Language Learning Strategies and its Implications for Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

Effective language learners are aware of the strategies they use and why they use them. Likewise, skilled language learners select those strategies that work well for specific tasks. Less effective learners are also aware of their learning strategies, but employ them randomly, without a careful selection or focus of a particular strategy for an assigned task. Could less effective learners have more opportunities of becoming effective learners if they have the means of targeting their learning strategies to specific tasks? Language learning strategy instruction can help EFL students "learn better" by raising students' awareness of language learning strategies, by highlighting the relationship between strategy use and language learning tasks, and by increasing students' existing language learning strategies.

Key words: estudiantes exitosos en el aprendizaje de un idioma, estrategias de lenguaje, adquisición de una lenguaje, concienciación, capacitación para el uso de estrategias de lenguaje

Resumen

Los estudiantes exitosos en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras son aquellos que están conscientes de las estrategias que utilizan para su aprendizaje y las razones por las cuales las utilizan. De igual manera, los estudiantes capacitados en el uso de estrategias para el aprendizaje de lenguas seleccionan aquellas estrategias que funcionan más efectivamente en tareas específicas. Los estudiantes menos exitosos en el aprendizaje de lenguas también están conscientes de las estrategias de aprendizaje pero las emplean esporádicamente sin efectuar una selección cuidadosa de una estrategia en particular para la tarea asignada. La pregunta es: ¿podrían los estudiantes menos exitosos tener más oportunidades de convertirse en estudiantes exitosos en el aprendizaje si tuvieran los medios para direccionar sus estrategias de aprendizaje hacia tareas específicas? La enseñanza o capacitación en las estrategias de aprendizaje para la adquisición de una lengua puede ayudar al estudiante de una lengua extranjera a aprender mejor si se incrementa su concienciación de las estrategias de aprendizaje, si se resalta la relación o vínculo entre el uso de estrategias y las tareas para el aprendizaje de una lengua, y si se aumenta el número de estrategias que los estudiantes utilizan.

Palabras claves: effective language learners, language learning strategies, second language acquisition, consciousness awareness, strategy use instruction

> *¨It has long been recognized that the most successful learners of languages are those who understand their own abilities and capacities well and who autonomously engage in systematic efforts to reach self-determined goals of acquisition¨.*
> *(Brown, 2002, vii)*

Introduction

Many ESL/EFL (English as a Second or Foreign Language) teachers wonder why some learners learn faster than other learners. They also wonder why classroom tasks are much easier for some students than for others. One of the reasons is related to the strategies ESL/EFL learners employ to accomplish their needs or the tasks assigned. Theory has shown (Cohen, 2003; Oxford, 1990) that strategy use favors effectiveness in language learning. That is, the more aware learners are on the strategies they employ (why use them), the more effective and skillful learners they will be. This hypothesis leads to the following question: Could less effective learners have more opportunities of becoming effective learners if they have the means of targeting their learning strategies to specific tasks? In search for an answer to this question, an action research study on strategy use was conducted with first year students of the Bachelor's Program in English at Universidad Autónoma de Chiriquí, a state university in the Province of Chiriquí, Republic of Panama. The quest was aimed towards determining the strategies learners employed (the ones used the most and least) and providing opportunities for strategy use through Strategy-based Instruction (SBI) to detect their progress, if any, on their use of English as a Foreign Language in classroom settings.

Theoretical Background

Brown (2002) has explained that adults have an advantage over children: adults can both learn subconsciously and consciously. ¨Being able to learn in both ways is important for success¨ (Brown, p. 12). It is true that learning involves a relaxing environment without worrying about detailed aspects of the language, but it is also true that there are moments in which the learners need to examine the language they are using and apply strategies to improve their output. Indeed, Oxford (2001) has clarified that ¨language learning strategies are used by learners to complete speaking, reading, vocabulary, listening or writing activities presented in language lessons¨ (p.21). Recognizing that there is a task to complete or a problem to solve, language learners will use whatever metacognitive, cognitive or social/affective strategies they possess to attend to the language-learning activity. This is done consciously. Based on this assumption, Oxford (1990) has classified learning strategies in direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies require mental processing of the language and these are grouped into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. The purpose

of using the memory strategies is to store and retrieve new information. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, help learners to understand and produce new language through a series of means such as summarizing and reasoning, among others. When learners feel they have certain limitations in getting their messages through or in understanding what other people are telling them, they make use of the compensation strategies to fill in the gaps in communication, like making intelligent guesses, asking for clarification, asking for repetition, and so forth.

In contrast, indirect strategies ¨support and manage language learning without involving the target language¨ (Oxford, 1990, p. 135). They are subdivided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies allow learners take control of their own knowledge by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning and evaluating. Since learners get very confused with all of the rules, vocabulary, and writing systems when learning a new language, they get hold of the metacognitive strategies to reorganize their schemata or previous knowledge and overview and link new material with old material. The affective strategies deal with emotions, attitudes, motivations and values. Krashen (1988) has highlighted the need to foster a low affective filter in language learning since it is one of the biggest influences on language learning success or failure. Positive emotions and attitudes are accomplished through the affective strategies when learners are engaged in relaxation activities, when they are involved in music and laughter, when they take risks wisely and are self-rewarded, or when they take their own emotional temperature and realize when they are anxious by doing checklists, writing a language learning diary or by discussing their feelings.

Research (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995, p.81; Cohen, 1998, p.69) has proved that language learners need instruction in 'how' to use strategies efficiently as a way to improve language learning and performance.

There are two common ways to approach language learning strategy instruction: uninformed strategy instruction or direct and integrated instruction. In uninformed strategy instruction, students work through materials and activities designed to elicit the use of specific strategies, but students are not informed of the name, purpose or value of the specific learning strategy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995, p. 153). Direct and integrated instruction (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995, p.153) informs learners of the value and purpose of learning strategies and helps learners to use, identify and develop learning strategies in a systematic way as they learn the target language. Oxford (1990) has highlighted that in direct and integrated instruction, the teacher explains to the learners the value, importance and purpose for strategy use to raise awareness in the application of these strategies, to make them identify specific strategies for specific tasks, and to provide opportunities for reflection, practice, and self-evaluation.

¨Through this direct and integrated approach to strategy instruction learners become reactive learners as they increase their awareness, practice, use and monitoring of the language learning strategies they are using while learning a second or foreign language¨ (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p.11). When learners

practice using the direct strategies, they are involved in activities when they create mental linkages, apply images and sounds, review material, employ action (memory strategies). They also practice through repeating, recognition of formulas and patterns, recombining, and practicing naturalistically, as well as receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output (cognitive strategies). Added to these activities, language learners start using linguistic cues to make intelligent guesses and get the message through; they ask for help; they use mimes and gestures, and so forth (compensation strategies) (Oxford, 1990).

Indirect strategy use instruction facilitates learners in centering their own learning by linking new material to already known material, by paying more attention to specific details, and by delaying production and focusing more on comprehension or the training of their listening skills. Learners start organizing more and identifying the focus of the task they have to accomplish. They get more involved in group work activities since they start seeking for more practice opportunities. Learners become aware of what they are doing and self-monitor and self-evaluate (metacognitive strategies). If they are anxious and feel fear in the performance of tasks, they start taking risks because they understand that learning is a process of making errors and overcoming them. So, they write their problems, they discuss them in class, and they view language learning as a positive and rewarding experience (affective strategies). Since learners are instructed in pair and group work too when they are involved in strategy training, they cooperate more with peers as well as with proficient users of the language. Empathy is triggered and there's a development of cultural understanding. Language learners feel the need for supporting one another and are aware of the thoughts and feelings of other. There´s also a greater use of the functions of the language and feedback on errors is greatly accomplished (social strategies). (Oxford, 1990).

Brief Description of the Study

The research method was qualitative where both observational and non/observational techniques for collecting information were used: questionnaires, interviews, in-class observations, reflective portfolios and students´ diaries. The subjects were 30 freshmen students from the B.A. Program in English whose ages ranged from 18 to 34 years old. Nine (9) students were male and 21 were female students. All of the subjects were full-time students taking the following subjects: Oral Communication I, Reading I, Grammar I and Writing I. One of the instruments used to collect information on strategy use was Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990). This questionnaire elicited fifty separate strategies and sectioned them into six major categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The questionnaire was in Spanish and it was translated from Rebecca Oxford´s Strategy-learning Inventory. A sample of the original inventory(English version) can be seen as follows:

Part: B

1. I say or write new English words several times.	Your answer ... ▼
2. I try to talk like native English speakers.	Your answer ... ▼
3. I practice the sounds of English.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I use the English word I know in different ways.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I start conversations in English.	Your answer ... ▼
6. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	Your answer ... ▼
7. I read for pleasure in English.	Your answer ... ▼
8. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	Your answer ... ▼
9. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	Your answer ... ▼
10. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	Your answer ... ▼
11. I try to find patterns in English.	Your answer ... ▼
12. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	Your answer ... ▼
13. I try not to translate word-for-word.	Your answer ... ▼
14. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	

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The interesting aspect of this instrument is that it not only tells a learner the strategies he or she employs, but also describes the frequency of use. Collecting data on the frequency of use of each of the fifty strategies was probably one of the most important achievements of this study. Another instrument used was an interview with students on what they knew about learning strategies. With this valuable information, I was able to decide on classroom tasks that could train students in the practice of the strategies they used the least, and thus determine if these tasks were helpful or not in improving learners' production. During the practice phase of this research, a learning styles questionnaire was incorporated to complement the study.

Results of the Study

The data collected showed that most of the students used almost all of these 50 strategies. Surprisingly, the frequency of use appeared to be "very rarely" or "less than half of the time", even though they stated in the inventory that they did use these strategies. In the interview, students did not really know about the efficacy of strategy use in facilitating their performance in English. Being something new to them, it fostered interest in wanting to know more. In fact, some of these students had low academic performance and hoped that strategy training could somehow help them improve academically. This made them become motivated to participate in the next part of the study. In regards to the learning styles questionnaire, it reinforced the practice phase of this study. The results of the questionnaire made learners aware of their personal learning styles, and the connection/integration between their style of learning, and their choosing of the strategies whenever they performed the different tasks during the study. For instance, a visual learner (learning style) would connect the sound of a new English word with an image or picture of the word to help him/her remember (learning strategy).

Strategy Training Classes

With the aid of the teachers of the different courses, 10 students, who were confronting problems using the four skills in English, were selected to participate in a three-month strategy training program. These students met with me two times a week, and they were trained on the use of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The strategy workshops lasted three months, totaling 48 hours on micro-teaching strategy training sessions. Students were engaged in a series of activities that could meet their curricular needs. That is, they were given extra tasks where they could strategically practice topics to be discussed in class. During the workshops, students had to keep reflective portfolios and diaries. In other words, there were given checklists after each task had been completed, and they had to fill in a grid by marking the strategies they performed for each task. They also had to state whether they had used a strategy that was not listed. An example of a checklist is as follows:

Learning Strategies Checklist

Mark with an (x) the strategies you used for the jigsaw listening:

Strategy	I used it.	I did not use it.	It helped me accomplish the task.	It did not help me accomplish the task.
I could listen and take notes.				
I could listen and associate the content with pictures.				
I could listen and guess new vocabulary by linking it to my native language.				
I could listen and group vocabulary in a semantic map.				
I could listen several times to get the meaning of the text.				
Other(s):				

These checklists were discussed among peers and myself. The more students (subjects of the study) did it, the more aware they became of the strategies they were using. The interesting part was that not all of the students used the same strategy to complete the tasks. Some used more strategies than others, and I wondered why. I decided then to complement the study with the administration of a learning styles questionnaire that helped me determine the learning styles as well as link that information with their learning strategies. The data collected on learning styles enriched the strategy-training program by determining how these learners learned, and helped me answer many of the questions students were constantly asking regarding the reasons some students chose certain strategies over others. Consequently, some strategy-based activities were designed (adapted) to meet the learning styles of the participants. As a result, the awareness of their learning style(s) and selection of strategies made them feel more confident. In addition, positive feedback upon the completion of tasks motivated them to be more interested in the sessions. As students progressed in the strategy-training workshop, they collected more and more information about themselves and had opportunities to go back to their reflective portfolio any time they wanted.

Effects on learners' performance

Because one of the purposes of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness strategy training had in students' progress in English, there were interviews with the teachers of the courses to monitor participants' progress. Even though their grades were slightly better, the impact was seen on their classroom performance. According to their regular teachers, the students tried to excel in

classroom assignments and they showed much more confidence when they were working individually and in groups. Amazingly, these students tended to finish the tasks earlier than their classmates. Added to this, they seemed not to be lost as before the training sessions, and they even commented to both the teachers and classmates about the strategies they were using. The classmates started to become interested in the strategies and they are willing to participate in a similar study in the future. It is important to clarify that none of the activities used in the strategy training program were similar to the ones teachers used in their regular classes. There was no manipulation of results.

Implications of the Study

Developing a strategies-based training workshop involves different phases: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion. The preparation phase lays the foundation or groundwork for creating a learner-centered environment that is ready for strategy instruction. In the presentation phase, language learning strategies are explicitly modeled, named and explained. The practice phase builds the real construction of independent learning and involves students in developing strategic thinking about the strategies themselves and their strategic use. The fourth phase, evaluation, engages students in reflective sessions and focuses on evaluating the new learning strategies, thus developing their metacognitive abilities. The last phase, expansion, allows learners to transfer the application of a strategy from a familiar context to an unfamiliar one effectively. This match of familiar strategies to new contexts or new tasks (real classroom practice) adds appropriateness and real ownership to learners to choose the best strategies to complete classroom tasks successfully. More importantly, this phase completes the cycle of strategy instruction and fosters a climate of sharing information of strategy use with peers where learners teach others how to use the strategies (Chamot, Barnhardt, Beard, & Robbins, 1999).

Conclusion

This study is not the only one conducted in this field, but its results support some of the principles suggested by Rebecca Oxford (1990): considering students' attitudes, beliefs and needs; integrating strategy training with regular classes; addressing affective issues; incorporating a systematic organization of phases; transferring strategy use to future language tasks; individualizing strategy training for particular types of students; and evaluating progress in strategy use and classroom performance. The study has proved that learning strategies are teachable and the format of instruction has to be direct and integrated. Through strategy use instruction, language learners are provided with hands-on practices and reinforcement opportunities in strategy use. The optimal goal is to help

learners become effective learner in order to improve language performance and proficiency. Integrating language learning strategy instruction into ESL/EFL classrooms not only helps learners become more efficient in their efforts to learn a second or foreign language, but it also it provides a meaningful way to focus the teaching efforts in facilitating the acquisition of a foreign language.

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Appendix

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Learning Strategy Inventory For Language Learners

Author: Prof. Rebecca Oxford, Columbia University, New York. This questionnaire was designed by Professor Rebecca Oxford, now Director of the Program for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at Teachers' College, Columbia University, New York.

It is designed to give you (and us) information about the way you tackle the tasks of learning a foreign language. This questionnaire is used all over the world. Unlike our other questionnaire, this one can give you information about your own learning techniques, once you have filled in all the questions and evaluate your answers.

STRATEGY INVENTORY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (SILL)

Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) R. Oxford, 1989

Information on answering this questionnaire:

All questions given to you have a similar system of answers to choose from. For spacial reasons, however, have we not been able to give details on the meaning of each answer you can choose from. To be able to answer accurately please refer to the information underneath:

- *Never true of me*: also includes 'almost never true of me'- it doesn't happen very often in your learning behaviour
- *Usually not true of me*: it happens occasionally in your learning behaviour
- *Somewhat true of me*: it happens in a fairly regular pattern in your learning behaviour
- *Usually true of me*: it happens regularly and represents an obvious pattern in your learning behaviour
- *Always true of me*: also includes 'almost always true of me'- it happens almost all the time and represents a strong pattern in your learning behaviour

Part: A

1. I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	Your answer ...
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	Your answer ...
3. I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word.	Your answer ...
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	Your answer ...
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	Your answer ...
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.	Your answer ...

7. I physically act out new English words.	Your answer ... ▼
8. I review English lessons often.	Your answer ... ▼
9. I remember the new words or phrases by remember-ing their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	Your answer ... ▼

Part: B

1. I say or write new English words several times.	Your answer ... ▼
2. I try to talk like native English speakers.	Your answer ... ▼
3. I practice the sounds of English.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I use the English word I know in different ways.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I start conversations in English.	Your answer ... ▼
6. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	Your answer ... ▼
7. I read for pleasure in English.	Your answer ... ▼
8. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	Your answer ... ▼
9. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	Your answer ... ▼
10. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	Your answer ... ▼
11. I try to find patterns in English.	Your answer ... ▼
12. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	Your answer ... ▼
13. I try not to translate word-for-word.	Your answer ... ▼
14. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	Your answer ... ▼

Part: C

1. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	Your answer ... ▼
2. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	Your answer ... ▼
3. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I read English without looking up every new word.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	Your answer ... ▼
6. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	Your answer ... ▼

Part: D

1. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	Your answer ... ▼
2. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	Your answer ... ▼
3. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I plan my schedule so I have enough time to study English.	Your answer ... ▼
6. I look for people I can talk to in English.	Your answer ... ▼
7. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	Your answer ... ▼
8. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	Your answer ... ▼
9. I think about my progress in learning English.	Your answer ... ▼

Part: E

1. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	Your answer ... ▼
2. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	Your answer ... ▼

3. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying English.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	Your answer ... ▼
6. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	Your answer ... ▼

Part: F

1. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	Your answer ... ▼
2. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	Your answer ... ▼
3. I practice my English with other students.	Your answer ... ▼
4. I ask for help from English speakers.	Your answer ... ▼
5. I ask questions in English.	Your answer ... ▼
6. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	Your answer ... ▼