LEARNING STRATEGIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This article reviews the relevant literature of language learning strategies by examining the background, the issues along with the definition, the characteristics, the categories and the functional framework. The intertwined relationships among person, task, context and strategies are illustrated with the tetrahedral model proposed by Gu (2003). The article also discusses the significance of language learning strategies for second language learning and the effectiveness of strategy instruction before presenting the pedagogical implications for second language teachers. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of language learning strategy studies by summarizing the important aspects and to highlight the implications for integrating language learning strategy instruction into ESL classrooms so that the teachers can have a meaningful way to focus on their teaching efforts and the learners can become more efficient in their efforts to learn a second language as well.

Keywords: learning strategies, second language teaching, strategy instruction

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, a historic focus-shifting in ESL studies has been from how teachers teach to how students learn (Wenden, 1987). Researchers try to search for a deeper understanding of the nature of the second language learning process. There is an increasing awareness that a conception of language learning is an essential component of language teaching theory, and that efficient language teaching must work with rather than against the natural processes of language learning (Cohen, 1998).

Increased interest in language learning strategies has resulted in a movement towards learner-centered language learning. This movement can be said to begin with attempts to identify the characteristics of good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). There has since been a proliferation in the publications on learning strategies (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Graham, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

This article reviews the background of language learning strategies, summarizes key points from the language learning strategy literature and then suggests some implications for classroom practice.

DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY

A number of definitions of language learning strategies have been used in the field of second language research and the definition literally becomes a 'fluid concept' (Gu, 2003). Derry & Murphy (1986, p. 2) defined a learning strategy as "a collection of mental tactics employed by an individual in a particular learning situation to facilitate acquisition of knowledge or skill". Rubin (1987) stated that language learning strategies "are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly" (p. 22). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) later defined language learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). According to Oxford (1993, p.18), language learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing second language skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability." Finally, Cohen (1998) defined learning strategies as "the steps or actions consciously selected by learners to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both" (p. 5).

The above definitions show that the concept of learning strategies has been refined from the early focus on mental processes to the focus on actions and processes, from unconscious to intentional. Meanwhile, learning strategies should not be confused with learning styles, which refer more broadly to a learner's preferred way of approaching new information (Salvisberg, 2005, p. 2), "though there appears to be an obvious relationship between one's language learning style and his/her usual or preferred language learning strategies" (Lessard-Clouston, 1997, p. 2) .

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY

Authors use diverse terms to refer to the concept of learning strategies. Some refer to strategies as 'skills', 'tactics', or 'techniques' while others call them 'learner strategies' 'learning strategies' or 'language learning strategies' (Gu, 2003). Despite all the variations, a common core is that learning strategies are cognitive skills or processes of the mind that are used to enhance learning or understanding. Lessard-Clouston (1997) summarized the basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of

language learning strategies. First, language learning strategies are consciously generated by learners; they are actions or steps taken by language learners to facilitate learning tasks. Second, language learning strategies enhance language learning and help develop the learner's skills in listening, speaking, reading, or writing the second language. Third, the main goal of language learning strategies is to affect the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes or integrates new knowledge (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.). Fourth, language learning strategies may be visible behaviors, steps and techniques or unobservable thoughts and mental processes. Finally, the other generally accepted features of language learning strategies include allowing learners to become more self-directed, expanding the role of language teachers, being problem-oriented, flexible and teachable (Oxford, 1990, p. 9).

CATEGORIES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY

The classification scheme proposed by Rubin (1981) is one of the earliest and subsumes learning strategies under two broad primary categories: strategies that may contribute directly to learning and those that may contribute indirectly to learning. The first primary category of direct strategies, with its substrategies, has a cognitive orientation and suggests considerable scope for self-awareness in the process of learning. The direct strategies, according to Rubin (1981), emphasize on-the-spot learning. The second primary category, together with its other substrategies, contains "indirect strategies", and emphasizes out-of-class activities. Rubin (1987, pp. 22-27) refined her strategy classification scheme by proposing three different types of strategies, e.g., learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies, according to their contribution to the process of language learning.

O'Malley and his colleagues conducted a major empirical research program in the 1980s with beginning and intermediate ESL learners. From the findings of their series of studies (e.g., Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley et al., 1985), these writers categorized learning strategies into three broad categories: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social-affective strategies. Synthesizing the earlier classifications and building upon her own research, Oxford (1990) presented an often quoted taxonomy, known as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Oxford first drew a general distinction between direct strategies and indirect strategies, as Rubin (1981, 1987) did. Direct strategies "directly involve the target language in the sense that they require mental processing of the language" (Oxford, 1990, p. 37). There are three main groups of direct strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies and

compensation strategies. Each group of strategies processes the language differently and for different purposes.

Indirect strategies, on the other hand, "provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means" (Oxford, 1990, p. 151). The three groups of indirect strategies are metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

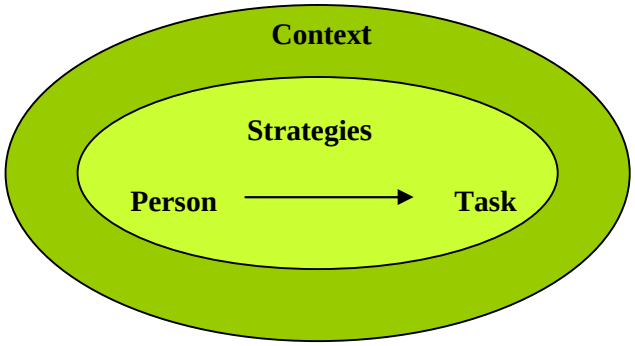
Each of these six strategy groups is further broken down into two levels with the first level including nineteen strategy sets and the second level including a total of sixty-two specific strategies. It is a very comprehensive taxonomy of language learning strategies and has been used in a considerable number of studies in various countries. Despite some criticism that the categorization of strategy groups in Oxford' strategy taxonomy sometimes is not sharp and clear, it is important to note that language learning strategies, whether direct or indirect, affective, cognitive or social, are interconnected and support each other.

FUNCTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY

Learning strategies are actions or steps the learner takes when confronted with a learning task and the strategies the learner chooses to use, the ways they are deployed, monitored and evaluated, depend both on what the learner brings with him/her to the learning situation and on the situation per se where learning occurs (Gu, 2003). Theorists and researchers have presented frameworks in slightly different ways to illustrate how learning strategies function with other related factors. Flavell (1979) came up with the well-quoted tripartite model of metacognitive knowledge, i.e., person, task, and strategy. Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, and Campione (1983) included learning activities, characteristics of the learner, criterial tasks, and nature of the materials as the four aspects of their framework for exploring problems of learning. Ellis (1994) summed up the general relationships between pre-existing factors, strategy use and learning results. First, the choice and use of learning strategies are determined by individual learner differences and situational and social factors. Second, the quantity and type of strategies chosen and used, and the rate and level of learning achievement mutually affect each other.

Williams & Burden's (1997) social constructivist model outlined four aspects of the teaching-learning process, i.e., teachers, learners, tasks, contexts. Gu (2003) proposed a tetrahedral model synthesizing intertwined relationships of person, task, context and strategies, and arguing that the conceptualization of learning strategies will not be complete without examining the learner's individual differences, learning activities,

situational variables and the corresponding dimensions along which the strategies vary.



Person-task-context-strategies: An explanatory model

(Gu, 2003, p. 12)

Person and Learning Strategies

When a learner approaches a relatively challenging learning task, s/he adopts certain strategies to solve the problem. This problem-solving process is constrained by the learner's learning beliefs, attitude, affective state, motivation, learning experience and prior knowledge. Besides, age, gender, language aptitude, intelligence, self-concept/image, personality, cognitive and learning style also potentially affect the learner's employment of learning strategies. The intertwined totality of these person-dependent factors determines to a large extent how the learner approaches a task (Ellis, 1994; Gu, 2003).

Learning Task and Learning Strategies

A learning task can be simple and straightforward, like committing an unfamiliar word to memory, learning how to pronounce a word, or as challenging and daunting as mastering a second language. Different learning materials, purposes and tasks at various difficulty levels demand different learning strategies and may even override individual differences (Gu, 2003). Likewise, knowledge acquisition calls for strategies different from those used for skill acquisition. In addition, a learner with a personal repertoire of strategies will choose and tailor his/her strategies to approach a task.

Learning Context and Learning Strategies

Like the denotation of a learning task, the meanings of contexts in second language acquisition research vary drastically with different researchers. It may refer to the parts of a piece of writing, a speech which surround a word, structure or passage and which influence or help to explain its meaning; it may also refer to the macro socio-cultural environment where learning takes place, with the teachers and their pedagogy, the peers, the classroom climate or ethos, the family support, the social, cultural tradition of learning, the curriculum, syllabus and the availability of input and output opportunities included (Gu, 2003). A learner's employment of learning strategies is determined not only by his/her personal factors but also by the socio-cultural context where s/he studies. A learning strategy that is effective and valued in one learning context may well be deemed inappropriate in another context (Gu, 2003, p. 14). In reality, contexts shape what an individual needs and wants to learn, when and where the learning takes place, and how the learning is perceived (Clement & Gardner, 2001).

Gu (2003, p. 14) argues that "person, task, context, and strategy are interrelated and work together to form the chemistry of learning. An analysis of learning strategies will never be complete without knowing the person-task-context configuration of the particular learning situation."

SIGNIFICANCE FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Language learning is a challenging and actually a daunting task for many who can not master a second language even though they have devoted much time and effort to it. To acquire a second language, the learners have to pick up a lot of both declarative knowledge and procedural skills and during the learning process, language learning strategies are important tools for learners' autonomous and active learning to develop their communicative competence and general linguistic proficiency (Oxford, 1990).

Learning strategies can help language learners to make their learning more efficient and enjoyable. Cognitive strategies help learners to use the language more or learn more efficiently. These strategies can directly facilitate learning so as to help achieve a specific learning goal. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, help the learners to plan and monitor their learning. They help the learners become more independent and personalize their learning by allowing them to take control over the learning process. Besides, social and affective strategies can help keep the learners motivated and deal with the frustrations of learning a new language. They

can also help the learners to find opportunities to use the language and learn the new culture.

Empirical research has shown that different learners use different language learning strategies in tackling different learning tasks in dissimilar contexts as demonstrated in the function model of Gu (2003). Moreover, studies of good learners revealed that they are also expert users of language learning strategies, capable of using a wide variety of language learning strategies frequently and appropriately to improve their language skills in a better way (e.g., Rubin, 1975; Williams & Burden, 1997). What should be noted is that unsuccessful language learners might also employ similar or even the same learning strategies as the good language learners. But their inappropriate combinations of strategies or lack of metacognitive strategies resulted in their failure (Gu, 2003; Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Thus, it is an essential job for second language teachers to help their students understand when, where and how to employ and deploy appropriate strategies or combinations of strategies according to contexts, tasks and their personal learning experiences.

EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

The last twenty years have seen growing interest in the notion of learner autonomy, which underpins the research on the effectiveness of language learning strategy instruction. Researchers have experimented with selected learning strategies to improve learners' language learning performance. Cohen & Aphek (1980) trained learners of Hebrew how to recall new words by using 'paired associations' and found that the learners who formed associations performed better in the subsequent recall tasks than when associations were not formed. In an investigation by Weinstein (1978) ninth grade students were trained in how to use a variety of elaboration strategies and apply them to reading comprehension and memory tasks. The positive results showed students trained in elaboration strategies significantly outperformed the students who received no training. In a training project to develop self-evaluation and monitoring strategies, Wenden (1987) reported that providing students with a checklist of criteria to self-evaluate their oral production resulted in successful use of self-evaluation as a learning strategy. More recently, Graham (1997) indicated that second language teachers can help students understand good language learning strategies and should train them to develop and use them. Nation (2001, p. 313) listed the studies of keyword strategies experimented with a wide range of languages. The results of the cited studies generally show that the keyword strategy training leads to faster and more secure vocabulary learning. The investigations as yet unanimously show that language learning strategies are teachable as suggested in Oxford (1990) and training language

learners to use selected learning strategies can have positive effects on task performance and the language learning process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

As illustrated by the explanatory tetrahedral model of Gu (2003), the relationships between person, task, context and strategies are intertwined. The concept of learning strategies is an extremely fluid one, involving noticing and selectively attending to a problem, analyzing the self, the task and the situation, making decisions and plans, executing plans, monitoring, and evaluating the effectiveness of the whole process. Furthermore, conceptions of learning have been found to differ from culture to culture.
Hence, strategy instruction can be very challenging, though very rewarding. Strategy instruction has to be linked to the students' needs and strategy should not be forced on anyone. Every student has their preferred way of studying and their preferred strategies. What works for one student in one task or one context may not work in another. Based on the tetrahedral model of Gu (2003) and the ideas of Salvisberg (2005), the following pedagogical implications can be drawn:

Learning Strategy Instructions Should be Individualized

Learning strategies are idiographic and the choice, use, and effectiveness of learning strategies differ from person to person. Second language learners should be helped to understand what language learning strategies are available to them, and what specific language learning strategies they might use in order to improve their specific language skills; strategies should be chosen which mesh with each other to fit the requirements of learners' goals and their style of learning; strategy training should be somewhat individualized for personal preferences. Individual affective issues, all of which influence strategy choice, should be taken into account and be directly addressed during strategy instruction.

Learning Strategy Instructions Should be Task-Specific

Strategies should be selected to meet the requirements of language tasks. Different types of tasks and tasks at various difficulty levels demand different learning strategies, even overriding individual differences from time to time. Therefore, learning strategies must be planned, executed, monitored and evaluated in accordance with teaching materials and learning tasks.

Learning Strategy Instructions Should Be Context-Specific

Even the same strategy may be executed in different ways in different educational traditions. On one hand, language teachers should learn and understand their students' language, culture and hence learning strategies. On the other, second language learning strategy training should be based on students' context-specific attitudes, beliefs, interests and stated needs.

Learning Strategy Instructions Should Be Sustained

Strategy training should be integrated into students' regular classes over a long period for them to consciously monitor, evaluate and gradually automatize the learning strategies. It's very important to provide students with a mechanism to evaluate the success of the training and the value of the strategies in multiple tasks in various contexts so as to appreciate their relevance for language learning tasks.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a brief overview of language learning strategies by examining their background and summarizing the relevant literature. Learning strategies are the key to learner autonomy and direct instruction in how, when and why to use language learning strategies can help learners systematically use various strategies as they learn a second or foreign language (Cohen, 1998). In addition, by integrating strategy use and instruction into regular language classes, learners are provided with hands-on practice and reinforcement of strategy use (Cohen, 1998). Empirical research has showed that strategies are teachable, and direct and explicit strategy instruction contributes to improved language performance and proficiency. Though integrating language learning strategy instruction into ESL classrooms can sometimes be a challenge, all language teachers may as well take it because not only does it help learners become more efficient in their efforts to learn a second language, but it also provides a meaningful way to focus one's teaching efforts.

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