

***THE IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNER STRATEGIES FOR SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING***

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**Abstract**

Success in learning a second or a foreign language, unlike success in first language acquisition, is very variable. *Learner strategies*, as conscious actions in learning and using a second or a foreign language, are one of the variable factors that have profound effects on how individual learners approach language learning and how successful they are. The more we learn about learner strategies, the more we gain a sense of the complex system of language learning and teaching. This paper critically reviews previous research on learner strategies and the implications of learner strategies for language teaching will be addressed. It aims to give some ideas to language teachers or administrators of how to: (1) explicitly involve learner strategies in a language curriculum, (2) provide language learners with a menu of the strategies that they can choose and adapt to different language learning tasks, and (3) create habits of good language learners.

**Keywords:** *learner strategies, the good language learner, strategies training, strategies-based instruction, autonomous learners*

## **Introduction**

*Second Language Acquisition* (SLA) research studies show how learners are similar, and how they are different in terms of acquiring a second language. Despite the common systems of memory and language and cognitive processing in the brain (Cook 2001), language learners vary in terms of factors such as: aptitudes, demographic variables, affective variables, learning styles, and learning strategies when they start learning the second language. These variable factors have profound effects on how the learners approach language learning tasks and how successful they are. Cook (2001) pointed out that gaining more information about how language learners actually learn can help the teacher to make any teaching method more effective and help them put their hunches on a firmer basis. Ehrman *et al.* (2003) also suggested that the more we learn about individual differences (i.e. how individuals learn a language); the more we gain a sense of how many different ways we can understand the complex system of language learning and teaching. This study will explore one of the variable factors that differentiate one learner from another in the way he/she approaches and achieves second language learning. This factor is '*Learner Strategies*'. The implication of learner strategies for language teaching will also be addressed.

### **1. Learner strategies**

#### **1.1 The theoretical background**

According to Chamot and O'Malley (1994), *language learning strategies* can be described within the *cognitive model of learning*. The cognitive model of learning indicates that learning is an active, dynamic process in which learners select

information from their environment, organize the information, relate it to what they already know, retain what they consider to be important, use the information in appropriate contexts, and reflect on the success of their learning efforts (ibid.).

During this process of learning, cognitive theories of learning differentiate between three functions in memory. *Long-term memory* is used to store information derived from personal experience and education, *short-term memory* is used to remember information that is relatively unimportant (i.e. to retain more than a few moments or is easily forgotten); and *working memory* is memory in which information is manipulated.

Strategies have a prominent role in the cognitive view of learning because they represent the dynamic mechanisms underlying thinking and learning processes. Macaro (2003) indicated that learner strategies are located in working memory as resources to aid the system of information processing. He mentioned that “In order to manage these resources, the central executive [*working memory*] has to exert control over their deployment” (p.327). Strategies for learning and using language then require conscious mental activity. Even automatized strategies, or strategies that the learners use quickly with minimal attention and effort, can be brought back to attention and evaluated by the learners.

Cognitive theories indicate that most information is stored in long-term memory as either *declarative knowledge* (what we can declare) or *procedural knowledge* (what we know how to do). Declarative knowledge is learned best by elaboration, in which new information is linked to existing information or schemata, and by building on previous knowledge. “Cognitive theory indicates that the greater linkages and pathways to existing memory frameworks will lead to enhanced learning

and recall...” (Chamot and O’Malley 1994, p.17). On the other hand, the preferred method of learning procedural knowledge is by practicing complete and meaningful components of complex cognitive procedures. When this complex cognitive process becomes proceduralized, learners can use the knowledge gained rapidly with a minimum of errors and without awareness of the many steps and decisions made while it is being executed.

Chamot and O’Malley suggested that the description of learning strategies can hinge on the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge. Learners can have declarative knowledge about learning strategies through formal instruction. This will encourage the learners to be aware of their existing strategies and the choices of strategies they can choose to use with new materials. Through verbalizing the strategies’ application and repeated applications of the strategies with various learning materials, the learners can gradually proceduralize the learning strategies.

I agree to a certain extent that the cognitive theory can be used to describe learner strategies that occur in the human brain (e.g. Oxford’s (1990) memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies). However, some strategies do not occur in the brain. Instead, they are performed as behaviors to aid learning or using of a second language. These strategies, include compensation strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies (ibid.), which may be better described from other perspectives such as the theory of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980 cited McDonough 1999), the humanistic perspective (Stevick 1976 cited Williams and Burden 1997), and social interactionism (Vygostky 1960, 1962, 1978 cited Williams and Burden 1997).

Following Canale and Swain's theory of communicative competence, *strategic competence* is what is needed to be taught and tested, together with grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic competence. Strategic competence refers to the use of communication strategies to compensate for difficulties in communication. The theory highlights the importance of these strategies which are called compensation strategies in learning and using a second language.

The humanistic approaches consider affective aspects of learning and language as important, and place the learner's thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all learner development. The language teaching methodologies that arise from the humanistic perspective value the importance of the learning environment and the significance of affective strategies which minimize student's anxiety and enhance personal security in learning and using a second language.

Social interactionists argue that an understanding of the workings of the human mind is not in itself adequate to explain what goes on when we learn something. This is because learning occurs first through interaction with other people, then the individual (Williams and Burden 1997). Vygotsky (1960, 1962, 1978 cited Williams and Burden 1997) emphasized the importance of language in interaction with people, and the role of teacher as mediator who helps learners move to the next level of the developmental process. Social interactionism emphasizes the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners, tasks, learning environment, and the importance of the role of social strategies which involve interacting with other people in learning and using a second language.

## 1.2 The definitions

The term *learning strategies* refers to techniques, behaviours, actions, thought process, problem solving, or study skills taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to a new situation (Oxford and Crookall 1989; Oxford 1990), and enable more independent, autonomous, lifelong learning (Allwright 1990 cited Ehrman *et al.* 2003). There are many other definitions of learning strategies. All of them imply learner's *conscious movement* toward a *language goal* (Bialystok 1990; Oxford 1990, 1996; cited Ehrman *et al.* 2003). Macaro (2003) added that "strategies must contain not only an action but also a goal and a learning situation" (p.327).

Cohen (1997) used the term *learner strategies*, as opposed to the narrower concept of learning strategies. According to McDonough (1999), the term 'learner strategies' has been used in relation to learning and learning to learn a second language, for using the language, for communicating in the language and for compensating for lack of knowledge or break down of communication, for exercise of language in macro-skill areas such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and for coping with difficult elements of language instruction such as classroom presentation and instruction, and taking tests. In summary, learner strategies are not only tools to assist language learning, but they are also tools to serve many other purposes both in learning and using a second language. Because of the variety of learner strategies' definitions and functions, many authors have classified learner strategies using different systems.

### 1.3 The classifications

Cohen (2003) provided four main strategy classification schemes. The first classification is *by goal* either to learn a language or to use a language. The second classification is *by language skill*, which includes the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing, and also skill-related strategies that cut across all four skill areas, such as vocabulary learning. The third classification is *by function* as explained in detail by Oxford (1990) as four functional groups of language learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social. The classifications and examples of learner strategies used are shown in Table 1.

These categories of language strategy have some interrelations. Dornyei (2005) argued for the lack of a clear-cut classification of individual strategies; for example memory strategies and cognitive strategies clearly overlap. Learners may use a whole set of strategies to perform a task, or they may use a mixture of strategies which is difficult to fit into any of the existing categories.

However, the definitions and classifications of learner strategies have helped in developing tools to assess learner strategies such as the SILL or Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990). Dornyei (2005) criticised this for its prescriptive and quantitative design which failed to explore the actual natures of learner strategies.

By Skill	By Goal	By Function	Example
Listening	Language learning strategies: conscious processes learners select in order to learn language	Memory strategy	Using keywords
Reading		Cognitive strategy	Taking notes, summarizing
Writing	Language use strategies: Conscious processes learners select in order to use language	Metacognitive strategy	Organizing, self- monitoring, self- evaluation
Speaking		Social strategy	Asking for correction
		Compensation strategy	Coining words
		Affective strategy	Relaxing

Table 1 Classification and examples of learner strategies

## 2. The studies of learner strategies

### 2.1 The study of the Good Language Learner

The study of the good language learner by Rubin (1975) has had a strong influence on the study of learner strategies. Rubin listed seven characteristics that formed the profile of 'good' language learners: those who (1) are willing and accurate guessers, (2) have a strong drive to communicate, (3) are not inhibited, (4) are willing to practice, (5) spend time monitoring their own speech and that of others, (6) are attentive to form and (7) are attentive to meaning. Subsequent research, then has tried to find out whether these characteristics can be developed for less successful learners.

However, I think not all learners have to have the characteristics of Rubin's good language learner in order to achieve language learning. Cohen (1997) mentioned that the prescriptive view of good language learners, such as that listed by Rubin, does not take learner differences into account. There are actually many kinds of good language learners. For example, the learners can be described as good language learners if they know how and when to apply strategies appropriate to their own

language learning needs. More recent research has tried to describe the strategies used by different individual learners.

## **2.2 The descriptive study of learner strategies**

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing amount of research into learner strategies in language learning and language use. The descriptive research is concerned with investigating and describing how individuals approach the task of learning and using a language. The results from the descriptive research studies provide us with identifications, descriptions, classifications of learner strategies, and a comparison of successful and less successful language learners.

O'Malley *et al.* (1985 cited Oxford 1989) investigated learning strategies used by 70 high school students who were classified as beginning and intermediate students. The findings showed that intermediate students tended to use more metacognitive strategies than those with beginning level proficiency; whereas, beginning level students used cognitive strategies more than intermediate level students. Generally, both beginning and intermediate level students used more cognitive, than metacognitive strategies.

The findings of this study also suggested that the beginning level students tended to use more strategies than the intermediate students. Such findings were inconsistent with several studies which reported that the more the language learners used strategies, the more proficient they became. A response to these conflicting findings is that frequency is not as important as effectiveness of use of learner strategies.

Recent research suggested that there is no single strategy pattern used by effective language learners (e.g. Oxford 1990; Chamot and O'Malley 1994; Victori and Lockhart 1995; Cohen 1996). In fact, successful language learners use an array of strategies, matching those strategies to their own learning style and personality and to the demands of the task in the context of cultural influences. Optimal learners find ways to tailor their strategy use to their individual needs and requirements; they develop combinations of strategies that work for them (Oxford 1990).

This is similar to Ehrman *et al.*'s (2003) conclusion that less able learners often use strategies in a random, unconnected, and uncontrolled manner, while more effective learners use a well orchestrated set of strategies (i.e. a set of interlocking, related, and mutually supportive strategies).

However, Grenfell and Macaro (2007) suggest that this complex strategic behaviour is still ambiguous, and future research will need to investigate how learners combine strategies and why certain learners are able to do this more effectively than others.

### **2.3 The intervention study of strategies training**

Intervention studies of strategies training are experimental studies which provide the strategies training to one group of learners (experimental group) but not the other one (control group), and to find out whether the two groups show different levels of learning achievement, and whether the strategies can be taught. Cohen (1997) indicated that, until recently there were few empirical studies that could be drawn on to demonstrate that strategies training had irrefutable benefits. According to

that, there are still questions that need to be answered: Can strategies be taught, and can they actually help develop learners' abilities to learn and use a second language?

### **3. Can strategies be taught?**

According to the theories and the previous intervention research, the answer is *yes*. As mentioned earlier, strategies, like the complex skills of language learning, can be learned through formal instruction and repeated practicing. According to social interactionist theory, learner's knowledge of strategies can be developed through the process of *scaffolding* (Chamot and O'Malley 1994). Through scaffolding, the teacher avoids giving direct instruction but facilitates learners to choose the strategies in learning and using a second language.

In addition, the previous research results (Oxford 1990; Victori and Lockhart 1995; Cohen and Weaver 1998) concerning possible benefits of strategies training have been generally positive in terms of language learning performances and attitudes improvement among language learners. Oxford (1990) suggested that even in ordinary language classrooms, it is possible for teachers to help their students learn strategies that will make learning more effective and often more fun. In response to the criticisms about the effectiveness of the strategies training, Chamot and Rubin (1994 cited Cohen 1994) pointed out that it is not a particular strategy that leads to improved performance, but rather the effective management of a repertoire of strategies.

Therefore, the strategies training should provide the learners with a repertoire of strategies which they can choose the strategies that they feel comfortable to use with a specific task. The training program should also train the learners how to select strategies that match their needs and goals, and the nature of the task. As Bialystok

(1990 cited Cook 2001) suggested|, “strategy-training helps the student to be aware of strategies in general rather than teaches specific strategies. The training assumes that *conscious attention* to learning strategies is beneficial. This is not the same as claiming that the strategies themselves are beneficial. Strategy-training in a sense assumes that strategies are teachable” (p.131). The benefits of the strategies training will be explained in more detail in the following section.

#### **4. How do studies in learner strategies improve language teaching and learning?**

##### **4.1 Strategies training and language teaching**

Traditionally, language curricula have tended to concentrate on teaching knowledge and skills, and have neglected to teach learners how to learn. Learner training in second or foreign language teaching is a new way of teaching learners explicitly the techniques of learning, and an awareness of how and when to use strategies to enable them to become self-directed (Williams and Burden 1997). In summary, learner training integrated in second or foreign language teaching subsumes (1) explicit or implicit strategies training, and (2) language teaching.

The teaching and learning goals of learner training in language teaching are both *external* and *internal* goals (Cook 2001); the students are expected to be able to use language inside and outside the classroom, and they will develop their quality as autonomous language learners. To achieve these goals, new roles of language teachers and learners have been suggested.

#### **4.2 The new roles of language teachers, learners, and tasks in strategies training**

Williams and Burden (1997, p.164), suggested that “individuals will choose to use certain strategies if they have a clear purpose for using them and they feel that accomplishing a particular task has value to them personally.” This means that the role of teachers in learner training, rather than teaching how to use particular strategies, is to help individuals to discover and develop those strategies that are most significant and personally relevant to them.

Williams and Burden also noted a reorientation of teachers’ roles. First, teachers need to become effective mediators. Second, they need to be able to take on such roles as advisors, facilitators, consultants, co-communicators, partners and joint problem-solvers. Third, teachers should have positive attitudes towards the value of learning strategies.

The learners will become more active and self-directed. Their needs, and previous learning experience and ability to learn and to use language are important ingredients for planning the teaching program. The learners will have a greater responsibility for their own learning (i.e. to set goals for their learning, to select and evaluate the strategies use). “Self-directed students gradually gain greater confidence, involvement, and proficiency” (Oxford 1990, p.10).

Language learning tasks have an important role in strategies training as they can be used to encourage the learners to ask themselves the fundamental questions such as; What do I want to achieve? Which strategies shall I use to achieve the goals? Do I know what I am doing and why I am doing it in this way? Williams and Burden (1997) referred to this questioning as *metacognitive reflection*, or the reflection on learning, themselves as learners, as well as on the feeling and emotions involved.

They also suggested that teachers should start with the simple tasks, moving towards more complex tasks which require learners to select their own strategies and evaluate their own level of success.

### **4.3 The frameworks of strategies training**

The understanding of how and when the students use specific strategies has helped inform strategies training programs. A variety of instructional models for foreign language learning strategies training have already been developed and implemented in a variety of educational settings (i.e. awareness training, strategy workshop, peer tutoring, and strategies-based instruction). All types of strategies training involve an expansion of learners' repertoire of learning strategies, and the aims to: (1) heighten learner awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in language learning and the range of strategies from which they can choose to help them learn the target language most efficiently (Metacognitive knowledge); and (2) develop responsibility of their own learning; in short, to develop learner autonomy (Cohen 2003).

Strategies-based instruction (SBI) seems to have an advantage over the others, since it is the model that integrates strategies training into foreign language classrooms. SBI was introduced by Andrew Cohen (Cohen 1996, 1998, 2003). It is a learner-centered approach to teaching that extends strategies training to include both explicit and implicit integration of language learning and language use strategies into a foreign language classroom. In a typical SBI classroom, teachers do the following:

- Describe, model, and give examples of potential useful strategies

- Elicit additional examples from students, based on students' own learning experiences
- Lead small-group and whole-class discussions about strategies
- Encourage students to experiment with a broad range of strategies
- Integrate strategies into everyday class materials, explicitly and implicitly embedding them into the language tasks to provide for contextualized strategy practice (Cohen 2003)

Chamot and O'Malley (1994) added three more factors which have been found to influence the effectiveness of learner training: (1) the length of training, (2) the degree of integration of the training into the regular curriculum and ongoing classroom activities, and (3) the development of expertise among teachers in how to conduct learning strategies instruction.

In my opinion, apart from the ready-made frameworks of strategies training, *opportunity* and *motivation* also have important roles in encouraging the learners to engage in language learning and to use learner strategies. They are the factors that the teachers can give to the student by having the learning situation emulate, as much as possible, a second language immersion situation complete with simulations of real life events and activities that second language learners would naturally encounter (Crookall and Oxford 1990 cited Oxford and Ehrman 1995). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) suggested that the more a foreign language classroom can become a 'language experience' situation, the more likely the student will find the need and the will to use language learning strategies at a high level and the more rapidly they will advance toward proficiency. In other words, classroom context plays an important role in

learner strategy use. Takeuchi, Griffiths, and Coyle (2007) also suggested that the teacher should set the language classroom as a strategic learning community where learners will be encouraged to make a maximum use of different learning strategies.

Language teachers could adapt and apply these strategy training frameworks to suit students at different ages and different levels of language proficiency. Teachers should also assess students' beliefs about language learning, and the learning strategies they already use, extend classroom strategies training into the course content, assist students in becoming more responsible for their efforts in learning and using the target language, and allow them to experience the advantages of systematically applying strategies to the learning and use of the language, and to individualize the language learning experience. Victori and Lockhart (1995) suggested that learners' feeling of increased expertise at language learning often increase learners' motivation and self-esteem, and also enhance the quality of learning.

## **Conclusion**

Learner strategies are tools that learners choose to use to assist their language learning and language use. They are one of the variable factors that differentiate successful from less successful language learners. The studies of learner strategies can be done from different perspectives (i.e. cognitive theories, humanistic approaches, and social interactionism), all of which try to indicate, classify, and analyze how learners approach language learning and language use. The results from the studies help inform language teachers how to train the less successful learners to become more successful in language learning. As a result of that, there have been a variety of strategies training programs; i.e. awareness training, strategy workshop, peer tutoring,

and strategies-based instruction. All types of strategies training involve an expansion of the learners' repertoire of language learning strategies. In addition to the aim to teach language content, the strategies training programs also have the aim to: (1) heighten learner awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in language learning and the range of strategies which they can choose to help them learn the target language most efficiently (Metacognitive knowledge), and (2) to develop responsibility for their own learning; in short, to develop learner autonomy. I also added that, for the strategies training to be effectively implemented, the students should have positive attitudes toward the target language and language learning. They should be encouraged to be aware of the learning strategies they already use and become more responsible for their efforts in learning and using the target language.

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