LEARNER TRAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF A PRIVATE CONVERSATION SCHOOL

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For

University of Birmingham

MA TESL/TEFL

Module 2

Assignment: PG/06/08
Word Count: 3792

Submitted: January 2008

PG/06/08:	**Discuss the role, or potential role, of learner training in your own teaching context. Illustrate your answer with reference to specific learning activities.**

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

1.2 Findings

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is “learner training?”

2.2 Language learner styles

2.3 Communication strategies vs. other learner strategies

2.4 Arguments for learner training

2.5 Arguments against learner training

2.6 Learner training and receptiveness of autonomy in the context of culture

3. The use of learner-training activities in the classroom

3.1 Adult learners in the author's classroom

3.1.1 Training activities used with adult learners, and their results

3.2 Young learners in the author's classroom

3.2.1 Training activities used with young learners, and their results

4. In the language classroom - Challenges

4.1 Attempt to empower adult learners

4.2 Difficulty with empowering young learners

5. In the language classroom- Successes

5.1 An adult learner, using his own strategies

5.2 Autonomy of a sixth-grade student

6. Conclusion

7. References

8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1- Adult Learner Survey

8.2 Appendix 2- One learner task, analyzed in terms of learner training

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Learner training is said to be beneficial for many reasons. It claims to give the learner tools for learning on their own. It shows them how to focus on goals they want to achieve. It helps them discover what works best for their individual needs. The aim of this research is to determine whether learner training can aid the students in my teaching situation, in a private conversation school with Japanese students.

1.2 Findings

This paper will show why the benefits of learner training have not, unfortunately, been successfully implemented in my classroom for all classes. I will discuss the failure of a survey conducted for finding ways to create a student-empowered learning environment, and the difficulty with promoting autonomy in an Asian classroom. There is a struggle between the idea of teaching in a way students are used to learning (a way they trust), with that of teaching in a way that current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) literature recommends. Defining the "good language learner" is also problematic, as there are good language learners capable of piecing together language in appropriate ways and achieving their goals, yet not fitting the criteria of a good language learner.

I will also discuss a few learner-training activities which have worked, and a few cases where students have started to use their own strategies to complete tasks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is "learner training?"

In her PhD thesis, Sinclair (2000:66) (cited in Sinclair, 2006) defined the aims of learner training as helping "...learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best and which are appropriate to their learning context, so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning."

Learner training is also known as "...learner development, learning to learn, learning learning, and promoting autonomy" (Sinclair, 2006).

Another view of what learner training involves can be seen in Tudor's four elements for preparing learners:

> *Self-awareness as a language learner.* This relates to students' motivation to learn the language, the amount of effort they are willing to put in, and their attitudes both to the target language (TL) and to the process of learning itself.
>
> *Awareness of learning goals.* Here, students need to develop an understanding of why they are studying the TL, of their communicative goals and of their current abilities in the language—together with the ability to analyse and discuss their goals.
>
> *Awareness of learning options.* This involves students acquiring an understanding of what language learning entails, of the various learning strategies, study options, and resources they can use, and of how different activities can advance learning—in both in-class and self-study contexts.
>
> *Language awareness.* Without having to become linguists, students need at least a basic idea of how language is structured and used—e.g. Certain grammatical or functional categories, the ability to recognize formulaic expressions, some notions of register and appropriacy.
>
> Helping students develop awareness in these areas, a process often referred to as learner training, is a crucial part of the teacher's role in a learner-centred approach.
>
> (1993:24-25)

Macaro states that learning an L2 (second language) cannot advance without using learner strategies:

> Learning of the L2 is brought about, in long-term memory, via strategic behaviour in working memory, through the development of declarative and procedural knowledge. Performance in the L2 is enhanced as a result of the way clusters of strategies interact with language processes, and these in

> turn contribute to skills through their acceleration and automatisation. It is the way that clusters of strategies interact with processes and thence skills that both knowledge of the language and performance in the language progress.
>
> (2006:332)

Therefore, we can see the importance of learning strategies. Learner training involves many issues, such as learner styles and preferences, autonomy, how a student can become a "good language learner," consciousness-raising, as well as cultural issues to consider when choosing ways to present learner training. There are also many different strategies to discuss with learners, such as: learner strategy training, communication strategies, reading strategies, test-taking strategies, listening strategies, note-taking strategies, vocabulary building strategies, grammar learning strategies, and even spelling strategies.

2.2 Language learner styles

The orientation of the language learner will affect how receptive they are to certain learning strategies and tasks. Dornyei (2005:130) and Putintseva (2006) both give summaries of Kolb's four basic learning style patterns: Diverging, converging, assimilating, and accommodating.

Diverging refers to those learners who prefer to look at concrete concepts from new angles, and use their imaginations. They do well with tasks such as brainstorming and group work. They like to receive feedback.

Converging learners have the ability to make decisions and solve specific problems. They like to try new things, and complete technical tasks on their own.

The **assimilating** learner group prefers theory to practical application. They are interested in organizing and putting things into a logical format. This group prefers ideas, lectures, and

reading instead of working with people.

Accommodating learners are those who like challenges, and taking chances. They prefer to work with others rather than on their own. They are not afraid to try new things to achieve their goals.

2.3 Communication strategies vs. other learner strategies

Can communication strategies also be considered learning strategies? Oxford claims they can.

> Researchers have used the term *communication strategies* in a very restricted sense, referring to strategies which compensate for missing knowledge only during conversational speech production... As Tarone uses it, the term *communication strategies* refers only to the speaking situation, and this usage might seem to imply that communication does not occur when the learner is engaged in the other three skills, listening, reading, and writing- certainly an erroneous implication. Another difficulty with the term *communication strategies* is that some researchers feel these strategies cannot simultaneously be learning strategies, on the assumption that the purpose is communication, not learning (Chamot, personal communication, July 4, 1987). The argument that communication strategies cannot also be learning strategies is inaccurate. It is often impossible to determine whether the learner intends to use a given strategy to communicate or to learn; often the motivations are mixed, and besides, learning often results even if communication is the main goal (Tarone, 1983; Rubin, 1987a).
>
> (1990:243)

In the context of a conversation school, communicative competence is the general goal of the students. According to Canale and Swain, communicative competence can be described in four parts, as:

1. *Grammatical competence* or *accuracy* is the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and word

formation.

2. *Sociolinguistic competence* is the extent to which utterances can be used or understood appropriately in various social contexts. It includes knowledge of speech acts such as persuading, apologizing, and describing.
3. *Discourse competence* is the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought, above the level of the single sentence.
4. *Strategic competence* is the ability to use strategies like gestures or "talking around" an unknown word in order to overcome limitations in language knowledge."

Canale and Swain (1980) (cited in Oxford, 1990:7)

However, Dornyei (2005:168) states that communication strategies are "...related to language *use* rather than language *learning*," and that "...the two processes are so different both in terms of their function and their psycholinguistic representation that they are best kept separate."

Dornyei suggests, based on the ideas of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), that the best categorization of language learning strategies is:

1. **Cognitive strategies**, involving the manipulation or transformation of the learning materials/input (e.g., repetition, summarizing, using images).
2. **Metacognitive strategies**, involving higher-order strategies aimed at analyzing, monitoring, evaluating, planning, and organizing one's own learning process.
3. **Social strategies**, involving interpersonal behaviors aimed at increasing the amount of L2 communication and practice the learner undertakes (e.g., initiating interaction with native speakers, cooperating with peers).
4. **Affective strategies**, involving taking control of the emotional (affective) conditions and experiences that shape one's subjective involvement in learning.

(2005:169)

Refer to sections 3.1.1 and 3.2.1 to see how these strategies have been used as types of

activities in the author's classroom. In terms of this paper, *learner training* is being researched, therefore all elements used to aid the training of learning the L2 will be discussed, including aids for language *use* (communication strategies).

2.4 Arguments for learner training

Macaro states that learning an L2 cannot commence without strategies for learning.

> ...strategies do not make learning more efficient; they are the raw material without which L2 learning cannot take place. More research is needed to illuminate how strategies combine to lead to both language competence and language performance.
>
> (2006:332)

Brown, in the introduction to his book on teaching strategies remarks, "It has long been recognized that the most successful learners of languages are those who understand their own abilities and capacities well and who autonomously engage in systematic efforts within and beyond the classroom to reach self-determined goals of acquisition" (2002:vii).

2.5 Arguments against learner training

Learner training has had much study, but there has only been a small amount of empirical evidence to support it and its strategy use.

Dornyei has said his views on learning strategies "are not very positive" (Dornyei, personal correspondence). He points out (2005:177) that Hadwin and Winne in 1996 only found 9% of 566 articles published about learning strategies and study skills to have included empirical testing.

Also, Macaro (2006:329) states that research is needed to prove, or at least hypothesize the reasons why each strategy works. For example, forming a sentence to remember a vocabulary term may help as a strategy, but *how* does it help the learner remember it?

Rees-Miller points out why teachers should be cautious to teach learner strategies:

> Among some of the factors complicating implementation of learner training are cultural differences, age, educational background of students, students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning, and varying cognitive styles. Until empirical data, particularly in the form of longitudinal studies, are gathered to answer questions about the usefulness of learner training, teachers should approach the implementation of learner training in the classroom with caution.
>
> (1993:679)

Macaro implies that learner strategies may sometimes be used to carry out the goals of the teacher, rather than that of the student (2006:328).

2.6 Learner training and the receptiveness of autonomy in the context of culture

Widdows and Voller (1991) (cited in Nunan, 1999:21) in their study of Japanese university students, found that they do not like teacher-controlled classrooms, nor passively sitting, reading or translating.

In contrast, Politzer and McGroarty (1985:112-114) state that based on criteria accepted as "good language learner" behavior, Hispanic students scored much higher than Asian students. However, according to their study, despite the low rankings for language learning behavior, Asians made higher gains than Hispanic learners in linguistic competence.

This could be due to the kind of English classroom environment they had been exposed to throughout their schooling. It cannot be assumed they are poor language learners. They may not reflect the traits of a good language learner, but this may be because the definition of "good language learner" was created from a Western standpoint (Harmer, 2005:42).

In comparing the visual and auditory learning styles of various cultures, Reid (1987) (cited in Brown, 2000:122) found that Japanese students were among the least auditory learners,

but also that gender, academic field, length of time in the US, and level of education were all factors for the preferences the subjects had. Brown also remarks (2000:122) that style preferences cannot be "easily predicted by cultural/linguistic backgrounds alone."

3. The use of learner-training activities in the classroom

The activities summarized in this section are examples of activities from the author's classroom, and are categorized following Dornyei's (2005:169) commentary on Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). However, activities including compensation (communication) strategies have also been added.

Also, see Appendix 8.2 for one activity created for adults, analyzed in terms of learner training.

3.1 Adult learners in the author's classroom

These learners are false-beginners, meaning they have all studied English during their junior and senior high school years, and are now returning to study English after a long hiatus. One student is studying English because he wants to do business overseas, and the rest are studying because they like to travel to English-speaking countries for vacation occasionally. There is one group of three students together, and the remaining three students take individual lessons.

3.1.1 Training activities used with adult learners, and their results

i. Activities using cognitive strategies:

Using the "word of the day" in their own sentences solidifies the meaning. They are able to do this, but sometimes they get discouraged and say it is too difficult.

ii. Activities using metacognitive strategies:

(See section 4.1)

iii. Activities using social strategies:

The teacher reads a passage in different ways, and the students must take turns interrupting to make the message more clear. e.g., The teacher reads very quickly, and the student must stop the teacher, and ask him to read more slowly.

This worked well, but the learners were hesitant to interrupt the speaker, even though they were asked to do so. They could do it, but the actual use of this skill has not been witnessed outside of the prepared situation.

iv. Activities using affective strategies:

The learners discuss their feelings of anxiety over communication when traveling to English speaking countries. Many of them have said they are excited to try to speak with people, but are nervous about not being able to function in conversation after the first few minutes. However, taking pauses while speaking, and other communicative strategies were discussed, and they are becoming more comfortable.

v. Activities using compensation (communication) strategies:

They often do not know the meaning of the "Word of the Day," (a random, selected word, such as "closely") but they are not afraid to make guesses as to what it could mean, based on how they hear the teacher use it in a sentence.

3.2 Young learners in the author's classroom

The young learners range from 5 years old up through high school, the majority being elementary school students from third to sixth grade. There is a range of 1 to 5 students per class, with the majority being in groups of two or three students. They have all studied at our conversation school for more than one year, and most have studied English for about three years.

3.2.1 Training activities used with young learners, and their results

i. Activities using cognitive strategies:

In the game “Slap” or “Karuta,” children first associate words with picture cards after listening and repeating the word while simultaneously looking at the picture card several times. A set of picture cards are scattered on the table, the teacher calls out a word, and the students must be the first to slap that picture card to win the round and take the card.

This activity has been performed a countless number of times in the classroom, always with the same enthusiasm. From experience, I can claim a high amount of connection between vocabulary learning and performance of this activity.

ii. Activities using metacognitive strategies:

With junior high school students, we discuss how they plan to use English in their futures. Also we talk about ways to find and use English outside of the classroom. They are receptive to this, but I'm not sure how deeply they think about these ideas after they leave the classroom.

iii. Activities using social strategies:

In this activity, junior high school students create a story, using vocabulary they have previously learned, and each other. First, they are separated into pairs. Each pair gets a set of letter cards with many duplications of letters, and they must make as many words using their sets as possible. After they have made their words, they work together in their pairs to create a story, using all of the words they have made.

This had great results, as the mood of the classroom was much brighter than usual, and they were using their imaginations a great deal.

iv. Activities using affective strategies:

There is a lack of teaching or using affective strategies with children. Any comforting is related to behavioral difficulties, usually concerns the student's emotional state outside the classroom, and is unrelated to the study of English. More research in children's classes needs to be done before any conclusion as to their applicability can to be drawn.

v. Activities using compensation (communication) strategies:

In the Gesture, Say, Draw game, a student must either act out the vocabulary, give a hint about it (e.g., if the card is “tiger” the hints may be “It's yellow and black. It's big.”), or draw the vocabulary on the whiteboard, within a time limit.

The success of this activity depends on the mood of the class. The lead student changes with every turn, and the leader has a lot of control in this activity. If there is one student who is having behavioral difficulty during this activity, the activity must change. However, if all students are behaving well, it is possible to see student-

centered learning with compensatory strategies being used throughout the activity.

4. In the language classroom- Challenges

4.1 Attempt to empower adult learners

The adult students are given periodic counseling to see how they are enjoying their lessons, if they have any questions about the biyearly evaluations, and to carry out other administrative tasks dealing with our school's business. This past summer they filled out a survey (see Appendix 8.1), with questions from myself, but asked in Japanese by the manager and recorded during counseling. It regarded the difficulty level of the lessons, content preferences, requests, and activity preferences, so they could begin to think of how they want to shape their own learning. The questions asked were few, as the bulk of this time was necessary to take care of things on the administrative end.

The most notable results were in regard to the activities they prefer. The survey stated, “My favorite activity was ...” and five activities done in the previous few months were listed. I intentionally listed activities that used different skills in order to get an idea of how they learn. Some were writing (making a travel brochure), questioning directly to native speakers (an American survey they created, which I took to the US for native speakers to answer), hands-on (doing a craft, using English during its construction), imagination activities (such as imagining they are going to a deserted island and can only take 5 things with them), describing (which also uses imagination, trying to find real criminals (from my hometown newspaper) using descriptions from other students of the same criminal), and a space for “other activities” in case they preferred one not listed.

None of these were marked on any of the answer sheets. Instead, the manager explained

they would all like to do more word-cloud expansion activities. Word clouds are part of our school's core curriculum promised to the students, and are used at least once in every adult lesson. They serve their purpose, being a method to use word association as means for communication, but the answers could have aided them to shape their own classes (as the classes are very small, ranging from 1 to 3 learners).

4.2 Difficulty with empowering young learners

Our school policy is to give no homework. It is one of the reasons some parents enroll their children in our school. With so many other activities that the students must carry out during the week, adding English homework on top of this would add extra stress.

I agree that the children have very busy schedules. However, since they meet the teacher only once a week, something should be done outside of class as well. There are options. I would be more than willing to help them find a pen-pal with a native speaker, or with another student of their same level within our school, and monitor that program. However, due to privacy concerns, this is an impossibility. Therefore, there is only my verbal encouragement and good wishes for them to find language learning opportunities outside of class.

With elementary school students and younger, I am curious as to what their goals are in English class. It seems many of them only want to win, compete, and be the fastest. Beyond that, there may be little interest in learning the L2. It is quite possible that many are there only because their parents would like them to learn English or have communication with a native speaker, not because the students want to learn English themselves.

This opinion does not include all of my young students, but a majority.

5. In the language classroom- Successes

5.1 An adult learner, using his own strategies

One learner has taken it upon himself to improve English communication in the classroom and out. He has a strong goal (to be able to do business and haggle outside of Japan), he knows his limitations (he knows some parts of grammar are beyond his reach at the moment, so he asks for other options to say the same thing), and he has strategies to help him learn.

This student can use compensation strategies. He can get "...the meaning across by describing the concept (circumlocution) or using a word that means the same thing (synonym); for example, "what you use to wash dishes with" as a description for *dishrag*" (Oxford, 1990:51).

He enjoys a time in his lesson we call "raw talk," where we mimic a situation in America. We act naturally, and some of the language used by the teacher is (knowingly) beyond his comprehension. He must use his own devices to make the situation go well, as there is no English aid during the 15 minutes of "raw talk." Following, we have a discussion about difficulties and suggestions for better communication.

5.2 Autonomy of a sixth-grade student

I teach one student privately, outside of school. This student is in the sixth grade, and last year was a beginner.

I would classify her as a good learner. She has motivation to read and study outside of her

English lessons. She knows her learning preferences, as can be seen by her choices of tasks. She has refused to take on a pen-pal when offered, but has chosen to take on social studies supplemental material. This material included memorization of translated terms (a form of learning she seems comfortable with), reading of passages beyond her level, and study of items she is currently studying in her regular social studies course. She also has volunteered to practice for a standardized English proficiency test for young learners.

She always has an opinion for what she wants to study next, and in the manner she wants to do it, from the range of possibilities offered to her. Also, she makes intelligent guesses as to what is going to happen next in her guided readers based on what has come previously, and what she sees in the picture on the page.

6 Conclusion

Although the strategies taught were useful with each class, the results demonstrate that learner training within the context of my teaching situation has many limitations. In general, the strategies were rarely used beyond the immediate class situation, and even then were not used unless brought to the foreground. There were a few exceptions, as shown above, in sections 5.1 and 5.2.

Learner training, when there was opportunity to use it in the classroom, wasn't proven to have the impact hoped for, yet this does not rule out its usefulness, and it may be more applicable to my future teaching positions.

Also, learner training assumes that following certain strategies can help to learn a language. If it is agreed that only following these strategies can lead to success, and “good language

learners" are only those who follow these strategies, we are discrediting the way people learn in certain cultures. To say that memorization or learning grammar by rote is not useful is to take away the foundation that some learners have had throughout their schooling. Is that a necessary step for learning English?

In view of this, the definition of a "good language learner" needs to be expanded, or changed to account for the students of Japan.

In the case of a business, it is important to give customers what they want. At first, I thought that would be to give them choices in their education, but what they seem to crave is for the teacher to teach, as they feel this is what they pay for. If they are asked to be a stakeholder in their education, they feel the teacher isn't doing his part.

This may be what Dornyei refers to as the "storming" stage (2001:107), where the teacher and the students start to move from teacher-based lessons to a classroom of autonomous language learners. He mentions this within the context of group dynamics within this change, but in the case of my classroom, the classes are very small and the transition is from teacher as lecturer with students as vessels waiting to be filled, to student as self-generator with teacher as a mere moderator of their education.

Therefore, I believe when I take on future teaching positions, I will keep learner training activities and the philosophy behind them in my conscious thought, and use them when the curriculum, schedule, and opportunity arises. I think it is a good way to begin a new class, helping them discover what kind of learner they are. Also, as time goes on and they take on new challenges in their L2, it will help them to show any useful ways for coping with new

tasks.

Books, such as Rebbecca Oxford's **Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know**, and H. Douglas Brown's **Strategies for Success** lend themselves well to making a separate course for university or older learners based on learning how to learn.

The same applies to these books, however, as Willis comments about Ellis and Sinclair's 1989 **Learning to Learn English** from Cambridge University Press: "Perhaps there are problems taking the learner training programme in their book and applying it as it stands. But the approach itself is a valuable one and the book is a goldmine of ideas for creative teachers." Willis (2001:159)

Students with a low English ability may not be able to fully access the usefulness of these books. Ideally, for beginning learners and false-beginners, a Japanese book pointing out the variety of learner types and learning strategies may be more beneficial. I would see this as a first step, with a short questionnaire asking about their learning preferences and goals in their native language before starting English instruction. Later as they become more advanced, they may benefit from a course in learning strategies in English. In the meantime, keeping as many learning tools in the forefront as possible, so as to bring them to the awareness of the learners will be one of my goals in the classroom.

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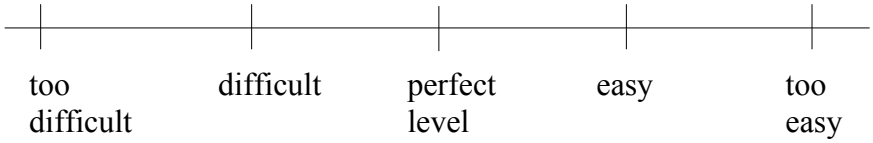
8. Appendices

8.1 Adult Survey

1. This past year's English lessons have been:



2. I want the teacher to _____.

3. Speaking and conversation are the most important at our school. I want to do this, plus:

   a.) reading practice?

   b.) listening practice?

   c.) writing practice?

4. I want to _____.

5. My favorite activity was:

   (making the travel brochure, the American survey, describing criminals, craft for Thanksgiving, imagination activities, other activity)

(Source: Original)

8.2 One learner task, analyzed in terms of learner training

The following is an example of a learner training task carried out on one adult class, with the strategies used in parentheses. The analysis uses the framework of Oxford (1990:18-21).

First, a large set of pictures of people were given to one group of students, then an identical set to another group (social, cooperating with peers). As there are three students in this class, the weakest learner was paired with the teacher (social, cooperating with a proficient user of the language). One group must ask the other group questions to find the chosen picture. (Deductive reasoning is used here, which is a cognitive skill, but in this case it is unrelated to *language learning* strategy.)

Before the task, they practiced some of the language they will be using during the task, such as descriptive words and question-forming (cognitive, practice). However, they were to come up with their own techniques for how to narrow the answer down (social, cooperating with peers).

By the end of the activity, they had the concept that if they asked about necklaces or coats, it wouldn't narrow the answers very much, whereas if they asked about long hair or short hair, or gender, it would narrow their answers down considerably.

In the following class, they were given the same type of task, but they worked individually instead of in groups, with objects the teacher had wrapped in a bag, such as a paper clip, a button, etc. They were again given a structure to follow, using “Is it (insert adjective)?” or “Does it (insert verb)?” or “Is it a (insert noun)?” (cognitive, recognizing and using formulas and patterns). They were to use the same strategies used in the previous class, but since they

did not have the vocabulary to answer, they were allowed to ask, “How do you say (the unknown vocabulary word in the L1) in English?” (compensation, getting help in speaking/ social, asking for clarification).

It was found that this task was much more difficult than the previous, and the students were frustrated. Their concentration was more on the object than the question-forming, and the grammar of their questions suffered.

As a task, it was not a failure; English was used for genuine communication, and being false-beginners, they could use vocabulary to describe the objects (such as “circle” and “make noise”) that we hadn't studied in class, but they had remembered from previous English instruction (metacognitive, linking with already known material). Also, though they asked in Japanese, they wanted to know comparative language in English for sizes, e.g., “bigger than/smaller than” (compensation, getting help/ social, asking for clarification).

Although it was pointed out that they had made great headway in using English that day and I tried to encourage them, they left without smiles and in Japanese they said to each other that the class was very difficult.

They took notes (cognitive, taking notes), and I am hopeful that they will use the language used in future classes when they come to objects they don't recognize, or objects they know but for which they don't know the English equivalent.

(Source: Original)