



Language Learning Strategies --- The Theoretical Framework and Some Suggestions for Learner Training Practice

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Abstract

Research in the field of second language learning indicates that proper use of language learning strategies leads to the improvement of overall Second Language (L2) or Foreign Language (FL) proficiency as well as specific language skills. This essay firstly attempts to build a theoretical framework of learning strategies theories by clarifying the definitions and categories of learning strategies, discussing the relevant factors influencing strategy choice, while making references to the status quo in China; then it looks at what some learners do that makes them 'good language learners'; finally, some preparatory work is suggested as a start for undertaking learner training in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms.

Keywords: Learning strategy, Strategy choice, Learner training

1. Theoretical framework of learning strategies

1.1 Definitions

In the literature concerning cognitive science in general or language learning in particular, the term 'strategy' has been referred to as a small range of synonyms such as 'technique', 'tactic' and 'skills', by which individual researchers describe their understandings in this particular area in slightly differential ways. Just as Bialystok (1983, cited in Wenden and Rubin 1987:7) states, 'there is little consensus in the literature concerning either the definition or the identification of language learning strategies'. Some more or less overlapping statements are compared as follows.

To begin with, there are some views triggering the discussion about whether language learning strategies are behavioral (observable), mental (unobservable) or both. For example, Oxford (1989, cited in Ellis, 1994: 531) defines the term as 'behaviours or actions', whereas Weinstein and Mayer (1986) argues learning strategies involve both behaviours and thoughts.

Secondly, the disagreement is about the nature of the behaviours, on the presupposition the language learning strategies are behaviours. Stern (1983, cited in Ellis, 1994:531) claims that 'strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behavior.' Here Stern describes the nature of strategy as general and overall, while Wenden (1987a: 7) blurs the distinction between these two by referring to 'strategies' as specific actions or techniques, adding that they are not about general approach of learners like reflecting and risk-taking.

The last major dispute deals with learners' awareness of strategy use. Some address this by applying distinct terms, for example, Seliger (1984, cited in Ellis, 1994:531) refers to the abstract cognitive categories of processing information subconsciously or unconsciously as 'strategies', while he defines another term 'tactics' as learners' deliberate respond to the learning circumstances. However, many researchers avoid making clear distinction on the issue of consciousness, and some suggest that learners cope with new information by deploying strategies consciously and these strategies would gradually become subconscious with repeated application and self-adaptation.

Although each of these arguments describes learning strategies from a unique perspective, altogether they may have helped us get a general notion of what are learner strategies:

- Learning strategies are either behavioral thus observable, or mental then not observable.
- Learning strategies could be either general approaches or specific actions or techniques adopted to learn a Target Language (TL).
- Learners are generally aware of what approaches or techniques they have used in language learning, despite some subconscious activities under certain circumstances.

1.2 Typology of learning strategies

According to Rubin (1987: 23), there are three kinds of learner strategies, namely, learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. It is noted that she use 'learner' in the superordinate so as to differ it from the

subordinate. Among the three, the first two are further named as direct strategies, in that they make direct and primary contribution to language learning, by means of obtaining, storing, retrieving and using language, as opposed to the indirect way in which social strategies contribute to language learning. As the first and major category, learning strategies may further break into cognitive and metacognitive strategies. O' Malley (1987) notes that the former normally entail direct manipulation or organization of new information, some typical examples of which are repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note-taking, deducing and inferencing; on the other hand, the latter often include planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities. The second category in Rubin's system of typology, communication strategies are often employed when learners participate a conversation, facilitating the on-going of conversation and allowing learners more chances of exposure to L2, such as clarification strategy and avoidance strategy. The last one, social strategies, coappearing with affective strategies in lots of strategy research reports, are applied with a lower frequency in classroom activities, for example, cooperating with peer learners in group work and asking teachers for clarification, due to lack of real life communicative situations and inevitable resort to mother tongue (Carless, 2007).

Although the primary and significant aspects of learner strategies have been covered in Rubin's categorization, some specific strategies owning their importance in L2 learning deserve particular attention. Take mnemonic techniques for instance, they are applied and relied on to some degree in lots of language learning areas. Deployed with other aides in a learning setting, like visual aids and physical responses (Thompson, 1987), memorizing strategies could be particularly effective to some learners. There are other perspectives from which learning strategies are examined, too. Oxford (1990) develops a six-item group of L2 learning behaviors, in which not only affective and social strategy are treated and valued respectively, but cognitive strategy are dealt with in three smaller parts, which are memory-related, general cognitive and compensatory strategy. There is not sufficient evidence to say this way is better than other systematizing approach, or vice versa, but it devotes the insight of seeing learners as persons able of accessing and utilizing comprehensive resources, rather than information processors and at the same time reminds teachers of some potentially enhancable aspects of their learners.

1.3 Factors in strategy choice

Although talking about factors influencing strategy choice may complicate the situation staged by variably defined and systematized learning strategies, it is still necessary to do this, since the learning we are discussing about does not take place in a vacuum or lab, where variables are minimized or in control. Even the strategies employed by classroom learners, whose learning setting does not allow too much operation of social functions and real life situations, are more or less influenced by a range of inner and outer factors.

1.3.1 Learner factors

What learners think about language learning may affect the way they go about doing it. Learners are found by Wenden (1987b, cited in Ellis 1994: 541) to hold at least these two different beliefs about language learning: some believe 'learning' language is very important, as a result, they often resort to cognitive strategies, whereas others regarding 'using' language as significant pay more attention to communicative strategies. In China, an EFL context, where the TL is not 'spoken in the immediate environment' and few chances are available for natural communication (Ringbom, 1980), there are much more learners who take the first attitude towards English learning than those who take the second, which might lead to a tendency in their strategy choice. For example, learners are commonly observed to rely on memorization and rote learning and spend plenty of time doing intensive reading.

Language learning styles, explained as general approaches to language learning, are gaining increasing attention as another essential parameter of L2 strategy choice. Some connection between L2 learning strategies and L2 learners' underlying learning styles are claimed to exist, and these styles may be further associated with certain cultural values. For example, as stated previously, some learners tend to be oriented by visual means and in turn use more listing and grouping strategies, while some prefer learning in an auditory way and are used to listening to tapes and podcasts (Oxford, 2002). On the other hand, research done by Scarcella and Oxford (1992) reveals that learners could overcome their weakness in some learning styles with appropriate strategy training.

Despite some existing contention about the effects of age on the rate, sequence, achievement of L2 learning, it is agreed by many researchers that young children often use simple strategies, while older learners tend to apply more sophisticated strategies (Ellis, 1994:541), which accounts for the fact that adults learn grammar and vocabulary faster and better than children. Nevertheless, this argument does not mean that adult learners do not need strategies in learning grammar and vocabulary at all; on the contrary, adult learners should raise their awareness of using strategies in a more effectively arranged way, which rings the bell to some EFL learners in China, who just blindly invest plenty of time and effort into grammar and vocabulary drills. Although research on aptitude and personality also shed some light on learner strategy choice, more convincing evidence need to be assembled to interpret their links with learning strategy. In addition, as an inevitable factor in language learning, motivation imposes its impact on learner strategies as well, to name just a few, passing exams and living up to parents' expectation. It has been claimed by some researchers that more

motivated learners, no matter in what way, employ learning strategies more frequently than less motivated learners (Oxford 1989).

1.3.2 Situational and social factors

While individual learner differences lead to some variance in strategy use, some situational factors may also be causes. Studies of classroom learners indicate that social strategies are rarely practiced (Chamot et al., 1988), as opposed to cognitive and metacognitive strategies which have been aware of and focused on in the same setting to a larger degree. Besides learning setting, task type is another situational factor to consider. For example, grammar and vocabulary tasks often require the use of self-monitoring, and guessing word meaning needs inductive strategy. It has become increasingly acknowledged that learning strategies are more likely to be improved in appropriate settings and through carefully chosen tasks.

Gender is a factor of social nature. Gu (2002) suggests that female learners generally make better use of most of the learner strategies, particularly those helping enlarging vocabulary size, and present higher overall EFL proficiency than their male counterparts. On the gender issue in language learning, I partially agree with Gu. Recalling my teaching experience, I should say girls in general had done a better job than boys in strategies such as note-taking and advance preparation. However, there are some boys who do show distinguished language ability; moreover, boys as a whole usually demonstrate more flexibility and creativity in language learning. Apparently, more study needs to be done to look into the connection between specific learning strategy and gender (including gender ratio in the classroom, where the behavioral tendency of the overwhelmingly major gender might influence that of the opposite gender), with other parameters like language proficiency and academic subject taken into careful account.

1.3.3 Academic factor

Although not as potent a factor as those described above, academic major might be another source of variety in strategy use for language learning. By means of questionnaires and tests, Gu (2002) finds that arts majors outperform sciences majors in overall proficiency of English, but have a slightly lower level of vocabulary size than the science majors do. Research undertaken by Oxford, Nyiko and Ehrman (1988) indicates that engineering students choose more analytic strategies than humanities students do. Although these results are not sufficient and conclusive to produce any concrete suggestions with for EFL teachers, without further information about other variables in a certain context, it is still reasonable to keep an eye on the potential connections between learner strategies and academic majors or future careers.

1.3.4 Cultural background

Cultural factor is too broad and complex a factor to be dealt with, within which quite a lot of aspects could lead to the variety of strategy use. In my teaching context, it is clearly felt that the strategies deployed by Chinese learners differ considerably from those widely advocated in western EFL literatures. In a classroom setting, for instance, Chinese learners rely more on note-taking strategy and ask teachers more frequently for repetition, paraphrasing, examples and explanation. Also notably, among these learners, introverts resort to taking notes to a larger degree, whereas extroverts are more likely to ask questions. On the contrary, their western peers tend to employ more cooperation strategies, like seeking feedback and pooling resources.

Such tendency of Chinese learners in strategy use is closely related to their cultural identity. In the cultural context of China, diligence in learning has been greatly stressed and highly praised since the emergence of ancient civil examination 'Ke Ju'. In order to obtain a higher mark and step higher on the power ladder, candidates had to learn piles of ancient classics by rote, as a result, many could recite great length of essays, hence the Chinese cheng yu (four-character idiom) 'dao bei ru liu', which literally means that one remembers something so clearly that he can even recite it out in an inverse sequence. Although memorization is not playing an overwhelming part in learning nowadays, mnemonic strategies like note-taking remain one of the most reliable learning techniques in classroom. The other strategy, question for clarification, as Harvey (1985) observes, may be resulted in by the strong emphasis of mistake correction in Chinese academic context.

2. Good language learner

Despite the miscellaneous views about how learning strategies can impact learning outcomes and how they are related to other factors, on evident contrasts between the behaviors of effective learners and those of their less effective counterparts, a list of features shared by 'good language learners' has been widely recognized by L2 researchers and classroom practitioners, as Rubin (1975) suggests, including 'willingly and accurately guess, want to communicate, are uninhibited about mistakes, focus on both structure and meaning, take advantage of all practice opportunities, and monitor their own speech and that of others'.

In the light of Rubin's observation, quite a big number of EFL learners in China are not the so-called 'good language learners', since as Harvey (1985) describes they generally would not like to make inferences about the meaning of words and sentences, pay too little attention to communication skills, feel like to be corrected, and concentrate largely

on grammatical structures. However, millions of EFL learners have learned English in these conventional Chinese ways and a number of them have made outstanding success in English. As regards these contrasts between Eastern and Western behaviours of language learning, probably aware of risking overgeneralization and stereotyping, Harvey (1985) further reviews that Chinese learning methods could not be simply labeled as 'primitive' or 'old-fashioned', and it is ridiculous to assert that these two contrasting ways can not work alongside each other. Therefore, what EFL teaching in China needs are not only western insights but also rational research into classroom learner behaviors and their correlation with other contextual factors so as to inform classroom practice.

Apart from those generally acknowledged attributes of 'good language learner', an argument made by Oxford (2002) about another comparison in strategy use between effective learners and less effective ones reveals the importance of learner training. She states that successful learners are not only aware of what strategies they use, but also skilled at selecting those working together more efficiently and tailoring them to the demands of different language tasks. In contrast, the less effective learners are ill-equipped at employing the strategies in a high-performing manner, although they are reported to be actually not inferior in the awareness of strategy use as well as the number of strategies used. Based on Oxford's findings, it is reasonable to claim that the value of learner training should not stay at the consciousness-raising level.

3. Learner training

Based on the enlightening views displayed above on 'good language learner', the issue of learner training has been foregrounded. As regards this area, quite a number of questions have been asked, hypothesis been tested, results been discussed and implications been drawn by L2 learning researchers and classroom practitioners. In this section, I would just like to give an example of how the novice EFL teacher practitioners like me could set out identifying the strategies used by certain learners and then planning training as to what the learners need.

To begin with, it is necessary to find out about the learners' learning strategies in a particular context. Oxford (2002) lists a group of frequently adopted techniques for eliciting L2 learners' strategies, include classroom observation, formal and informal interviews, learning diaries, open-ended or structured surveys of strategy use frequency, and think-aloud procedures. In fact, it would be more reasonable to combine two or more of them, according to specific objectives, subject features and context factors, as different methods have their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Take my current teaching context for example, the learners are 29 first-year junior college students majoring in mechanics, using textbooks focusing on reading and writing skills. If I would like to check the learners' use of language learning strategies, any one from self-designed think-aloud written report, reading journal, informal interview, classroom observation and survey would be worth trying. To get a general profile of the learners' strategy use frequency as a preliminary step, I can use Chinese translation of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL Version 7.0 for ESL/EFL, Oxford, 1989), a widely employed summative rating scale involving 6 subscales (namely, memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategy) of 50 items on a five-point Likert-scale, the reliability and validity of which have been confirmed by many researchers in cross-cultural contexts. As a supplement to this inventory, a few lines of background information is expected to be supplied by the learners, such as gender, age and the college entrance exam mark (given no other placement test result is available at the moment). Descriptive statistics are then used to analyze the data. As can be seen from the results presented in Table 1, the means for the learners' overall strategy use frequency, regardless of the specific strategy type, are rather similar, that is between 2 and 3, which means less than half of the time, with compensation and metacognitive strategy use happening slightly more frequent than the others.

Insert Table 1 Here

To have a closer look at each high frequency item as well as the low frequency one and analyze the possible causes, the data of each inventory item is also computed and put into Table 2 (see Appendix). Within the scope of the compensation strategies and the metacognitive strategies, the following items have both their mean scores and mode scores above 3 in Table 2: item (24) 'guessing unknown words' meaning', item (29) 'using alternatives to unavailable words', item (32) 'paying attention to people speaking English' and item (33) 'striving to become better English learners'. These findings show that the learners tend to compensate when aware of limited vocabulary, and they are willing and making effort to do better in English learning, which is also embodied in the mode score of item (38) 'reflecting on the progress in learning. Noticeably, they have great interests in speaking English, which makes an interesting contrast to the quite low results of item (35) 'looking for people to talk with in English'. This probably reveals that good oral ability is regarded as important and admiring by the learners, but presumably due to the priority given to reading and writing in classroom, they seldom take the initiatives or seek chances to speak English, which is reflected in item (14). Additionally, some items in other categories are also worth noticing. For instance, using item (39) could mean that affective factor has a significant effect on how they learn; the poor results in item (7) and (43) might be seen as the indicators of the learners' weak awareness of the applying diary and physical acts in English learning.

In spite of these inventory results, further attempts still need to be made to refine or verify them according to specific contexts. For example, O'Malley et al. (1985) carried out classroom observation from the perspectives of source, activity, setting, materials and approach concerning learning strategy, and interviews for both teachers and students to elicit strategies for specific learning tasks, the findings of which informed the training practice and were the basis of refining the training approaches. There are good considerations behind these attempts: firstly, it is now generally recognized that learner strategy use is very unlikely to be discussed thoroughly without taking into consideration the learner differences either individually or in groups (Macaro, 2006) such as age, gender, major and learning experience; Secondly, apart from the variables, the method used in this paper to elicit strategies is not without flaws. The validity of the language learning strategy inventories like SILL has been challenged by some researchers, arguing that the strategies contained may not be simply transferred in different social and cultural environments (LoCastro, 1994), and the means by which the strategies are categorized, however convenient in terms of research and instruction, lacks theoretical support (Skehan, 1991).

On the basis of the inventory results, a list of findings can be summarized as follows:

- The learners use most of the language learning strategies not very frequently or systematically;
- Most of the learners' vocabulary sizes are quite limited and they are more or less aware of this;
- Most of the learners' speaking fluency does not live up to their expectation;
- Most of the learners feel the tension and anxiety during interaction and when making errors.

These findings at least inform the future training practice in three ways: first of all, the learners need to be convinced that to be successful in language learning they need some training sessions of language strategy use; then some combinations of strategies need to be determined for the training with particular emphasis on the strategies used in vocabulary acquisition and listening-speaking tasks; furthermore, adequate chances need to be provided of deploying social/affective strategies. Before strategy training can be conducted, several other issues need to be sorted out, for which different voices are always heard. Regarding the structure of the training content, Ma (2008) makes the point on the basis of his study that metacognitive and affective strategies could be packaged with certain cognitive ones to gain a desirable result due to the facilitative correlation between them, which is certainly one possible sort of training syllabus, which can be customized accordingly. To match with the content, there is usually an organizing style of training to be decided, too. It is recognized by some as a beneficial way to integrate training module into regular class guided with explicit instruction (Oxford, 2002), which received objections by those who are for doing it either separately or implicitly.

Apart from what to deliver in a training session and how to do it, it is necessary for the instructor to think about the means and criteria of assessment before the training. The last note is to get learners psychologically prepared, in other words, to keep them well aware of the strategy training they are undertaking so as to encourage their engagement and active responses (Hedge, 2000: 85). To expand the scope of learner training, Hedge (ibid.) further points out that time outside classroom hours could also be made use of as a continuing phase of classroom training through ICT (Information Communications Technology) in language labs, self-access centres as well as at home.

4. Conclusion

This essay outlines the major aspects of L2 learning strategies, introduces some important insights of L2 learning researchers into surveying, exploring and training L2 learning strategies, and makes association between them in the background of EFL learning and teaching in China. Also a list of suggestions for learner training is made for greenhorns in this field. On the basis of my experience both as a teacher and a learner in investigating and using learning strategies, more research needs to be undertaken to examine the effectiveness of strategy training in a specific area and increase the possibility of EFL learners becoming more responsible for their own learning.

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Table 1. Frequency of language learning strategy use (By category)

Strategy Category	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Memory	29	1.00	3.77	2.2375	.58321
Cognitive	29	1.50	3.28	2.5123	.45299
Compensation	29	1.33	3.83	2.7068	.62306
Metacognitive	29	1.55	4.11	2.7471	.66527
Affective	29	1.33	3.83	2.6149	.62852
Social	29	1.33	3.66	2.4712	.61086

Table 2. Frequency of language learning strategy use (By item)

Strategy Item	N	Min	Max	Mode	Mean	Std. Dev
1.Associating new words to things already learnt	29	1	5	2	2.2413	1.05746
2.Making sentences with new words	29	1	3	2	1.7586	0.57663
3.Memorizing new words as to sounds or images	29	1	5	2	2.2068	1.01345
4.Memorizing new words by visualizing situations	29	1	5	2	2.3103	1.07249
5.Memorizing new words as to rhymes	29	1	4	2	2.3103	1.00368
6.Memorizing new words with flashcards	29	1	5	2	2.5172	1.52645
7.Memorizing new words by doing physical acts	29	1	2	1	1.4827	0.50854
8.Reviewing regularly	29	1	4	3	2.5714	1.03382
9.Memorizing new words as to where they appear	29	1	5	2	2.8275	1.36457
10.Saying or writing new words repeatedly	29	2	5	4	3.7586	0.91242
11.Trying to talk like natives	29	1	4	2	1.8965	0.85960
12.Practicing sounds of English words	29	1	5	2	2.6551	0.97379
13.Using words in varied ways	29	1	4	2	1.9310	0.73615
14.Striking up talks in English	29	1	4	2	1.8620	0.74278
15.Watching English videos	29	1	5	2	2.7241	1.09858
16.Reading English for pleasure	29	1	4	2	2.2068	0.77364
17.Writing letters & reports in English	29	1	4	2	1.7931	0.72601
18.Reading in depth after skimming	29	1	5	2	3.1379	1.27403
19.Looking for similar words in mother tongue	29	1	5	3	2.7241	0.95978
20 Seeking patterns in English	29	1	5	2	2.8275	1.00246
21.Learning words in a morphological way	29	1	5	3	2.7931	1.11417
22.Avoiding word-for- word translation	29	1	5	2	3.0344	1.01709
23.Summarizing the information heard or read	29	1	5	2	1.8275	0.80485
24.Guessing unknown words' meaning	29	1	5	3	3.1379	0.99009
25.Using gestures while conversing	29	1	5	2	2.1379	1.18695
26.Making up new words when needed	29	1	4	3	2.1379	0.99009
27.Looking up each new words met in reading	29	1	5	3	2.8965	1.04692
28.Anticipating during conversation	29	1	4	3	2.3103	0.89056
29.Using alternatives to unavailable words	29	1	5	4	3.6206	1.01467
30 Seeking chances to use English	29	1	5	2	2.4482	1.12078
31.Noticing mistakes so as to improve	29	2	5	2	2.9655	0.90564
32.Paying attention to people speaking English	29	1	5	5	3.8275	1.13606
33.Striving to become better English	29	1	5	3	3.4482	1.32520

learners						
34.Planning to ensure enough time for English	29	1	5	2	2.5517	0.86597
35.Looking for people to talk with in English	29	1	3	1	1.6551	0.66953
36.Reading as much as possible in English	29	1	5	2	2.6551	1.00980
37.Having clear targets for improving English	29	1	4	2	2.2758	0.99629
38.Reflecting on the progress in learning	29	1	5	4	2.8965	1.08050
39.Trying to relax when afraid of using English	29	1	5	4	3.0344	1.23874
40.Trying to speak more though fearing errors	29	1	5	3	2.7586	1.05746
41.Rewarding oneself when doing well	29	1	5	3	2.9655	1.17967
42.Noticing tension in learning or using English	29	1	5	2	2.6896	1.13714
43.Describing feelings about learning in diaries	29	1	4	1	1.7931	1.01345
44.Talking to others about how you feel in learning	29	1	4	2	2.4482	0.98511
45.Asking for slowing down or repetition	29	1	5	4	3.2068	1.08164
46.Asking natives to correct your errors in talking	29	1	4	1	2.5172	1.24271
47.Practicing English with fellow learners	29	1	4	2	2.1379	0.95334
48 Seeking help from natives	29	1	4	2	2.3793	1.04297
49.Asking questions in English	29	1	4	2	2.1379	0.87522
50.Trying to learn about the target cultures	29	1	5	2	2.4482	1.08845