

Course- M.A Education

Semester- 2nd

Paper-mache- VII

TOPIC- Teaching Study Skill



17.2 WHAT ARE STUDY SKILLS ?

In very simple terms, 'study skills' may be defined as skills which help learners to study more efficiently. When we teach study skills to our learners, we achieve two purposes:

- (a) **Directly**— We help the student to increase his/her knowledge of the subject matter.
- (b) **Indirectly** —We improve his/her ability to learn other subjects independently and at will. In other words, we enable him/her to 'learn to learn'.

We must be careful to distinguish linguistic skills from study skills. Linguistic skills help learners to 'communicate'; study skills, on the other hand, enable the learners to 'study'; and the process of study involves four operations: **perception, comprehension, retention and retrieval**. In other words the student should first perceive what is relevant to his/her needs, and select only those areas which are important. S/he cannot study everything available in every book s/he can lay hands on. Once s/he has decided on areas significant to him/her, s/he has to read and understand - or comprehend - the material that s/he has selected, for no learning can take place without comprehension. What is not understood is not learnt. Comprehension thus constitutes an important stage in the process of learning. However, mere comprehension does not guarantee mastery of the subject; for human memory is so transient, that, what is understood, may easily be forgotten, hence the learner has to make special efforts to **retain** what s/he has learnt. Different students adopt different means towards retention. Very weak students blindly memorize the whole lesson; brighter learners, however, try to remember the basic principles in the form of short notes, which could be paraphrased later. The last stage in the learning process involves the **retrieval** of what has been learnt. When required, for example, in the examination hall, the learner should be able to **retrieve** all that s/he has learnt throughout the year. We shall look at each of these sub-skills of study in greater detail.

In the literature on study skills, we refer to three major types of study skills corresponding to the four operations in the process of study. They are:

- (a) **Gathering skills** (perception, comprehension)
- (b) **Storing skills** (Retention)
- (c) **Retrieval skills** (Retrieval)

17.2.1 Gathering Skills

These are also known as **reference** skills and enable a learner to gather information as quickly as possible. This requires two sub-skills: **locating** and **comprehending** information.

How do we go about locating the information we need? We should first of all, know the **sources** available, eg. books, journals, etc.; once s/he has identified the sources, the learner should make effective use of them.

A major source of information, which all educated people keep consulting often, is the **dictionary**. We mainly look for meanings of words in the dictionary. Most students don't even know how to use a dictionary. Nor are they aware of the fund of information available in a dictionary, e.g. pronunciation, grammar, etymology, derivations, etc. In a later section of this unit we shall present several tasks which enable a learner to exploit the potential of the dictionary for language learning.

What are the other sources of information available to a student? Imagine that there is a student of Chemistry who has been asked to write an assignment on a specific topic.

His/her text book alone will not be sufficient nor can s/he afford to copy verbatim from the same. S/he has to go to the library. Here s/he should know how to make use of library catalogues. In the era of computerisation today, s/he should know how to get the information from the computer. Once s/he has located the relevant books from the library catalogue, s/he can start referring to them. As it is impossible to read every word of every book on the area, s/he needs to be selective. Here s/he could get some guidance from the **contents page** or the **index** at the back of the book. After locating the relevant pages, s/he should quickly **skim** through them and perhaps **scan** only those sections which are useful for his/her assignment. Most students today do not want to go through these laborious processes, with the result, the xeroxed materials pile up but nothing gets assimilated. The gathering skills may be summed up as follows:

- (a) Locating information - through reference to dictionaries, library catalogues, Tables of Content, Index, etc.
- (b) Comprehending information - through mastering the sub-skills of reading, like skimming, scanning, etc.

17.2.2. Storage Skills

As the name suggests, storage skills involve the ability to **store information for ready retrieval and use**. You may ask: What is so difficult about 'storing' information? Once we have read and understood some information, is it not automatically stored in the memory? I would say, 'partly yes' and 'partly no'. What does this mean? We do remember what we read/listen to; but not everything. So, most of us hasten to copy down important facts. If we are not properly trained, we would waste a lot of time in copying; further, just before the examination, when the students revise all the lessons, it would be just impossible for them to read through hundreds of pages. They should have the notes in a brief and precise form, ready for quick reference. In fact, each student adopts his/her own way of storing information. However, s/he will benefit greatly from a training in storing skills.

Storing skills are of two major categories:

- a) **Note - taking** - which involves listening to lectures and taking down notes - i.e. the main and subordinate points. This is a skill every student needs to master. In fact, since students have not mastered this skill adequately, we teachers are forced to resort to dictating notes after we have finished lecturing on a topic.
- b) **Note - making** is very similar to note-taking, except for the fact that note-making involves reading books and making notes, whereas note - taking involves listening to a lecture and taking down notes. Note - making is a more leisurely activity.

Both the skills above, may be divided into the following sub-skills.

- i. Comprehension of the text/lecture
- ii. Identification of the main points
- iii. Distinguishing main factors from subordinate ones
- iv. Deciding on the order of priority among the various points
- v. Identifying the organisation of points
- vi. Organising the points into a visual display.

mmar Note - making and note - taking are meant only for the student's private use, hence s/he is free to use any abbreviation, symbol, etc, although it would be a good idea to tell the students about certain reduction devices.

17.2.3 Retrieval Skills

While writing an examination, or participating in a conference or seminar, students need to **summarise** their ideas in a coherent form, so that their readers can understand them. Or sometimes they have to prepare a research abstract based on their reading.

The student will of course base their summary or abstract on the notes they had prepared earlier. The length of a summary may vary depending on the purpose for which it is intended. Generally the precis in the examination papers is required to be one-third of the original; but all summaries need not be so.

Summarising is not an exercise to be learnt for use in the class room alone; it has relevance for life. We can summarise articles, chapters and even books for future reference. If you are a secretary, your boss may ask you to present the gist of a document. A newspaper reporter's job is to summarise speeches and reports. Scientists and researchers read abstracts of important books/papers to keep themselves upto date and save time as well. A good summary requires several skills on the part of the learner: reading, comprehension, analysis, judgement, clarity, brevity, etc.

17.3 WHY DO STUDENTS NEED TRAINING IN STUDY SKILLS?

Students have two types of goals: the short-term goal is to pass the examination. The long-term goal, on the other hand, is to prepare for life; in other words, the second goal extends beyond examinations. In order to achieve both these goals they have to know how to study. Hence the importance of study skills.

It is a sad reflection on our education system that our learners do not know the study skills even in relation to their mother tongue. They do not know how to locate information or make notes even when they refer to books in the vernacular. Very often, the English teacher tells them what study skills are, as well as, how to develop them. By training them in study skills, the teacher indirectly helps them to study their other subjects also more efficiently.

Many teachers argue that there is no need to focus on study skills or give special training in this area. Conscious teaching of study skills is not necessary. They say : "Most of us learnt our study skills unconsciously. No one taught us how to make notes. We learnt it on our own; similarly our learners will also 'pick up' these skills. There is no need to 'waste' precious class time on such trivialities"

There are two basic flaws in this argument. Firstly, we know from experience that most students do not learn study skills on their own. Even when they join the undergraduate course, they do not know how to make notes or how to write a summary. They lift words at random and string them together and call it a precis. The concept of note-making is totally strange to them.

Secondly, even learners who can learn these skills on their own, might take a long time doing so. In the absence of guidance, they have to adopt the 'trial and error' method to develop these skills. If, on the other hand, they are given some training, they will learn these quickly; this, in turn, will accelerate their pace of learning the other subjects as well. Instead of regarding the time spent on developing study skills as a waste of time, it is necessary to regard it as a wise investment.

Study skills are needed at all levels. Even children at the primary level need them. For example, identifying the moral of a story is a study skill. Locating answers to questions is another study skill. As students go to higher classes the nature of study skills becomes more complex.

While discussing the importance of learner training, Ellis and Sinclair observe that study skills form a part of learners training as indicated in the diagram below:

mar Learning to learn, as we pointed out earlier, is more important, than learning per se.

Why should study skills form a part of the English curriculum?

Even those who strongly advocate the introduction of study skills as an integral part of school education, suggest that the teachers of various subjects should undertake the responsibility of developing study skills in their learners. Two major reasons are offered in support of this view:

- (a) Study skills help learners to study their subjects better.
- (b) The English teacher is not a master of all the subjects and hence may find it difficult to deal with subjects like Physics, Economics, etc.

While we admit the validity of both these reasons, we would still argue for the inclusion of study skills in the English curriculum for the following reasons. The attitude towards the nature of the English to be taught in schools and colleges has undergone a sea change in recent years. Teaching of English literature, though it has its value, is no more regarded as the primary aim of General English courses. English is now regarded as a **service language** or a tool, which enables learners to acquire mastery in other subjects. Hence there is an urgent need to relate the teaching of English to the teaching of other subjects.

Of course the English teacher cannot master all the subject; and s/he need not. It is enough if s/he is able to steer the middle course between literature and other subjects as far as the content goes. The English teacher is not expected to teach the subjects; but only the strategies to study them. This becomes feasible at the secondary school level, where most English teachers also handle subjects like Science, History, etc.

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