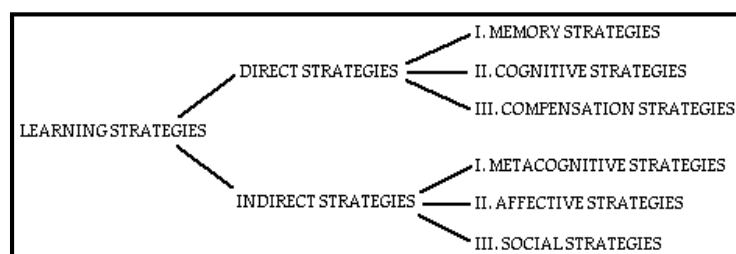


Figure 1 Language Learning Strategies: Direct and Indirect Strategies (Oxford, 1990)

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a survey method whereby perception was obtained via an adapted questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The data are tabulated in graphic representation to compare the employment of instructional language strategies in the ESL classroom. Data from the interviews were transcribed to obtain more information on teachers’ perception on the teaching and learning of ESL.

In this study, the instruments used to collect data were an adapted questionnaire from Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and some structured questions for individual interviews. The self-designed structured questions focus on teachers’ perception on English language teaching and learning, and instructional language strategies employed in their classroom. The structured questions are used in order to have uniformity in the interviews conducted towards the research objectives. Interviews were recorded and notes were taken by the researchers. Teachers’ perception was the focal point of discussion and the study aimed to get an insightful perception of the most effective strategies teachers employ.

A total of 24 items in this questionnaire were adapted from the Strategy Inventory Language Learning (Oxford 1990) that consists of language learning strategies learners employed in the learning of language. The language learning strategies in SILL are converted into teaching strategies, which reflected ‘what teachers do’ in the English language classroom as tabulated in Table 1 below. The section consists of two main components; firstly, the *Direct Strategies*, which were subdivided into memory strategies (Item

No. 1-4), cognitive strategies (Item No. 5-8), compensation strategies (Item No. 9-12), and secondly, the *Indirect Strategies*, which consisted of metacognitive strategies (Item 13-16), affective strategies (Item No. 17-20) and social strategies (Item No. 21-24). In the adapted questionnaire, 12 out of 24 items were converted into the negative forms to add variety and for easy computation. The following table shows the items of the questionnaire and instructional strategy teachers can do in their ESL classroom.

Table 1 Instructional Language Strategies: What Teachers Do

Strategies	Item Number In Questionnaire	Instructional Strategies
Direct Strategies		
1. Memory strategies	Questions No. 1-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to relate the new words to something that is familiar to them • Make personally meaningful associations of things, materials or concepts etc. • Explain words in context not in isolation • Use visual images and mental picture of situations to be taught • Use and link visual images with sound, motion and tactile strategies in teaching • Pair or group things and request or make students imitate and follow.
2. Cognitive strategies	Questions No. 5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give practices in summarizing, translating and repetition exercises, taking notes, highlighting etc. • Provide practice in skimming to get ideas quickly. • Provide opportunity for practicing naturalistically, such as participating in conversations, reading books or articles, or writing a letter. • Encourage the use of a variety of emphasis techniques such as underlining, starring or colour-coding to highlight important information.
3. Compensation strategies	Questions No. 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach predictive skills, encourage use of gestures to convey meanings and information. • Teach the use of linguistic and non-linguistic clues to guess meanings. • Give allowances for overcoming limitations in speaking and writing such as using mime/gesture, coining words, switching to mother-tongue, using synonym.
Indirect Strategies		
4. Metacognitive strategies	Questions No. 13-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set goals for improving, allow self-planning and provide practice opportunities. • Explain explicitly about language learning, give suggestions on how to self-evaluate and self-monitor their progress. • Focus on listening skills by delaying speech production. • Encourage self-monitoring and self-evaluation

5. Affective strategies	Questions No. 17-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give reward, have casual talk or provide relaxation exercise such as employing music and instilling laughter in the teaching process • Encourage peer discussion and expression of feelings about learning the language • Encourage keeping of language diary or checklist
6. Social strategies	Questions No. 21-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage cooperation among peers and other proficient users of the language for example, English teachers. • Encourage students to ask questions and provide opportunity for them to ask for clarification or verification and ask for correction • Teach about the culture of English speakers. • Talk about empathy eg. Sensitive towards others and ask about the thoughts and feelings of others.

The participants for this study were eight ESL secondary school teachers who were randomly selected from a few schools in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. All the eight participants were TESL trained teachers with Bachelor degrees, which constituted 62.5% (five participants) of the sample group while the remaining 25% (two participants) with Master degrees and 12.5% (one participant) with Diploma in Teacher Training. All the participants have more than ten years of experience teaching English language. Based on their teaching experiences, the teachers would have acquired varied perceptions and good understanding of ESL classroom teaching and learning. This has become a strong basis for these teachers to participate in this exploratory study.

The quantitative scores from the adapted five Likert scale questionnaire were calculated and tabulated according to the frequency of employment. A table was drawn to show the ranking of the most frequently employed strategies to the least employed strategies. Interviews were recorded and a verbatim of their conversation were transcribed and analysed. The comments from the participants are noted to provide helpful insights into their employment of the instructional language strategies. It also revealed the existence of both positive and negative elements. Further analysis of the data will be shown in the following tables in the next section.

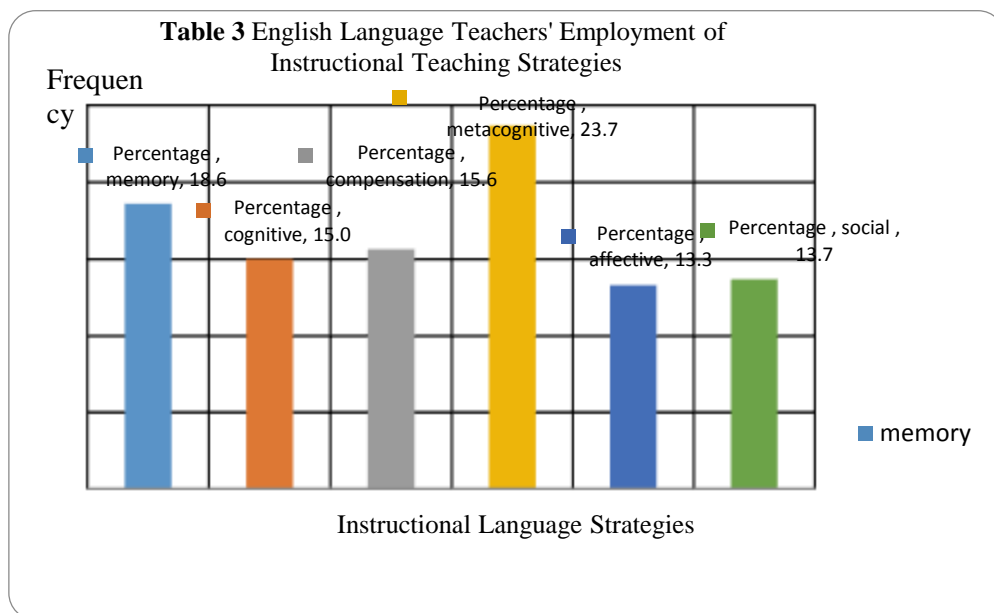
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data revealed that the most frequently employed strategies were metacognitive strategies (23.7%), followed by memory (18.6%), compensation (15.6%) and cognitive strategies (15.0%). The social strategies (13.7%) and affective strategies (13.3%) were the two least employed strategies. Generally, the employment of direct and indirect strategies by the participants did not show consistency. The most frequently used strategies were metacognitive strategies, which are indirect strategies. The participants who were experienced teachers with at least more than ten years in the education field were aware of the importance of indirect strategies to enhance learning. The findings of this study also revealed the least employed strategies, such as the social and affective strategies were also incidentally from the indirect strategies category. The other 3 strategies, namely, memory, cognitive and compensation strategies were direct strategies, and they were found to be moderately employed in the ESL classroom.

Table 2 Rank ordering of Employment of Instructional Language Strategy

Rank	Strategies
6 (most frequent)	Metacognitive
5	Memory
4	Compensation
3	Cognitive
2	Social
1 (least frequent)	Affective

Table 3 below shows the results obtained from the administered adapted questionnaire.



Metacognitive strategies was found to be the most frequently employed strategies with an accumulative percentage of 23.7% as shown in the graph above (Table 3). Metacognition, in its simplest form, is thinking about students' own thinking. Generally, the main objective of teaching metacognitive strategies was to provide ESL students explicit teacher instruction for a specific metacognitive strategy. All the participants in this study kept record of their students' progress in learning English as this is part of the requirement of school administration. Research shows that metacognitive skills can be taught to students to improve their learning (Thiede, Anderson, & Therriault, 2003). Hence, the practices of correcting students work and making them learn from their mistakes and imparting clear goals for improving English skills has become a norm in an ESL classroom. This skill was undeniably a very important skill because metacognition allows people to take charge of their own learning. It involves awareness of how they learn, an evaluation of their learning needs, generating strategies to meet these needs and then implementing the strategies (Hacker, 2009). It is concluded that the metacognition strategies has been employed appropriately. These indirect strategies (metacognitive strategies) employed by the ESL teachers are vital tools for language learning. These strategies positively drive students in the right direction towards achieving better

language learning strategies. Hence, self-directed language learning will be enhanced for successful language learning.

Memory strategies were found to be listed as the second frequently used strategies. The frequency score for memory strategies is 18.6%. The participants employed memory strategies because they are more focused on content and the tendency of them employing the memory strategies is higher compared to the metacognitive strategies. They perceived ESL teachers as the main mediator who determines the success of language learning. All the eight participants expressed their views on how powerful and how much impact teachers have on student learning. Basically, all the participants were found to relate new words to something that is familiar to students. They would also describe a new word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used. Additionally, all the participants choose to use teaching aids to make their students remember new words. They further employ the direct strategies such as using visual images and mental picture of situations to be taught. They would explain words in context not in isolation. Making students relate new words to something that is familiar and making meaningful associations of things, materials or concepts are the most common practice among the teachers.

Memory strategies seem to be used frequently too. Some of the participants have similar beliefs about student learning. They believe that students learn English language through “imitation and success in acquiring language means being able to process information and use the language appropriately”. The participants believe that by bringing in teaching materials which are “closely related to students’ daily life” and providing ‘motivation’, ‘intensive practice’ and engaging more ‘creative teaching’, students will be prepared for more challenges in the learning of ESL. One participant’s view is ESL teachers should “teach students according to their ability, not just teaching what’s in the syllabus.” She expressed her apprehension that ESL teachers are very concerned about finishing the syllabus and may neglect weaker students in the process. Additionally, another participant verified that many teachers focused on “teaching aspects of grammar, vocabularies, tenses and providing drilling” and they hope that “students will have enough practice” to prepare them for their examination. She also observed that her “students have a poor command to start with, so they find lessons boring and intimidating.” In view of these observations of their students’ poor attitude, she opted to employ memory strategies to make them learn and grasp language which she believed could be done in a shorter period of time.

Compensation and Cognitive Strategies are similar in frequency of employment by the participants of this study. The frequency for employment of compensation strategies is 15.6%, and the frequency for cognitive strategies is 15.0. Generally, these direct strategies are most commonly utilized in the Malaysian ESL classroom. The data revealed some negative aspects of the learning of language in our students. The participants commented that their students were ‘lack of confidence’, have ‘lackadaisical attitude’ and ‘high expectations of being spoon-fed” by ESL teachers. Hence, majority of participants employed direct strategies to make them learn. They employed cognitive strategies such as making their students take notes, summarize and highlight. One participant employed compensation strategies such as using translation whenever the need arises. She allowed her students to use the Malay language and entertained their queries in the ESL classrooms. Hence, it is noted here that the participants’ choice of instructional strategies depends greatly on her students’ behaviour and attitude.

A majority of the participants believed that the “teacher is the most powerful and influential person” in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, their decisions to employ the cognitive and compensation strategies are very much influenced by their observation of their students’ behaviour in their own class. To enhance language learning the participants chose cognitive strategies, which encompass giving practices in summarizing, translating and repetition exercises, taking notes, highlighting etc. Practice in skimming to get ideas quickly and for practicing naturalistically, were popularly employed by the participants. The participants encouraged the use of a variety of emphasis techniques such as underlining, starring or colour-coding to highlight important information. Similarly to cognitive strategies, compensation strategies are moderately employed. The participants taught predictive skills, encouraged use of gesture to convey meanings and information. They also engaged on teaching the use of linguistic and non-linguistic clues to guess meanings. They allowed students to overcome the limitations encountered in speaking and writing by using mime/gesture, coining words, switching to mother-tongue, using synonym. All these strategies employed by the participants reflected the language learning strategies. It is hoped that these skills would be adopted by students to help them to develop their language learning skills.

Social Strategies and Affective Strategies were found to be the least employed among the Instructional Language Strategies examined in this study. The frequency score of social strategies was 13.7% and affective strategies was 13.3%. Affective Strategies are learning strategies concerned with managing emotions, both negative and positive. The relationship between affective strategies and learning is not very clear, but from the observations of the researchers a positive affective environment helps learning in general. According to Hurd (2008), affect refers to the emotions, feelings, and attitudes that individuals bring to the learning experience and the role these play in motivation. Within the scope of this exploratory study, both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that these two indirect strategies were lesser favored compared to the other strategies. Both these indirect strategies were least used because teachers perceived these strategies as time-consuming, which was actually a misconception. As Hurd (2008) postulates that many findings in neuroscience indicate that both affect and cognition are fundamental and interdependent aspects of human brain functioning, affective strategies are much needed for conducive learning of ESL. If ESL teachers only choose to employ cognitive and compensation strategies, some of the students' language learning progress may be affected. Caine and Caine (1991) note that, "We do not simply learn. What we learn is influenced and organized by emotions and mind sets based on expectancy, personal biases and prejudices, degree of self-esteem, and the need for social interaction." Hence in order to enhance learning, in general, and especially learning ESL, it is essential to create the right environment for learning.

Both the indirect strategies, social strategies and affective strategies were least employed by the participants due to their own beliefs that learning ESL is very much influenced by students' home environment. One participant who teaches in an urban school, seldom employ these strategies because she thinks that there is "no necessity to make students feel 'comfortable' and 'at ease' to be able to learn language". Most of her students are from English speaking families and they are confident enough to participate in all the activities that she conducts. She further explains that 'social strategies' are not anything new to her students. She found out that some of them were already applying these social strategies online, getting connected with English speakers, either through emails or through online internet games. She believed that most of her students were more interested in a lesson focussed on content through memory and cognitive strategies. With such perception, one participant chose to employ the direct strategies in her ESL class. In line with this view, another participant expressed her disapproval with regards to giving encouragement to students to ask questions in languages other than English during English lessons. She used solely English in the ESL classroom to communicate with her students. Her strong views on the use of 'only English' in the ESL classroom may be threatening for some students. Two other participants supported this view that it is "not a norm for English teachers to encourage them to use translation or use any other languages." However, this was contradicted by another participant, who expressed her strong perception of translation as necessary for learning a second language. She allows translation in her class because, "there may be no equivalent word for some vocabulary in the language concerned" and "sometimes students need to be given immediate feedback on the actual meaning of words or sentences." Generally, the perceptions of the ESL teachers may vary due to the different class situation and different types of students. Hence, the choice of strategies to be employed by teachers need to be catered for individual needs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, this paper which examined teachers' employment of Instructional Language Strategies (ILS) revealed that the most frequently employed strategies are metacognitive strategies, followed by memory, compensation and cognitive strategies. The social strategies and affective strategies are the two least employed strategies. Analyses also showed teachers' choice of employment of ILS were influenced by their perception on language teaching and learning. Analyses of data from interviews showed that teachers' choice of employment of ILS is influenced by their perception and views on language learning. From the discussion, the participants' choices of ILS are found to vary accordingly and they are influenced by some of the factors such as students' attitude towards language learning, students' home environment, students' level of language proficiency, and beliefs of the teachers with regards to the teaching and learning of English

as a Second Language. Some recommendations for further researches and its implications for teachers are discussed in this section.

All the strategies from SILL were of equal importance for students to apply in the ESL classroom. This exploratory study has highlighted the significance of indirect strategies, such as the metacognitive, affective and social strategies. These indirect strategies are essential strategies as they contribute highly to the success of learning language. Nunan (1996:41) too, recommends that ‘language classrooms should have a dual focus, not only teaching language content but also on developing learning processes as well’. (Cohen & Macaro, 2007, p. 160). The researchers strongly agree that developing self-directed strategies will enable learners to apply these strategies, not only in language learning, but also in learning other subject matter. In view of its usefulness, it is highly recommended that ESL teachers in the Malaysian context need to lower affective filter through engagement of affective and social strategies, which are found to be the least employed strategies.

While having discussed on the usefulness of including language learning strategy instruction in second language learning, much still remains to be investigated. Further research can be conducted with a greater number of participants to increase validity of data. Perhaps action research conducted in the ESL classroom may provide more evidences of the effectiveness of affective and social strategies in terms of learner motivation, learner performance and the increased self-confidence to continue self-directed learning.

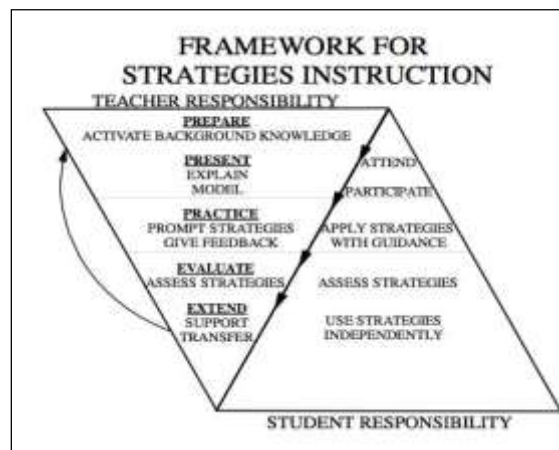


Figure 2 Framework for Strategies Instruction (Chamot & Robbins, 2005)

In summary, the instructional language teaching strategies employed by the participants in this study reveal some aspects which emphasize on the importance of developing students’ metacognitive understanding. Undoubtedly, this can be facilitated by teachers’ modeling and demonstration. By providing consistent practice, the students will be able to internalize these language learning strategies. It is highly recommended that teachers adopt the framework above. Teachers need to take the responsibility to prepare, present, practice, evaluate and extend. On the other hand, students make an effort to take charge of their own learning. Therefore this will lead to successful acquisition of English language. In sum, it is critical that teachers give consideration to employ appropriate instructional language learning strategies when teaching students, and when designing classroom research. Appropriate learning strategies should be among the first considerations of any ESL teacher or researcher who wants to enhance student learning.

Lastly, the implications for this Instructional Language Strategy study are not too far-reaching. ESL teachers are recommended to employ all the language learning strategies in the effort to promote effective learning of the language. Teachers need to conceptualize language learning strategies in a way that includes not just the cognitive and metacognitive strategies, but also the social and affective sides of learning. Language learning undoubtedly involves much more from the learner as well as from the teacher. It is undeniable that instructional language strategies may serve as a model for students to adopt and to apply

when learning language. Additionally, the power of using language learning strategies and with good practice can help to make language learning easier and more effective. Hence, teachers need to know the right time and to choose the most appropriate strategies for teaching in the classroom. Further research on the impact of teachers' application of these ILS on students' success in language learning is highly recommended and much anticipated.

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