

SLA Implications to Language Learning Strategies and Pedagogy

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Abstract: The topic of language learning has been one of the most prolific areas of research in ESL education in recent years. With the advent of the communicative approach in ESL education, greater responsibility has been placed on ESL learners for their own learning than under the previous teaching methods used in ESL classrooms. Therefore, the learners under the communicative approach often need to employ various and specific language learning strategies in order to carry out their tasks or to facilitate their language learning. The purpose of this paper is to provide ESL teachers with a broad picture for the area of language learning strategies. In addition, it aims to offer ESL teachers some applications for their own classrooms. There have been three major domains related to research on language learning strategies: 1) identification and classification of language learning strategies; 2) factors influencing the use of language learning strategies; and 3) language learning strategy training. Several implications and applications are discussed based on the findings from the three domains.

1. Introduction

Learning strategies have been defined as specific behaviours and thought processes employed by the learner to facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval, or use of information (Chamot, 1993). In line with this definition, language learning strategies can be defined as conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviours that learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable (Cohen, 2002).

After perceiving the failure of the Grammar translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method in terms of fostering real communication skills, ESL/EFL educators have begun to search for more affective language teaching methods. This quest caused the advent of the communication approach in language teaching (Oxford, 1989). As the communicative approach has been utilized in ESL/EFL classrooms, learners have become more autonomous and taken greater responsibility for their own learning compared to those educated under the Audio-Lingual Method. Under this circumstance, the communicative approach encourages learners to use language learning or to carry out their language learning tasks.

The area of language learning strategies has been one of the popular ones in ESL/EFL research and pedagogy since the 1970's. This paper synthesizes research conducted on language learning strategies to this date and aims to provide ESL/EFL teacher with a broad picture of language learning strategies and offer some ways to apply them to their classrooms. Existing research on language learning strategies generally falls into the following three categories: 1) identification and classification of language learning strategies; 2) factors influencing the use of language learning strategies; and 3) language learning strategy training. After examining each area based on finding from previous work, several implications and applications will be discussed.

2. Identification and Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Interest in the identification of language learning strategies emerged in the 1970s when several researchers explored "good language learning" studies (Naiman, Frchlich, &Todesco, 1975; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). During this time, it was assumed that good language learners use better learning strategies than poor language learners (Oxford, 1989), and that these strategies could be detected by concentrating on what good language learners did as they learned a language. Rubin (1975) identified the good language learner's characteristics as follows: 1) being a willing and accurate guesser, 2) having a strong, persevering drive to communicate, 3) often being uninhibited and willing to make mistakes in order to learn or communicate, 4) focusing on form by

looking for patterns, 5) taking advantage of all practice opportunities, 6) monitoring his or her own speech as well as that of others, and 7) paying attention to meaning.

Stern (1975) presented the following ten strategies of good language learners: 1) a personal learning style or positive learning strategies, 2) an active approach to the learning task, 3) a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and empathy with its speakers, 4) technical know-how about how to tackle a language, 5) strategies of experimentation and planning with the object of developing the new language learning into an ordered system, and revising this system progressively, 6) constantly searching for meaning, 7) willingness to practice, 8) willingness to use the language in real communication, 9) self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use, and 10) developing the target language more and more as a separate references system and learning to think in it (p. 316).

Finally, Naimen et al, (1975) suggested that good language learners: 1) select language situations that allow one's preferences to be used, 2) be actively involved in language learning, 3) see language as both a rule system and a communication tool, 4) extend and revise one's understanding of the language, 5) learn to think in the language, and 6) address the affective demands of language learning. During the 1980s, a number of researchers presented various classifications of language learning strategies. First, Rubin (1987) classified strategies as direct and indirect strategies depending on their contribution to the language learning process. Examples of the former categories are classification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice. The latter categories include learners' behaviors such as creating practice opportunities and using production tracks such as communication strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) offered a comprehensive summary and evaluation of strategy research to 1990 in their volume entitled *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. In this volume, they classified language learning strategies into the three categories: 1) metacognitive strategies, 2) cognitive strategies, and 3) social/affective strategies. Detailed strategies of the three strategy categories are shown in table 1.

TABLE 1. Classification of Language Learning Strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990)

| Major Strategies | Specific Strategies |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Metacognitive strategies | Advance organization Advance preparation Organizational planning Selective attention Self-monitoring Self-evaluation Self-management |
| Cognitive strategies | Resourcing Grouping Note taking Summarizing Deduction Imagery Auditory representation Elaboration Transfer Inferencing |
| Social/Affective Strategies | Questioning for clarification Cooperation Self-talk |

Oxford (1990) classified language learning strategies based on the synthesis of previous work on good language learning strategies in general (Naiman et al, 1975; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) and in relation to each of the four language skills (Tyache & Mendelsohn, 1986). As in Rubin's classification, Oxford (1990) classified language learning strategies as direct and indirect strategies; however, Oxford's subcategories of direct and indirect strategies were quite different from Rubin's classification. Oxford classified them in terms of four language skills rather than Rubin's idea of their contribution to language learning processes. Direct strategies in Oxford's classification involve memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Detailed descriptions of the six categories of strategies (Oxford & Crookall, 1989) are as follows:

1. Memory strategies: techniques especially tailored to help the learner store new information in memory and receive it later
2. Cognitive strategies: skills that involve manipulation and transformation of the language in some direct way (e.g., through reasoning analysis, note taking, functional practice in naturalistic settings, formal practice with structures and sounds, etc.)
3. Compensation strategies: behaviors used to compensate for missing knowledge of some kind (e.g., inferencing while listening or reading or using synonyms or circumlocution while speaking or writing)
4. Metacognitive strategies: behaviors used for centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning. These "beyond-the-cognitive" strategies are used to provide "executive control" over the learning process.
5. Affective strategies: techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations related to language learning
6. Social strategies: behaviors involving other people in the language learning process (e.g., questioning, cooperating with peers, and developing empathy)

3. Factors Influencing Use of Language Learning Strategies

An enormous number of studies have been conducted in recent years in order to explore factors affecting the use of language learning strategies. These factors include 1) L2 proficiency level, 2) affect, 3) ethnicity, 4) age, 5) gender, and 6) learning style.

a. L2 Proficiency Level

A number of studies demonstrated that students use somewhat different language learning strategies as they progress to higher course levels. Chamot and Kasper (1989), using think-aloud protocols, investigated upper and lower thirds of L2 learners' strategies in their longitudinal study. According to the results of the study, more proficient learners were more purposeful in performing tasks than less proficient learners. In addition, more proficient learners made greater use of learning strategies such as elaboration, inferencing, selective attention, and self-monitoring than less proficient learners. Politzer (1983) found that higher-course level students employed more positive language learning strategies than did lower-course level students. In the study of Chamot et al. (1987), as the course level rose, metacognitive strategy use increased and cognitive strategy use decreased. However, the course level did not affect social/affective strategy use in that the use of social/affective strategies remained very low across all course levels. O'Malley et al. (1985b) reported that intermediate level students used proportionately more metacognitive strategies than students with beginning level proficiency. Nyikos (1987) discovered developmental trends in strategy use, with decreasing and increasing uses of various strategies as student's language learning progressed.

b. Affect

The affect variable L2 includes L2 learner's attitudes toward ESL/EFL learning, motivation, anxiety, etc. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), attitudes and motivation have played significant roles in successful language learning. Oxford (1989) also noted that the existing literature on attitudes has shown its significant role in language learning in general. It is therefore likely to be influential in strategy use. In the study of Blalystok and Frchlich (1978), learners' attitude was found to be highly influential in the choice of language learning strategies- more influential than language aptitude. Little other empirical research has been done on the influence of attitudes on strategy use. Gardner (1985) found that motivation, closely related to attitudes, was the most influential factor in second language learning. In the study by Oxford and Nyikos (1989), motivation was found to be the most powerful factor influencing use of language learning strategies out of all other variables measured.

c. Ethnicity

A number of studies have reported the significant influence of ethnicity on learner's choice of strategies. According to these studies, Asian students tended to employ strategies involving rote memorization and language rules more than communication strategies, in addition, they responded less positively to strategy training than did Hispanic students (O'Malley).

Table 2 offers comparisons among the studies that adopted Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (1990) in several ethnic groups. According to Table 2, metacognitive strategies were found to be the more frequently used strategies, and memory strategies were revealed to be the less frequently used strategies in most of the studies. Cognitive, social, and affective strategies were found to be diverse in terms of frequency in use across all the studies.

TABLE 2. Comparisons among the Studies Using the SILL.

| Researchers | Subjects' ethnicity | More frequently used strategies | Less frequently used strategies |
|----------------|---------------------|---|--|
| Douglas (1992) | American | Metacognitive S. Social S. Cognitive S. | Compensation S. Memory S. Affective S. |
| Yang (1992) | Taiwanese | Compensation S. Affective S. Metacognitive S. | Social S. Cognitive S. Memory S. |
| Mullins (1992) | Thailand | Compensation S. Metacognitive S. Cognitive S. | Social S. Affective S. Memory S. |
| Jung (1996) | Korean | Metacognitive S. Affective S. Compensation S. | Cognitive S. Memory S. Social S. |

d. Age

According to the results of several studies, adult language learners use more diverse and sophisticated language learning strategies than did younger learners. However, Oxford (1989) indicated that the motivational orientation of the adult learners, who were learning a language for immediate career purpose, might have been a greater factor than age in the above studies. Using a think-aloud procedure, Leaver (1989) also investigated the relationship between age and strategic choice by comparing the strategies used by two children and 15 adults learning foreign languages. According to the results of the study, there were significant differences between the two groups use of strategies. The adults used bottom-up processing strategies, whereas the children employed top-down processing strategies. Leaver, however, realized that age was not a factor affecting their differences and strategies.

e. Gender

The gender variable has been also explored by a number of ASL/AFL researchers. Politzer (1983) found that women used social learning strategies significantly more often than men. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Oxford and her colleagues reported the effects of gender on strategy use. According to a study by Ehrman and Oxford (1989), adult female language learners, in contrast to males, showed significantly greater use of language learning strategies in four categories: general study strategies, functional practice strategies, strategies for searching for and communicating meaning, and self-management strategies. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) also discovered that female learners, as compared to male learners, used language learning strategies significantly more often in three or five possible strategy categories: formal rule-based practice strategies, general study strategies, and conversational/input elicitation strategies. However, Oxford (1989) noted that the sex differences in the above studies above might have been associated with women's greater social orientation, strong verbal skills, and greater conformity to norms, both linguistic and academic, as demonstrated by earlier research.

f. Learning Style

Learning style can be defined as a person's "general approach to learning and problem solving" (Nam & Oxford, 1998, p. 52). By contrast, learning strategies refer to a person's "specific methods of approaching a problem or task" (Brown, 1987, p. 79). Little research has been conducted to determine the relationship between learning style and learning strategies. Gallin (1999) found that those who were more intuitive in cognitive style preference were more likely to use inferencing strategy while reading than the less intuitive in cognitive style preference.

4. Language Learning Strategy Training

The purpose of research on EFL/ESL learning strategies was to provide unsuccessful language learners with the effective learning strategies used by successful ones. A number of studies have investigated the effects of language learning strategy instruction on ESL/EFL learners' achievements. Cohen and Aphek (1980) explored the effects of vocabulary learning training on students learning Hebrew. An experimental group was trained to use word association strategies in vocabulary learning tasks. Results indicated that the experimental group employed the association strategies in subsequent vocabulary learning tasks and showed better performance on vocabulary test than did the control groups. Hosenfeld (1984) investigated the effect of strategy training on reading comprehension. She trained two unsuccessful readers with the strategies of successful readers. After the treatment, she found that the two unsuccessful readers began to employ the language learning strategies used by successful readers in subsequent reading tasks. The study by Oxford et al. (1990) explored the effects of strategy training in various international settings. Oxford and her five colleagues investigated the effects of strategy training on students learning Hebrew in Israel (Cohen), students learning Danish in Denmark (Sutter), students learning Spanish in U.S. (Lavine), student learning Russian in the U.S. (Oxford), students learning German in the U.S. (Nyikos) and students learning English in France (Crookall). The six researchers reported that their strategy training generally yielded positive results and concluded that "strategy training – if designed carefully and sensitively with the learners' needs in mind – can become a key element in creative, self-directed language learning" (p. 211).

Park (1996) investigated the effects of self-regulated strategy training on the four variables in reading performance of ESL students. The experiment lasted for eight weeks and the four variables were reading comprehension, strategy use, reading attitudes, and learning styles. During the experiment, an experimental group received both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. According to the results of the study, there were significant positive effects in reading proficiency. The experimental group showed significantly better performances in the posttest compared to the pretest. The control group also demonstrated some improvements during the experimental period, but it failed to reach the level of significance. However, there were no significant differences in the use of strategies between the two groups after the treatment. In addition, no significant differences in the overall attitudes toward reading and learning styles were observed during the treatment period. Reflecting on the results of the above studies, the effects of strategy training on language learning seem to be inconclusive.

5. Implications and Applications

So far, we have examined research in the area of language learning strategies in terms of three categories: 1) identification and classification of language learning strategies; 2) factors influencing the use of language learning strategies; and 3) language learning strategy training. Several implications can be explored for future research directions in ESL/EFL language learning strategies.

First, the language strategy identification and classification research has aimed to identify the most effective foreign language learning strategies and to offer ways in which those effective strategies can be taught to less proficient foreign language learners. As we have observed, good ESL/EFL learners use a larger variety of language learning strategies whereas poor ESL/EFL learners have a smaller repertoire of strategies. They also use them more consciously and more frequently than do poor ESL/EFL learners. Bacon (1992) indicated that when EFL learners are aware of the variety of strategies that are available to them, they can better choose, use, evaluate, and modify those that work best for them as individuals. Therefore, we should provide our students with various and numerous language learning strategies to the greatest extent possible. Especially, we should introduce the characteristics of good learners and the good learners' language learning strategies to our students and try to develop their awareness and use of those strategies.

Second, the findings drawn from the previous research have indicated that a number of factors were interrelated with learners' use of language learning strategies. Therefore, as ESL/EFL researchers, we should try to explore the relationship between each variable and the use of language learning strategies using diverse methods. While conducting various experiments, we should also carefully examine how these variables affect

our students language learning strategies and what other variables could be influential in their use of language learning strategies. Based on the results of these procedures, we could identify and classify some beneficial language learning strategies for our students and make well-designed strategy instruction plan.

Third, although the effects of strategy training on language learning is not yet fully conclusive, a number of studies have confirmed the positive effects of language learning strategies. These results suggest the necessity of offering strategy training to ESL/EFL learners. However, the majority of ESL/EFL students do not perceive the usefulness of language learning strategies for facilitating their English language. We thus should develop their awareness of language learning strategies and how to employ those strategies by providing them with strategies training. Existing research indicates that enormous time and effort is needed on the part of ESL/EFL teachers to produce the positive effects of strategy learning. Therefore, we should be patient in implementing strategy learning, and the strategy training should be designed and conducted in a systematic way over the long term. Some practical applications to ESL/EFL education can be also considered. From the research in the area of learning strategies, we can consider a learning strategy instructional framework as following four steps: 1) identifying the students present strategies, 2) assessing their strategy needs, 3) offering strategy instruction, and 4) helping students transfer strategies to new tasks.

The final step would be helping students transfer strategies to new tasks. Transferring strategies that students have learned to new task might not be easy for the students to do on their own. After offering strategy instructions, we should give them opportunities to discuss the new strategies on some other similar types of language tasks and to practice using them on these tasks. When the students are involved in the new language tasks, we should reduce the reminders to use the strategies by degrees in order to make them utilize the strategies automatically and independently on other tasks.

In summary, as ESL/EFL teachers, we should give some guidelines to our students on how they can learn language more easily and more effectively. Offering them strategy training would be one effective way to meet that goal. In conducting strategy training, we should first identify what strategies our students employ in language learning tasks, and then assess the efficacy of the strategies in a systematic way, using diverse measurements. Then, instruction could be focused on those strategies that appear to be effective and beneficial, especially for those students who have poor language skills. Finally, strategy training by ESL/EFL teachers should be offered in a very explicit way. If not, it would be hard for students to realize the necessity and usefulness of certain strategies. Strategy training with a explicit manner will make students perceive those more easily and use the strategies more independently and autonomously in their other communication situations.

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