AN OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE LEARNER STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to provide an overview of language learner strategies (LLS) for ESL/EFL teachers. It includes a discussion of the origin of LLS research, various definitions of LLS, the importance of teaching and learning these strategies in language learning, especially in learner autonomy, different taxonomies and features of LLS.

Keywords: Learner strategies, metacognition, learner autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Genesis of Language Learner Strategies

Needless to say, learning is much more than a hyphen between S and R plus feedback as it was once widely accepted as a seemingly hard fact by proponents of behavioristic psychology (Gu, 2007). Behavioristics, with the premise that learning is the result of environmental factors, viewed language learning as conditioning and habit formation which can be achieved through stimulus-response and reinforcement (Williams & Burden, 1997).

To bring social context of language teaching and learning much more into view, it was Dell Hymes (1972) who coined what is called *communicative competence* to run counter deliberately to Chomsky's linguistic competence.In a pedagogically influential attempt, Canale and Swain (1980) postulated communicative competence as a four-dimensional category of knowledge including *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse*, and *strategic* competence. It is in this context that the term "strategy" has gained vibrancy and brought into play in applied linguistics. As a whole, this strategic competence is critical for achieving the purpose of communication by L2 learners, whether it is orally, or pertaining to production or comprehension of written text. Likewise, its compensatory function when communication breakdowns occur for some reasons is also highly valued.

This overview is an attempt to give learners' strategic behaviors the rightful position they deserve in L2 acquisition from its very inception in the 1970s to the present day.

Surprisingly enough, despite the above-mentioned paradigmatic changes and developments in language teaching and learning approaches, however, the initial impetus for LLS emanated from a very different direction. If there is just one researcher who can be best regarded as the birth parent of language learner strategy research, then she is the eminent American sociolinguistic, Joan Rubin (1975) with her seminal and pivotal article entitled 'What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us' (Stern, 1983; Grenfell &Macaro, 2007). She established a rather conceptual and speculative list of seven learning strategies employed by successful language learners among which were 'monitoring, guessing or inductive reasoning, and creating opportunities for practice'. This attempt became more or less the cornerstone of many other studies in this area of investigation.

In a similar vein and at the very time, Stern (1975) in a conscious attempt in order to come to grips with LLS, listed the top-ten strategies of the good language learner (GLL) such as 'willingness to both practice and use language in real communication, self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use, and technical expertise about how to tackle a language'. In another inquiry which was conducted by Naiman et al. (1978) aiming at establishing the learning strategies of thirty adult language learners through intensive retrospective interviews, they reached the conclusion that good language learners seize every possibly helpful learning opportunities available to them, and if necessary create them. In addition, good language learners tailor some strategies and techniques to suit their individual requirements. Shortly afterwards, some researchers such as Wesche (1975), Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1977, 1981) and Hosenfeld (1977, 1978) deepened our understanding of GLLs.

The driving force behind LLS research has originally predicated upon an underlying assumption that the transferability and passing on the strategies of good language learners to less good or even poor language learners is in actuality within the bounds of possibility which offers sure ways of equipping learners with the appropriate skills and strategies to become autonomous and self-directed language learners (Ellis, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1997; McDonough, 2002; Grenfell &Macaro, 2007). Hsiao and Oxford (2002) put emphasis on learning strategies as a fundamental factor in building learner autonomy which give learners a high degree of control over their learning process.

Learner autonomy refers to as the ability to manage and take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). Nonetheless, after achieving autonomy, learner becomes more emancipated and less dependent on the help of teacher.

LANGUAGE LEARNER STRATEGIES: SEARCHING FOR A DEFINITION

The simple phrase , 'LLS', covers a wide range of studies within applied linguistics and is one of the latest buzz concepts in language teaching and learning. Although many important advances have been made in LLS field, some questions have poorly answered or even remained unanswered within the field. Evidently enough, one such a question has to do with the lack of consensus in defining the term LLS (Wenden, 1991; Dornyei 2005; Ellis, 1994; McDonough, 1995; White, 2008).

Taking a cursory look at the recent studies related to learning strategies lead us to many "fuzzy synonyms" in the literature (Oxford & Cohen, 1992, p. 24). Of course, the search for an uncontested terminology is part of LLS story which deems necessary to be narrated by further research. O'Malley et al. (1985) highlight the issue of fuzziness in this way: "There is no consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language   learning or how these differ from other types of learner activities."

Different terminologies have been used by different authors to refer to the same concept. The term "learner strategies" have been used by Wenden and Rubin (1987), while others such as O'Malley and Chamot (1990) used the term "learning strategies". Instead, Oxford (1990) preferably uses "language learning strategies". It is appropriate here to take note of a distinction which is sometimes made in the literature between "learner strategies" and "learning strategies".

Expressed succinctly, 'learner strategy' is referred to as preferred, natural and habitual ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Learning strategies are general not language-specific and are involved in all kinds of learning regardless of the content and context. In other words, their application to the learning of all

subjects such as science, history, math, languages and other subject-matters both in formal and informal settings is possible.

The other side of the coin deals with 'learner strategy' as opposed to the narrower and more passive conception of 'learning strategies' resulting from a paradigmatic shift of emphasis on the teacher to the learner within the realm of applied linguistics. For that reason, language learners became the central focus of attention by capitalizing on their active participation in the learning process as a problem solver and reflective organizer of knowledge and skills essential for effective use.

Another commonplace distinction is drawn between the terms "strategy" and "skill" which have often been used interchangeably. As Oxford (2000) remarked the term *strategy* comes from a Greek term *strategia*meaning 'command of a general'. What seems to be as the basic ingredient of a strategy in ancient Greece is a "general plan to win a war" (p. 274). Today, a strategy is treated as a conscious plan in order for meeting a goal. "The warlike meaning of the term has largely fallen away, but conscious control, intention, and goal-directedness remain essential criteria for a strategy" (Oxford, 2003, p. 274).A *skill*, in contrast, "affords high levels of performance with little effort" (Afflerbach et al., 2008,p. 372). In other words, a skill is an automatized and largely a subconscious process, while a strategy is a process controlled deliberately and consciously (Williams and Moran, 1989). "An emerging skill can become a strategy when it is used intentionally. Likewise, a strategy can "go underground" (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) and become a skill" (Paris et al., 1991, p. 611).

Not surprisingly, LLS field, with its crucial value in ESL/EFL teaching and learning, abounds with various definitions. In a broad sense of the word, Rubin (1975), the pioneer of the area, defined language learner strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p.43). Another early definition of learner strategies has been offered by Wenden (1987) who defined the concept as "language learner behavior learners get actually engaged in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language" (p.6). Weinstein and Mayer (1986) are of the opinion that learning strategies are behaviors or thoughts learners get involved in during learning intended to impact upon the learners' encoding processes. Oxford (1990) defines language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8).Many other definitions have been put forth for the concept of learner strategies in recent years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Definitions of language learner strategies by various researchers

Researcher	Definition
Rubin (1987)	"any set of operations, plans, or routines, used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, retrieval, storage and use of information" (p.19)
O'Malley & Chamot (1990)	"the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1).
Oxford (1990)	"specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use–often consciously–to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2" (p. 1).
McDonough (1995)	"articulated plans for meeting particular types of problems not a piece of problem-solving itself" (p. 3).
Cohen (1998)	"learning processes which are consciously selected by the learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning of a second or foreign language, through the storage retention, recall, and application of information about that language" (p. 4).
Macaro (2001)	"an interesting practice-related avenue to pursue is whether what we mean by effort when doing a language task simply means the effective development of a range of strategies in a task" (p. 264).
Chamot (2004)	"The conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal" (p. 14).

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUGE LEARNER STRATEGIS

Give a man fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish he eats for a lifetime (A Chinese proverb).

The research findings inside the field of LLS have corroborated the teachability of learner strategies to less successful language learners in order to help them become better and active language learners (Chamot et al, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1996; Wenden, 1987; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). "The use of strategies embodies taking active, timely, coordinated responsibility for learning. This is both learnable and teachable" (Oxford, 2008, P. 52).

It is most probable that a language is "the most complex set of skills one could ever seek to acquire" (Brown, 2001, p. 208); hence, what Brown calls *strategic investment* deems essential for learners to gain mastery over language. Oxford (2008) noted that "learning strategies are generally signs of learner autonomy" (p. 52). Hsiao and Oxford (2002) acknowledged that "[l]earning strategies for L2s help build learner autonomy, which requires the learner to take conscious control of his or her own learning process" (p. 369).

Ample evidence proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that a strong relationship was forged between learner strategies and the facilitation of autonomy. That is, learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy (Ellis, 199; Williams & Burden; 1997; Wenden, 1985, 1992; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Oxford, 2001, Hsiao & Oxford, 2002).

From a wealth of information available, Kumaravadivelu (2006) rightly noted that promoting learner autonomy is a pedagogical imperative inasmuch as language is largely an autonomous activity. To operationalize the idea of 'learning how to learn', learners require to be equipped with the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies which are prerequisites for self-direction of their own learning, to be made aware of and gain insight into strategies applied by good language learners, and to be coached the strategies explicitly and systematically. In summary, what seems to be quite clear is that proficient L2 learners show strong tendency to possess and employ a wide array of strategies than less proficient learners (O'Malley &Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 1996, & 2008).

STRATEGY TAXONOMIES AND CLASSIFICATIONS

Literally, there are currently hundreds of various classifications of language learner strategies in existence alongside with the myriad of definitions (e.g., Rubin, 1981, 1987; O'Malley &Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992; Ellis 1994). Most of these attempts mirror more or less the same categorizations of language learner strategies without any extreme variation. Whatever their personal sacrifice, these investigators have done us a grand service, for their collections and classifications of language learner strategies led to important discoveries about the nature of language learner strategies.

Joan Rubin (1987), the pioneer of the field, categorizes language learner strategies into three major kinds of strategies, namely *Learning*, *Communication*, and *Social* based on the criteria of whether the strategy contributes directly or indirectly to learning. Learner strategies directly affect learning and contribute to the development of language system. Communication strategies which are less directly related to language learning have to do with the communication processes of participation in a conversation and clarification of speakers' intended meaning. And Social strategies afford learners opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge.

In another attempt, O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) have classified language learner strategies into three primary categories: *Metacognitive* strategies, *Cognitive* strategies and *Affective* or

Social strategies. In their opinion, Metacognitive strategies include "higher order executive skills that may entail planning for monitoring or evaluating the success of a learning activity" (O'Malley &Chamot, 1990, p.44). Cognitive strategies encompass the manipulation or transformation of the material to be learned, and Socioaffective strategies mainly include the learner in communicative interaction with another person.

In a more comprehensive and detailed classification model, Oxford (1990) made a distinction between *direct* and *indirect* strategies. On the one hand, direct strategies are subdivided into three groups of *Memory*, *Cognitive*, and *Compensation* strategies which contribute directly to learning. On the other hand, indirect strategies contribute indirectly but effectively to learning and also subdivided into three groups of *Metacognitive*, *Affective*, and *Social* strategies. Though various investigators acknowledged that Oxford's classification is more comprehensive and superior, it is not without faults as Oxford herself concedes. There is a lack of consensus on the basic definitions of the terms 'direct' or 'indirect', on what exactly strategies are, how many strategies we really have, how we should define, demarcate, and categorize them.

FEATURES OF LEARNER STRATEGIES

Understanding the features of language learner strategies is unquestionably important to an understanding of the nature of LLS. Griffiths (2004a) posits out that lack of consensus amongst researchers regarding the definition and classification of learning strategies is a contributory factor in our relatively unclear and imperfect understanding of the concept of learner strategies. A potential way out of the dilemma proposed by Griffiths (2004a) is knowing and getting to make sense of learner strategies more fully by resorting to a set of distinguishing features. Some common features of language learner strategies suggested by Wenden (1997), Lessard-Cloustan (1997), and Oxford (1990) are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Features of learner strategies by Wenden (1997), Lessard-Cloustan (1997), and Oxford (1990)

Charateristics of LLS		
Wenden (1987)	Lessard-Cloustan (1997)	Oxford (1990)
1. Contribute directly and indirectly to learning 2. Observable and unobservable 3. Problem oriented responding to the need 4. Specifications/ Techniques	1. Enhance language learning and develop competency 2. Visible or unseen 3. Involve information and memory 4. Learner generated-deliberate steps	1. Contribute to communicative competence 2. Observable and unobservable 3. Are problem oriented 4. Are action based 5. Expand the role of language teachers

LANGUAGE LEARNER STRATEGIES AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Successful learners are aware of strategy use (1999; O'Malley &Chamot, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995, Oxford, 2008). The point is, more proficient language learners not only tend to have and exploit a variety of strategies than less proficient language learners (Oxford, 2008), but also are typically aware of strategies at their disposal, can evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies, and can choose strategies appropriately (Chamot& O'Malley, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990, 2008; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot& El-Dinary, 1999).

Ample empirical evidence stresses the centrality of LLS, especially metacognitive and cognitive strategies to language learning process because they are frequently used by successful language learners (Abraham & Van, 1987; Wharton, 2000; Bruen, 2001). To be more exact, what distinguishes proficient from less proficient learners is the conscious ability to gain mastery over their knowledge and learning process.

CONCLUSION

This article was sought to provide a brief overview of LLS. It examined their background and summarizing the relevant literature from the very beginning of language strategy studies which were mainly concerned with identification of various strategies utilized by GLL to date. It has also outlined different strategy classifications and their importance for increasing learners' language proficiency and independence. Teaching LLS is a necessity which needs careful considerations by language teachers.

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