Something more about old and new language learning strategies

This paper provides an overview of key issues concerning the use of language learning strategies in foreign language learning and teaching. It examines their background and summarises the relevant literature. It outlines how LLS training has been used and it also poses questions for further research. What kind of strategies can help us and our students to interact profitably with new technologies? Do we need new strategies, or perhaps a mixture of old and new?

Introduction

In the course of a generation people everywhere in the world have suddenly become interested in communication, and the likelihood of having to deal with speakers of other languages has increased enormously with the use of networking and e-mail. Language learning has become necessary on an unprecedented scale. The fact that learners should not consider themselves as losers when studying a language, but instead try to gain knowledge of their potentialities has acquired vital importance.

That is why much time and energy have been devoted to identify what makes a learner to be successful. Researchers seem to agree in considering the use of learning strategies as one of the main factors that determine success, although it is not clear which specific strategies are related to proficiency. As a consequence, a gradual but significant shift has taken place in education, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning.
In the history of language teaching we may distinguish two sources that together produce the main currents of change in the last decade. One is the concept of mind, which determines learning theory, and the other are the different areas of language acquisition, which address not only the characteristics of L2 acquisition, but also the individual differences of learners. These sources reflect the changing conditions that determine the motives and purposes for language study.

Researchers have directed their attention not only to the description of learners language, but to how the acquisition of the second language takes place and which are the factors, internal or external, that contribute to it. Research has made evident that the material or the teacher are not the only ones to blame for the failure of the learner. It is wrong to think that everything that is taught will be learned because learners process the input provided in different ways depending on their personal variables.

These learner's characteristics that are supposed to enhance or inhibit the acquisition of L2 have been motive of ample research. Gardner and McIntyre (1992) grouped these characteristics into three broad categories: cognitive variables, which include intelligence, aptitude, learning strategies, previous learning and experience; affective variables such as attitude, motivation, anxiety, personality, self-confidence, learning styles, and a final miscellaneous category involving factors like age or socio-cultural experience.

The extent to which these individual characteristics are interrelated and influence one another is still a matter of study and dispute. However, it is suggested that together with situational factors they determine the choice of learning strategies to be used and these influence the rate and the level of achievement.
Learning Strategies

Definition

Although there has been an enormous activity in the study of learning strategies, recent literature reveals the problem encountered to reach a consensus regarding what they are. Stern (1983) calls them “general tendencies”, Winstein and Mayer (1986) “behaviours and thoughts”, Chamot (1987) “techniques, approaches or actions”, Bialystok (1978) “mental activities”, Cook (1996) “choices”, Oxford (1990) “specific actions”. It is easy to realise that such a variety of terms contributes to create uncertainty and further problems. Nevertheless, these definitions reflect the roots of language strategies in cognitive science, with its assumptions that human beings process information and that learning involves such information processing.

Despite the fact that the terminology is not always uniform, with some writers using the terms “learner strategies” (Wenden & Rubin, 1987), “learning strategies” O’Malley & Chamot (1990) and “language learning strategies” (Oxford, 1990, 1996), there are a number of basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of learning strategies.

Some features of language learning strategies.

Some of the major conclusions drawn thus far, suggest that language learning strategies (Oxford 1990, 9):
1) contribute to the main goal - communicative competence. They enhance language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner’s skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing the L2.
2) **allow learners to become more self-directed**, that is they assist students in becoming independent, confident learners.

3) **expand the role of teachers**, who adopt the role of facilitator, helper guide, co-ordinator, and adviser.

4) **are problem - oriented**. They are used in order to cope with a problem, or achieve a goal.

5) **are specific actions taken by the learner**. They are actions accomplished to enhance learning.

6) **involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive** they also include planning, evaluating, asking for verification.

7) **support learning both directly and indirectly**. Some strategies contribute directly to learning; others, including metacognitive and affective/social contribute indirectly but are equally important and serve to support one another.

8) **are not often observable**. If they are behavioural they can be observed, otherwise, if they are mental or behavioural but used outside the classroom they are unobservable.

9) **are often conscious**. Learning strategies are seen as conscious by some researchers (Chamot 1987). However, although their use reflects conscious effort, after a certain amount of practice they may be performed automatically.

10) **can be taught**. Age is not possible to be altered, and other personal traits such as aptitude and learning style are very difficult to change. In contrast learning strategies may be learned through training and modified.

11) **are flexible**. They are not always used in predictable sequences.

12) **are influenced by a variety of factors**. The factors that affect their choice are: sex, age, nationality, learning style, motivation, teacher expectations, purpose of learning

---

Learning strategies: attempts made to classify them
In the early 1970s research on learning strategies emerged as a desire for identifying which were the strategies that successful learners used. Rubin (1975:41-51) tried to show that some individuals are more competent because they have a special way of processing information and declared that good language learners:

- are willing and accurate guessers
- have strong motivation to communicate
- are often not inhibited
- are prepared to attend to form
- seek opportunities to use the language
- monitor their own speech and that of others
- attend to meaning

This concern for describing the characteristics of effective learners led to the compilation of lists of learning strategies (Stern 1975; Naiman et al. 1978). Although there was no attempt to classify them, a distinction which seems important is the one among learning, communication and production strategies made by Tarone (1980). Learning strategies are “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language”; production strategies such as rehearsal and discourse planning are “an attempt to use the language efficiently” (Tarone op. cit.: 419) and communication strategies are those used by learners “to overcome the inadequacies of their interlanguage resources” (Ellis 1994:396).

It was necessary to wait till the year 1990 to have two important contributions which endeavoured to offer an exhaustive classification of language learning strategies. Oxford (1990), who based his work on previous inventories, divided language strategies into two main classes: direct and indirect which are subdivided into three groups each: memory, cognitive and compensation
(direct) and metacognitive, affective and social (indirect). The difference between direct and indirect is that the former, which require mental processing, operate directly on the target language helping to store and retrieve it, while the later do not operate on the target language itself but attempt to create a positive effect controlling anxiety and seeking social support. According to Oxford direct and indirect strategies “support each other” and each strategy subdivision “is capable of connecting with and assisting every other strategy group” (op.cit.:14). Apparently Oxford tried to include in her classification every strategy that had previously been described. This work served as a foundation for the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) designed to assess uses of learning strategies in SLA.

Of special interest for their effort to give a theoretical framework to their classification are O’Malley et al. (1985a and 1985 b) and O’Malley and Chamot (1990). O’Malley and Chamot (1990:1) present the view “that language is a complex cognitive skill that can be described within the context of cognitive theory”. They state that to be successful a theory of SLA must, among other things, “be able to describe what learning strategies are, how information about learning strategies is stored in memory, how strategies are learned and may become automatic and why they influence learning in a positive way”. Analysing different theoretical efforts made to identify the role of cognitive components in second language acquisition, they conclude that a description of the importance strategic processes have is missing and that there is need for a clarification.

The study presented by O’Malley and Chamot introduces an information-processing theory of memory based on John Anderson’s work (1983, 1985) that distinguishes declarative knowledge (what we know about) from procedural knowledge (what we know how to do). It states that declarative
knowledge is maintained in long term memory in terms of meaning through propositional representation which maintain the meaning of information but without details. When the units of meaning are larger, they can be represented by propositional networks that require a schema (or the configuration of features that help to define a concept). Thus schemata facilitate inferences about concepts and enhance organization and understanding.

An example of procedural knowledge is when we speak or produce language. Anderson argues that language acquisition, as any other procedural knowledge, requires extensive practice. The representation of this knowledge in long-term memory is one of the main issues in cognitive theory and is known as production system. Language comprehension and production are seen in this theory as complex and active processes in which individuals construct meaning.

In cognitive theory learning strategies are viewed as complex skills not different from other cognitive processes. This is perhaps due to the fact that this theory focuses on the description of how information is stored and retrieved, not on how to facilitate learning. This contrasts with a linguistic theory of SLA that considers linguistic knowledge different from other knowledge systems.

In the early 1980s we find one of the main contributions of cognitive psychology: the distinction between metacognitive and cognitive strategies. This distinction is not easy to delimitate with precise boundaries because there is evidence that some strategies considered initially as metacognitive may sometimes function as cognitive (e.g. directed attention).
Metacognitive strategies may be defined as those that direct the learner’s attention to the learning task while cognitive strategies are specific to distinct learning activities operating directly on the incoming information. A final group is that of social/affective strategies which consist of using social interaction to enhance the comprehension, learning or retention of information. Both metacognitive and social/affective strategies are not only applicable to language learning but to a variety of tasks. These three main types of strategies are the ones distinguished in O’Malley and Chamont’s (1990) study.

Importance of learning strategies

So far we have tried to establish what strategies are and how they are classified, but little has been said about the reasons for their importance. As stated above, research on learning strategies has been motivated, in part, by the desire to discover the secrets of successful language learners, with the hope of using the information to help less effective learners (Wenden 1986:199). Developing skills in the three types of strategies our language learners will be able to control their own learning and increase their autonomy and independence. They will become more aware of the ways in which they learn most efficiently, and the ways in which they can continue to communicate in the target language after they leave the language classroom.

To fully understand this issue, we need to analyse how we learn and how strategies (especially cognitive ones) contribute to the learning process. According to information processing theorists the act of learning falls into well defined steps:

1. Selecting information: our sensory buffers receive the incoming data – what we hear, see, touch and taste- from our sensory organs. Here the information is selected for processing or is forgotten.
2. **Comprehending and storing information**: the selected information is transferred to short memory where it is transformed into a meaningful symbol – sound, word, or structure - stored in long-term memory and integrated into the existing schema.

3. **Retrieving the information**: the information that has been understood and stored can be easily retrieved. The automatic retrieval of the required information is evidence of acquisition.

These stages of the act of learning are enhanced by different strategies. Thus **selective attending, setting goals and objectives** and **advance preparation** may be used in the first stage to decide what information we will pay attention to; **elaboration** (used to comprehend the incoming information), **grouping, making associations, rehearsal, keywords, use of imagery, recombination** and **mnemonic strategies** help to comprehend and store information. In the third stage **repetition, conscious application of rules, imitation, experiment** facilitate the development of automatic and appropriate retrieval.

Oxford (1990:43) claims that among cognitive strategies that she considers essential, the most important are strategies for practising. She justifies her assertion explaining that to reach proficiency in a second language thousands of hours of practice are needed, and that these strategies offer the possibility of repeating and recombining sounds, words and structures.

Although the majority of studies on learning training or on learning outcomes have originally focused on mother tongue acquisition, different authors have produced material to teach learning strategies to second language learners. Rubin and Thompson (1982) encourage learners to use learning strategies and provide practical suggestions of language learning resources. They also offer information on the language learning process and describe fourteen
strategies classified according to learning behaviours ("be creative", "make intelligent guesses") that can help users to improve their foreign language acquisition.

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) have developed materials that provide training in learning strategy use for intermediate level EFL and ESL learners. Other material has been produced by Oxford (1990) and Wenden (1991), but in spite of the enormous effort made to offer adequate literature to train learners to use language learning strategies, few studies have been conducted to evaluate the effects of this training on second language acquisition.

Old and new learning strategies.

Dalin and Rust (1996,90) argue that in everyday life, technological developments have dramatically changed the need for knowledge and even redefined what may be defined as useful knowledge. Learners must take an active rather than a passive role in relationship to learning knowledge, because knowledge to be meaningful, must become part of their own experience and reflection. Thus, the use of technology forces us to reconsider our idea of learning strategies particularly the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

When searching for information on the web, the boundary between different types of cognitive and metacognitive strategies seems to get blurred. Side by side with traditional reading strategies, like scanning and skimming, we need monitoring, search strategies, evaluation strategies to assess if the information is, not only accurate and reliable, but also appropriate for our purposes. We also have to decide whether to stop navigating, go back to another site or continue exploiting the resource. These decisions have to be based on facts as well as experience. Assimilating information and executing
the right decisions require critical thought. With the freedom and flexibility offered by technological development comes responsibility.

The use of technology makes the learners work independently of the teacher and, therefore, what they most need are independent learning strategies. This very often requires a change in the teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. As a result our teaching should include not only training, practice and monitoring of specific strategies, but more important, information about their significance and utility. As EFL teachers we should encourage our learners to vary their strategies as the task requires, and promote the acquisition of skills which will help them to learn content.

It may also be important to consider the impact that different learning styles have on the use of new technologies and how individual differences come to light when using them. People are different and they continue to be different when they navigate, because, in a way, we navigate as we learn. There are people who navigate in a structured, sequential way and look for information by following a set of clear criteria, whereas others may be driven by a non-linear, more random way. Considering these differences, we should try to help learners to capitalise their strong points and develop a rich range of searching and evaluating strategies to be used in real time.

How to teach learning strategies

One of the most important issues related to the actual implementation of learning strategies instruction is developing in teachers the techniques for delivering effective strategy instruction to students. Chamot & O’Malley (1994) have provided a useful framework of instructional sequence developed for the CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach). This sequence provides a five-phase cycle that is as follows:

- Phase 1: Strategy Awareness
- Phase 2: Strategy Instruction
- Phase 3: Monitoring and Practice
- Phase 4: Application and Evaluation
- Phase 5: Generalization and Self-Regulation
- **Preparation**: the purpose of this phase is to develop students’ awareness of their current strategies, and the relationship between their own mental processing and effective learning. The teacher can include class discussions about strategies used for typical activities students have experienced in the classroom.

- **Presentation**: the teacher focuses on specific strategies, explaining them and giving explicit guidance in their use.

- **Practice**: students have the opportunity of practising strategies with authentic tasks.

- **Evaluation**: learners are given opportunities to evaluate their success in using learning strategies. They can keep journals, write checklists of the strategies used, and carry out interviews.

- **Expansion**: at this stage students have become independently strategic, and should be able to apply the strategies they have learned to new contexts.

**Sources of further research**

The sometimes conflicting findings yielded by research on language learning leave a number of points which stand in need of further clarification. Skehan (1989) quoted by Parrot (1993:61) acknowledges that “If, now, we review the whole of the learner-strategies research, we have to say that the area is at an embryonic stage. Conflicting results and methodologies proliferate. There are few hard findings”.

Despite the progress made in the study of language strategies there is not yet a general consensus about what they are and which the final classification is. One of the major problems is the reliability of the methods to obtain data. There is a group of strategies that being mental cannot be observed. As one of the methods used in investigation has been to ask learners to describe
(thinking aloud) what they are doing, there is no way to control whether what they report is true or it has been altered by the same act of reporting.

Another problem is that although researchers and teachers seem to agree about the importance of learning strategies in the acquisition of a foreign language, it is not known yet which are the most effective strategies for learning. An important point would be that researchers, material designers and teachers worked together side by side informing each other of their findings.

Moreover, new technologies force us to reconsider which are the strategies that can help our students to interact profitably with them, and what impact do learning styles have on their use. The use of technologies must be related to personal differences. Therefore, our primary objective should be to help learners to deal with their weak points and improve their flexibility to be able to change the bits of information found on the web into knowledge they can use.

These are only some of the numerous issues that might be worth investigating in an effort to further explore the importance that language learning strategies have in second language acquisition.

**Conclusion**

As Wenden (1991:29) points out the change in scientific thinking on the nature of mind fostered interest in learner’s strategies. The learner was no longer viewed as a passive recipient but rather as an active contributor of his/her own learning, choosing and controlling the strategies s/he used. As Ellis (1993) emphasises “ultimately, what is learned is controlled by the learner, not the teacher, not the textbooks, not the syllabus.”
The purpose of this work has been to explore the significance that language learning strategies have in the context of second language acquisition. Because the literature in this area is so extensive, I have only mentioned some of the researches that have contributed in trying to define and classify them.

Finally I have tried to establish the importance strategies have in the different stages of the learning process and to suggest some of the points that could be interesting to verify in further researches. In my opinion, the use of language learning strategies not only encourages learners in their learning, but also helps teachers reflect on and improve their teaching.

3559 words

Bibliography


• Rubin, J. (1975) “What the good language learner can teach us?” *TESOL QUARTERLY* 9, 41-51.


Silvana Riccio de Bottino
Graduated from the Escuela Superior de Lenguas ( Universidad Nacional de Córdoba) as a teacher of English and teacher and translator of Italian. Master in Applied Linguistics and TESOL ( University of Leicester - England) . Associate Professor and Researcher at UNCPBA . Jefa de Area and Methodology teacher at the ISFD Nº 22 – Olavarría.