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STRATEGIES OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS AND THEIR PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with a question of how much we know about the processes accounting for success in learning a second/foreign language, and whether and how this knowledge can be used to plan learner-training activities. Some major research findings in the area of *language learning strategies* are presented together with suggestions as to how they may have a positive effect on language learning. In particular, the so-called "*good language learner*" studies and studies attempting to identify relationship between range, type, and frequency of learning strategy use and the learning tasks involved are discussed by the author.

In recent years we have witnessed an increasing interest in learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring another language. This change of emphasis can be explained by the fact that much of the research concerned with the effectiveness of different language teaching methods proved to be quite inconclusive. As no real superiority of one method over another has been clearly established, it has become apparent that no one method can be equally successful for all students. This led to the belief that language teaching probably could be greatly improved if we had a better understanding of the language learner and the language learning process itself, and thus, later, prompted research in the cognitive abilities that language learners bring to the complex task of mastering another language. It was hoped that student "strategies" for learning, once identified and combined with materials and methods, would foster a higher rate of achievement in a shorter period of time.

In language learning researchers are especially interested in the kind of processes that account for modifications in the learners' competence, and which can be introduced through certain learning activities. The learner can often be successful through the adoption of specific strategies, although attitude and motivational differences also seem to be responsible for the success achieved in mastering a foreign language. Thus, language learning strategies do exist, and they influence significantly second language acquisition. Research in this area provides us with some information about the learner's perception of what they do to learn or to manage their learning, and at the same time it presents the process of second language learning from the learners' viewpoint.

What constitutes a learning strategy, and how do learning strategies differ from other types of learner activities? A number of definitions can be found in recent literature on the subject. Rubin (1975:43) defines strategies as "... the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge ...", and in her later article she further distinguishes between *cognitive processes* (a general category of actions contributing *directly* to the learning process) and *cognitive strategies* (specific actions contributing directly to the process) (1981:118). Naiman et al. (1978:2) refer to strategies as general, more or less deliberate approaches which are employed in coping with the problem facing the learner. For Tarone (1980:419), a language learning strategy is "... an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language ...", where the basic motivation is to learn (e.g., memorization, repetition for remembering, etc.). In Brown's definition a strategy is characterized as "... a particular method of approaching a problem or task, a mode of operation for achieving a particular end, a planned design for controlling and manipulating certain information ..." (1980:83). For him, strategies are some contextualized "battle plans" that vary from moment to moment, and from individual to individual. A distinction is made between two types of strategies, namely, *learning strategies* (methods of perceiving and storing particular items for later recall), and *communication strategies* (methods of achieving communication, of encoding or expressing meaning in a language.[1]

It is also worthwhile looking at some more recent definitions, namely those of Bialystok and O'Malley et al., whose research in this area provides us with an enormous amount of information and fruitful insights on the strategies, beliefs and views of adult language learners and the influence of the strategies on their ways of learning.

According to Bialystok (1983:101) "... the learning strategies refer to

[1]According to Bialystok (1983:101–3), "strategy" can be classified as either a *learning strategy* or a *communication strategy*, depending on the extent to which a strategy is based on a feature of the learner (learning strategy), or a feature of the language (communication strategy). This, however, can be revealed only through linguistic analysis of the learner's interlanguage, since any strategy may potentially operate as either a learning or a communication one.

activities in which the learner may engage for the purpose of improving target language competence, and hence are revealed by the learner." She also emphasizes the diverse character of such activities, as well as the fact that the learner is able to exercise control over the strategies he or she uses. O'Malley et al. (1985:23) provide a definition similar to Brown's, in which learning strategies are described as "... any set of operations or steps used by the learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information". They believe that the key to the effectiveness of learning strategies is the special kind of mental activity the strategies promote.

As can be seen from the above definitions, there is no consensus as to how to define "learning strategies", although all the researchers seem to agree as to their problem-solving nature and their facilitating function in the learning process.

Some earlier research in second language learning concerned with the differential success of foreign language learners suggested that there is a group of "good language learners" who use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command over new language skills. It was assumed that the learning strategies of such learners, once identified and successfully taught to less competent learners, could have considerable potential for enhancing the development of second language skills. Such an assumption was connected with a belief that students can be helped to become better language learners once we know how to help them. This belief was expressed by Rubin in the introduction to her pioneering study: "If we know more about what the "successful learners" did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success need." (1975:42). She also emphasized that language learner depends on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation, and opportunity, with aptitude being the least subject to manipulation, an invariant characteristic of an individual.

In her study, in addition to isolating a number of "techniques or devices" used by good language learners to acquire knowlege, Rubin also concluded that a good language learner seems to have high motivation to communicate, no matter where he is. Also, he is constantly seeking opportunities both within and outside the classroom, that expose him to the language and which give him a chance to practise what he has learned. By contrast, poorer language learners do not show any traces of such tendencies (cf. Rubin 1975:43–47). A similar study was carried out by Stern (1975), whose list of strategies used by good language learners contained six strategies identical with those on Rubin's list (see Appendix). Naiman et al.'s study of the good language learner identified five broad strategies (cf. 1978:3–15), on the basis of which they concluded that "... the good language learner is someone who actively involves himself in the language learning process, either right from the beginning or later; he also finds ways to overcome obstacles, whether linguistic, affective or environmental; he

monitors his own performance; he studies, practises, and involves himself in communication." (Naiman et al. 1978:17). Their study indicates that motivation and positive attitude towards the learning task, favourable learning circumstances, certain personality characteristics (e.g., sociability and persistance), and the development of learning techniques suitable to learners' personal needs, were all significant for success in language learning.

In addition to good language learner studies, a number of other studies, which provided lists and classifications of strategies that learners reported using, have been undertaken. Bialystok and Fröhlich (1978) discovered that the use of the learning strategies is an important way to increase proficiency, and that any language learner can be expected to improve his language proficiency by increasing his use of learning strategies. Through her already mentioned research, Rubin (1981) identified some of the major processes which probably contribute both to language learning and other kinds of learning. She provided a list of some of the specific strategies which exemplify these cognitive processes, and which probably contribute directly to language learning, as well as a list of those which contribute to the learning process in an indirect way (see Appendix). She believes that once we get a clear picture and are capable of observing and identifying such strategies, we might be able to find out which processes and strategies promote learning for specific students in specific learning settings for particular tasks.

A study, which not only attempted to identify the range, type, and frequency of learning strategy use, but also tried to determine the types of learning tasks with which the strategies tend to be associated, was conducted by O'Malley et al. The study, considered to be one of the most comprehensive in the area, focussed on beginning and intermediate ESL students, and led to the following conclusions:

a) strategies could be classified into three broad categories:
   - metacognitive
   - cognitive
   - social-mediating/socio-affective (see Appendix);
b) students tended to use strategies most often with less complex language tasks;
c) the strategies students used most often tended to require little cognitive processing of the learning materials;
d) teachers were generally unaware of students' strategies and rarely introduced strategies while teaching.

Altogether, some twenty six strategies were identified, some of which were more frequently used than others (e.g., repetition and note-taking). It was also found that the proportion of learning strategies varied depending on the learning activity. For example, the largest number of strategies were reported

for vocabulary learning and pronunciation. It also turned out that students tended to use most frequently such strategies which entailed the least amount of transformation or manipulation of the information to be learned.

An earlier study by Bialystok (1981) in which four strategies were examined (monitoring, functional practice, formal practice,[2] and inferencing), provided some evidence for the claims that:

1) time spent on some of the strategies is more profitable than on others, and
2) the language task involved determines which of the strategies would be most beneficial.

According to her research findings, *functional practice* is the strategy most responsible for achievement in different tasks, and, thus, she concludes that "general exposure to the language in communicative situations is ... relevant to performance requiring attention to either meaning or form" (1981:31). An immediate pedagogical implication follows from this conclusion: since additional formal practice after a particular point no longer facilitates performance, perhaps the formal aspects of language would be better learned in a communicative context. It is also worth noting that in this study the use of strategies was related primarily to the attitude of the language learner: learners particularly motivated to master the language engage in strategies which help them with the task on hand.

The research findings presented above prove that language learners not only make conscious efforts in mastering a foreign language, but they also are aware of the strategies they use, and are usually capable of judging them as effective or ineffective. Thus, strategy use is triggered by the following situations reported by Wenden (1986:191):

a) when an unfamiliar item of language is noted,
b) when there is a gap between communication need and linguistic repertoire,
c) when inhibiting feelings, such as fear, embarrassment, and uncertainty are present.

Effectiveness of the strategies is judged on the basis of improved proficiency in the language, their role in the language learning process (personal factors), and finally beliefs about how best to learn a language. Strategies judged as ineffective are subject to change, and, on the whole, the strategy use is determined by language learning priorities.

[2] Practice can be classified as either *formal* or *functional*, depending on the purpose. *Formal practice* is the specific exercise of the language code for the sake of mastering the rule system (e.g., filling in the blanks, memorizing vocabulary, etc.). *Functional practice* occurs when the language learner increases his opportunity to use the language for communication (e.g., going to the movies, talking to native speakers, etc.), (c.f. Bialystok 1981:25).

The research conducted in the last two or three years has added new dimensions to the definition of a strategy. Today the term "strategies" refers not only to "*language learning behaviors* learners actually engage in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language", but also it includes "what learners know about the strategies they use, i.e. their strategic knowledge",[3] plus what they "know about aspects of their language learning other than the strategies they use"[4] (c.f. Wenden 1987:7).

What conclusions can be drawn from the research findings presented above? First of all, it has to be stressed that effective learning strategies are *frequently* used by successful second language learners, and are positively associated with language acquisition. Therefore, we may assume that they have considerable potential for enhancing the development of skills in a foreign language. Second, the efficacy of second language learning is influenced by a wide range of factors, including aptitude, motivation, and cultural background. Aptitude and strategy use affect achievement in classroom tasks, whereas outside the classroom the use of strategies is related primarily to the attitude of the language learner. Third, different language tasks demand different strategies which can be applicable to a variety of such tasks and adapted to the language proficiences of individual learners. Fourth, both good and poor second language learners can improve their second language performance by learning to use specific strategies, and once trained, they become the best judges of how to approach the learning task. Fifth, second language teachers are often surprisingly unaware of their students' strategies. However, they can go beyond their traditional role of providing information, and can be trained to recognize, teach and reinforce appropriate strategies. They should also be able to encourage and assist students in applying the strategies to an expanded range of language activities and materials so that strategies transfer to new activities and are used by students independently of the teacher. Sixth, some strategies, such as functional practice, are crucial for most second language learners, and therefore more time should be devoted to them.

On the whole, continued advances in language strategies research should permit students to learn language more efficiently through classroom instruction, as this has the potential to influence a wide range of skills to which strategies can be applied. On the other hand, however, there is a possibility that the strategies practised in the classroom can be successfully applied in an acquisition environment outside the classroom. Thus, it seems plausible to assume that research on strategies of second language learners will help us to

[3] This knowledge is revealed in statements learners make when introspecting on some aspects of their language learning.

[4] E.g., what personal factors facilitate language learning; some general principles to follow in order to learn a second language successfully, etc.

create autonomous language learners who will not only be more efficient at learning and using their second language, but also more capable of self-directing these processes. In order to take on more responsibility for their learning, the learners must also know something about factors affecting their learning. Therefore, it is important to discover what the students know or believe about their learning, as it has bearing on the way they tackle the new language.

What the learners do to acquire second language competence and what can be done to facilitate this process have become important questions. Teachers, aided by researchers, have to think of best ways of using classroom time to prepare students to meet their communication needs in the second language. "Learner-training" activities that help learners expand their repertoire of strategies and redefine their knowledge of the learning process are needed. Classroom time devoted to learning of these strategies will be well spent, as it will equip the learners with a means of increasing their competence. With the help and cooperation of better language learners, the teachers can help less successful students to better develop their language skills.

Some practical attempts in this direction have already been made. For example, Rubin and Thompson (1982) gave direct advice to students on how to become better language learners. Reiss (1981:127) provided a list of activities that teachers should follow in order to help learners overcome the sorts of difficulties they may have in learning a language. Currently, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) published a course in learner training, which will undoubtedly have tremendous effect on the field.

Summing up, learner strategy research is a merging together of theoretical and practical concerns. It contributes both to general learning theory, by investigating mental processes and structures, and to our better understanding of the processes of second language learning. At the same time it provides teachers and learners with practical tools enabling them to make the learning-teaching process more efficient.

APPENDIX

I. STRATEGIES USED BY "GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS" (Rubin 1975:43–47):

(1) the good language learner may be a good guesser, that is, he gathers and stores information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved;
(2) he is often willing to appear foolish in order to communicate and get his message across;
(3) he will try out knowledge by making up sentences, thus bringing his newly acquired competence into use;
(4) the GLL is prepared to attend to form;
(5) the GLL practises;

(6) the GLL monitors his own and the speech of others; part of his monitoring is a function of his active participation in the learning process;
(7) the GLL attends to meaning.

II. STRATEGIES OF GOOD LEARNERS (Stern 1975):
(1) planning strategy;
(2) active strategy;
(3) emphatic strategy – or a tolerant and outgoing approach to the TL;
(4) formal strategy – technical know-how of how to tackle a language;
(5) experimental strategy;
(6) semantic strategy – constant search for meaning;
(7) practice strategy;
(8) communication strategy;
(9) monitoring strategy;
(10) internalization strategy.

III. NAIMAN ET AL.'S LIST OF STRATEGIES USED BY GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS (1978: 13–15):
(1) active task approach;
(2) realization of language as a system;
(3) realization of language as a means of communication and interaction;
(4) management of affective demands;
(5) monitoring of second language performance.

IV. PROCESSES CONTRIBUTING TO LEARNING (Rubin 1981:124–26):
(1) Processes which may contribute directly to learning:
A. clarification/verification;
B. monitoring;
C. memorization;
D. guessing/inductive inferencing;
E. deductive reasoning;
F. practice.
(2) processes which may contribute to learning in an indirect way:
A. creating opportunity for practice;
B. production tasks.

V. LEARNING STRATEGY DEFINITIONS (O'Malley et al., 1985b:582–84):

Learning strategy	Description
METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES	
advance organizers	making a general but comprehensive preview of the organizing concept or principle in anticipated learning activity
directed attention	deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distractors
selective attention	deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of language input or situational details that will cue the retention of language input
self-management	understanding the conditions that help one learn and arranging for the presence of those conditions
functional planning	planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary to carry out an upcoming language task

Learning strategy	Description
self-monitoring	correcting one's speech for accuracy in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, or for appropriateness related to the setting or to the people who are present
delayed production	consciously deciding to postpone speaking in order to learn initially through listening comprehension
self-evaluation	checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against an internal measure of completeness and accuracy
COGNITIVE STRATEGIES	
repetition	imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal
resourcing	using target language reference materials
translation	using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language
grouping	reordering or reclassifying, and perhaps labeling, the material to be learned, based on common attributes
note-taking	writing down the main idea, important points, outline, or summary of information presented orally or in writing
deduction	consciously applying rules to produce or understand the second language
recombination	constructing a meaningful sentence or larger sentence sequence by combining known elements in a new way
imagery	relating new information to visual concepts in memory via familiar, easily retrievable visualizations, phrases, or locations
auditory representation	retention of the sound or a similar sound for a word, phrase, or longer sentence sequence
keyword	remembering a new word in the second language by 1) identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word and 2) generating easily recalled images of some relationship between the new word and the familiar word
contextualization	placing a word or phrase in a meaningful language sequence
elaboration	relating new information to other concepts in memory
transfer	using previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge to facilitate a new language learning task
inferencing	using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes, or fill in missing information
SOCIOAFFECTIVE STRATEGIES	
cooperation	working with one or more peers to obtain feedback, pool information, or model a language activity
question for clarification	asking a teacher or other native speaker for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation and/or examples.

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