Issues in Language Learning Strategies

By

Ali Derakhshan [1], Rahebeh Tamaskani [2] and Maryam Faribi [3]

[1]Assistant Professor at Golestan University, Department of English Language and Literature, Gorgan, Iran
[2]Department of English Language Teaching, Golestan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran,
[3]Department of English Language Teaching, Golestan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, **Iran.**

Abstract

Learning strategies are intentional behaviours and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information. They are not only tools to assist language learning, but they are also tools to serve many other purposes both in learning and using a second language. There are different types of language learning strategies. By having more knowledge about these strategies, we can gain more information about complex system of language learning and teaching. Successful language learners apply more and better strategies while weak language learners use fewer strategies. An important point is that there are no good or bad strategies; instead, there is good or bad application of strategies. How learners process new information and what kind of strategies they use to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of language learning. The aim of this paper is to review language learning strategies. Different definitions, classifications, and Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) are provided which are important both for teachers and students. The paper concludes with some implications of these strategies in English classes.

Keywords: Strategy, SILL, Affective Variables, Motivation, Current Issues.

1. Introduction

Language learning strategies are conscious actions that learners use to learn a foreign or second language. These strategies are different and dependent on learners' personality. Different researchers defined them from different point of view. Rubin (as cited in Tseng, 2005, p.322) identified six characteristics of the these strategies: 1)strategies refer to specific actions or techniques, they are not characteristics that describe a learner's general approach, 2)some of these actions will be observable and others will not be observable, 3)strategies are problem oriented. Learners utilize them to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information. 4)strategies will be used to refer to language learning behaviours that contribute directly to learning, 5)sometimes strategies may be consciously deployed. For certain learning problems, strategies can become automated and remain below conscious or potentially conscious, 6) strategies are behaviours that are amenable to change.

Grenfell and Harris (as cited in Chamot, 2005, p.112) pointed that learning strategies are important in second language learning and teaching for two major reasons. First by examining the strategies used by second language learners during the language learning process, we gain insights to the meta cognitive, cognitive, social, and affective processes involved in language learning. The second reason supporting research into language learning strategies is that less successful language learners can be taught new strategies, thus helping them become better language learners. Furthermore, the better understanding of language learning strategies for English teachers can help students to learn more successfully and develop their learning autonomy (Lee, 2010).

Abhacorn (2008) suggested that "the strategies training should provide the learners with repertoire of strategies which they can choose the strategies that they feel comfortable to use with a specific task". According to Chamot (2005), learning strategies are identified through various self-report procedures. Although self-report is always subject to error, no better way has yet been devised for identifying

learners' mental processes and techniques for completing a learning task. Learning strategies are for the most part unobservable, though some may be associated with an observable behaviour.In this paper, different definitions of language learning strategies, some studies, affective factors and current issues of these strategies are reviewed.

2. Literature Review

Definition of Language Learning Strategy
There are different definitions of language learning strategies. Some of them are introduced below.

> The term strategy is from Greek strategia 'command of a general'. In broad modernusage, a strategy is a plan that is consciously aimed at meeting a goal; the warlike meaning of the term has largely fallen away, but conscious control, intention, and goal-directedness remain essential criteria for strategy.(Oxford, 2003, p.274)

Wenden(as cited in Lee, 2010, p.136) described language learning strategies from the aspect of language learning behaviours, included learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language. According to him another aspect of language learning behaviours is cognitive theory which includes learner's strategic knowledge of language learning and affective view is the final aspect of language learning behaviour, such as learner's motivation, attitude. Chamot (2005) believed that "learning strategies are procedures that facilitate a learning task. Strategies are most often conscious and goal-driven, especially in the beginning stages of tackling an unfamiliar language task" (p.112).According to Chamot (2004) " language strategies are the thoughts and actions that individuals use to accomplish a learning goal"(p.14).

Learning strategies are thoughts and actions that learners consciously use in order to gain the goal of learning. Strategic learners, who have meta cognitive knowledge about their own thinking and also learning approaches based on the text, use appropriate and related strategies to meet both the task demands and their own learning needs (Chamot, 2004).

Rigney (as cited in Oxford, 1989, p.235) stated that "learning strategies are operations used by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, or retrieval of information, according to one familiar definition". Oxford (1989) believed that learners use particular behaviours or actions tolearn language more successful; these behaviours and actions are language learning strategies. According to Chamot (2005), the type of language strategies which learner used, depends on the context. In other words the context shows what strategies they need to apply. For example to learn vocabulary students should memorize the meaning of new words; so in this task memorization is an appropriate learning strategy. "The learners' choice of which memorization strategy to use will depend on their understanding of their own learning process and on which strategies have been successful in the past" (Hsiao, as cited in Chamot, 2005, p.113). "Language learners will be successful in the task due to use of an appropriate language learning strategy" (Richards as cited in Lee, 2010, p.137).

L2 strategies are explained as any strategies that are related to the L2, such as strategies for learning or using the L2 (Cohen, as cited inOxford, 2003, p.274). "L2 learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps, techniques [or thoughts] – such as seeking out conversation patterns, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task – used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, as cited in Oxford, 2003, p.274). There are hundreds of language learning strategies; L2 learning strategies help language learners to promote their knowledge and information of   language (Oxford, 2003).

Anderson (2005, p.757) stated that:

> Perceptive second/foreign language (L2) learners are those who are aware of and use appropriate strategies for learning and communicating in a second language. The purpose of strategy use is to improve performance in the learning and use of ones' second language. Strategies are the *conscious* actions that learners take to improve their language learning. Strategies may be observable, such as observing someone take notes during an academic lecture to recall information better, or they may be mental, such as thinking about what one already knows on a topic before reading a passage in a textbook. Because strategies are conscious, there is active involvement of the L2 learner in their selection and use. Strategies are not isolated actions, but rather a process of orchestrating more than one action to accomplish an L2 task. It may be helpful to view strategy use as an orchestra. Rarely does an instrument sound good alone. However, when combined with other instruments, beautiful music results. Although we can identify individual strategies, rarely will one strategy be used in isolation. Strategies are related to each other and much be viewed as a process and not as a single action.

A specific language strategy is not good or bad. It is useful when it is applied in context. The strategy itself cannot be important. It should be used in the context. There are three conditions under which strategy is useful : (a) According to the L2 task, the related strategy should be applied; in other words, there will be relationship between L2 task and applied strategy, (b) The strategy is dependent on student's learning style because each learner has his/her own learning style. Based on the learning style, appropriate learning strategy will be used, and (c) The learner uses the strategy effectively; s/he connect it with other related and useful strategies (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003).

Strategies that fulfil these conditions "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self- directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, as cited in Ehrman et al., 2013, p.315) According to Oxford, "learners need to develop skills from strategic learning that will enable them to develop an understanding of the task that can help them in the decision-making process" (Oxford,2011, p.47).

Features of Language Learning Strategies
Language Learning Strategies have the following features. They
1. contribute to the man goal; communicative competence.
2. allow learners to become more self-directed.
3. expand the role of teachers.
4. are problem – oriented.
5. are specific actions taken by the learner.
6. involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
7. support learning both directly and indirectly.
8. are not always observable.
9. are often conscious.
10. can be taught.
11. are flexible.
12. are influenced by a variety of factors.
    (Oxford, p.18)

Language learners apply language learning strategies which can be interpreted as a means to acquire and to use information that learners have acquired, stored or recalled. Moreover, using these strategies can also promote autonomous learning" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 78-9)

Research in Language Learning Strategies

Research in language learning strategies started in the early seventies. Rubin (as cited in Chamot, 2005, p.115)suggested that"a model of the good language learner could be constructed by looking at special strategies used by successful L2 students". In cognitive psychology, studies of learning strategies with L1 learners have concentrated on determining the effects of strategy training on different kinds of tasks and learners. Research done in cognitive psychology has also shown that successful learners have effective ways of processing information and that these strategies can be taught to other learners. What is not clear from the literature on cognitive psychology research however is why these strategies are effective in the learning process and what the link is between strategies and mental process (Nambiar, 2009,p.133)

The research about learning strategies in L2 acquisition in the 1970s encompassed our understanding of how strategies increase and support language learning. The focus of research in the 1980s was on the effects of strategy training on different learners and tasks (Nambiar, 2009).Many researchers worked in this area such as Weinstein and Mayer who believed that the role of learning strategies in learning process can be best understood by means of information processing (Weinstein & Mayer).

The information processing framework has been developed by research done in cognitive psychology in the 1980s, and this was a significant contribution particularly for language learning (O'Mally, Chamot, & Stewner-Manzanares, 1985). At that time there were some distinctions among different kinds of strategies; it was helpful for researchers to classify strategies into different categories. In the 1970s,researchersonly made a simple list of strategies, but in the 1980s they classified them into categories. In this area studies done in cognitive psychology and learning strategies revealed that some of them have theoretical base in cognitive theory. Research in language learning strategies in the 1990s was conducted on variables affecting choice of these strategies such as proficiency, learning environment, age, gender, learning style, ethnicity, motivation and beliefs (Nambiar, 2009).

Oxford proposed language learning strategies in 1990s. It included two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies sub-divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies divided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Oxford, 1990).

According to Oxford (1990):

1. Cognitive strategies enable the learners to manipulate the language material indirect ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, and synthesizing.
2. Meta cognitive strategies (e.g., identifying one's own preferences and needs, planning, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success) are used to manage the learning process overall.
3. Memory-related strategies (e.g., acronyms, sound similarities, images, keywords) help learners link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding.
4. Compensatory strategies (e.g., guessing from the context; circumlocution; and gestures and pause words) help make up for missing knowledge.
5. Affective strategies, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, help learners manage their emotions and motivation level.
6. Social strategies (e.g., asking questions, asking for clarification, asking for help, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) enable the learner to learn via interaction with others and understand the target culture (p. 58).

This system concluded that successful language learners apply strategies in six categories: meta cognitive, affective, social, memory, cognitive and compensatory. By meta cognitive strategies, good language learners handle the process of learning; they can pay attention and evaluate themselves. By affective strategies they control their emotions such as anxiety and self-encouragement. With social

strategies they cooperate and work with others. By using memory strategies they get knowledge and information into memory and when they need, they can recall it. By cognitive strategies they use the new language directly. By using compensatory strategies like guessing meanings, they can overcome knowledge limitations (Oxford, 1989). Considering social strategies, Slavin (1980) investigated that students who learned to use cooperative learning strategies had a better performance in comparison to those students who did not the chance of such a training. Brown and Palinscar (1982) contended that "an ideal training package would consist of both practice in the use of tasks-appropriate strategies, instruction concerning the significance of those activities, and instruction concerning the monitoring and control of strategy use" (p. 7).

In comparison to other language learning strategies, SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) as mentioned above, was more comprehensive and detailed. Researchers such as Ehrman& Oxford, 1989; Oxford &Nyikos, 1989; Phillips, 1991; Green, 1991 applied SILL and stated that using language learning strategies influence language proficiency greatly, so as a result of this finding, researchers have focused on variables that affect language learning strategy use (Lee, 2010). Some of these factors will be introduced below.

Affective Variables
As mentioned earlier, in the 1990s the focus of researchers was on the variables affecting the choice of learning strategies among different group learners (Nambiar, 2009). There are many factors that influence learners using learning strategies.

Proficiency
Based on different studies done on proficiency (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Park, 1997; Sheorey, 1999) it was found that high correlation and important relationships exist between proficiency and language learning strategies. Language learners, who use these strategies more than others, acquire more language proficiency. These relations should be studied more in order to help language learners to understand target language and use it more successfully and effectively (Lee, 2010).

Learning Style
According to Pushler, McDaniel, Rohrer and Bjork (2008) the term learning style refers to the concept that individuals differ in regard to what mode of instruction or study is most effective for them (p. 105). Studying learning style deals with important factors such as personality and cognitive style which can detect specific abilities, predict possible performance, and enhance teaching and learning in any classroom (Ehrman et al., 2013). Nambiar (2009) believed that "learning styles refer to the specific cognitive, affective and psychological traits that determine how a learner processes information" (p.142). According to the type of language learning styles which learners use, we can distinguish one from another. As a result of this factor, some learners are visually or auditory oriented or they are different in their tolerance of ambiguity (Nambiar, 2009). Learning strategies refer to particular behaviours. Learning style represents general learning tendencies and how learners solve problems (Oxford, 1989).
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A learner's ability and willingness to work is very much determined by his/her learning style and the learning strategies s/he employs to help him/her cope within various instructional methodologies. Understanding learner's individual style preferences can help teachers to orient their L2 instruction and also apply appropriate strategy training. (Nambiar, 2009, p.142)

Language Being Learned
Oxford(1989) stated that the language being learned affects the strategies that are used. Learners learn languages for different purposes; based on learners' different goals they choose appropriate strategies.

Beliefs

About people's beliefs, Nambiar (2009) pointed out that "all learners have strong beliefs about how languages are learned and this will determine their strategy use because research has shown that their strategy use is consistent with the beliefs they have about learning" (p.143).

According to the studies in this subject, there is cyclical relationship between learner's belief and using strategy (Yang, 1999). It is shown that learner's beliefs have effects on the type of learner's learning strategies. Yu (2007) investigated that third-year Chinese college students concentrate on form-focus belief. He came up with the conclusion that there is a high correlation between beliefs and the use of special strategies by these students. The comparison of beliefs about language learning and strategy use among native Korean and Bilingual Korean-Chinese university students revealed that bilinguals had stronger beliefs and consequently they used more learning strategies (Hong, 2006)

Degrees of Awareness

It refers to metacognitive awareness; a learner's degree of understanding about him/ herself and also about his/her learning process such as learner's own proficiency, age, social role, character, learning style etc. The learners' degree of knowledge about themselves can influence their useof language learning strategies (Wenden, as cited in Oxford,1998,p.237).

Motivation

According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989) strong relationship exists between motivation and learning strategies. In other words students with high level of motivation use more strategies than students with low motivation. They indicated that among all the factors they studied, motivation has the most influence on using learning strategies; language learners with high motivation have more tendency to use more strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

Theprime determining factor [in language learning success] is motivation" (Gardner, as cited in Oxford, 1989, p.239), because this factor identifies the level of active personal engagement in language learning(Oxford, 1989). According to Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning that was proposed by Gardner and Lambert in 1972,there are two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental; the first one refers to the learner's positive attitude toward the foreign culture and his/her tendency to participate as a member of this society; the second one refers to specific goal of learners to learn language in order to use it for particular purpose. Researchers in this area believed that language learners with integrative motivation are more successful learners than who use instrumental motivation (Ehram et al., 2003).

Deci and Ryan (as cited in Ehram et al.,2003,p.320) suggested intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is within the person, and it is related to people's identity. When learning is the only goal of the learners, they are intrinsically motivated, so they do all tasks and enjoyment of the activity is their reward. Extrinsic motivation comes from the outside the person. When students learn just for giving rewards (such as grades), they are extrinsically motivated. Some studies indicated that a close correlation exists between intrinsic motivation and language learning than between extrinsic motivation and language learning, but a learner's total motivation is almost the combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ehram et al., 2003). Biggs (1992) sought the possible relationship between intrinsic motivation and deep strategies and concluded that it is possible to treat motivation in parallel with strategies. Cohen (1998) conducted a research in the realm of strategy use and accumulated a list of materials which could help students to be aware of their learning. His findings had applicable advantages for teacher training programs, too.

The relationship between students' motivation and achievement in English and teacher motivation and strategy use in the classroom, will be defined.

Teacher motivation is related to teacher use of motivation strategies, which in turn are related to student motivation and English Achievement. Thus, any change in the educational system that promotes higher levels of teacher motivation should result in improved levels of education of the students. (Bernaus, Garden & Wilson, 2009, p.33-34)

Current Issues in Language Learning Strategies Research and Instruction
According to a few studies in this field, some of these issues are defined below.

Identification of Language Learning Strategies
The only way to identify student's language   learning strategy is through self-report protocol. Although the learner may not be truthful, it is the only way to define learners mental processing. In other words in all learning context which learner involved in language task, asking them is the only method to determine learner's used language strategies. There are some tools to find learner's strategy through asking them, such as questionnaire. Teachers can use questionnaire appropriated for the proficiency and age of their students. The students should complete it after completing the task. Teachers can apply SILL (as mentioned earlier), to understand a global picture of the learner's learning strategies. These methods help learners to promote their metacognition as strategic learners (Chamot, 2004).

Terminology and Classification of Language Learning Strategies
There are various classification systems to understand individual strategies such as strategies that affect specific learning task directly and those that influence learning indirectly. To classify these strategies, there are important factors which include student's learning goal or teacher's instructional goals. Language learners have particular purposes for learning foreign language. The teacher's purposes of teaching language are also different. Context is another significant factor. It means that in which society students are learning a new language. The combination of goal and context identify useful kinds of learning tasks and appropriate strategies that can help learners. In a language classroom teacher should understand their students' metacognition and students should know how to use appropriate strategies (Chamot, 2005).

Learning Strategies and Learning Characteristics
Linking learner's used strategy with learner's variable such as level of proficiency is a significant part of research on learner's language strategies. The level of proficiency in language learners depends on the number and range of strategies that they use, how they apply these strategies and the appropriateness of used strategies for the task. Students with higher level of proficiency have less anxiety and they are more self-confident (Khaldieh. as cited in Chamot, 2004, p.18). Students should know different leaning strategies. They should be able to evaluate these strategies and finally choose a set of effective and useful strategies (Chamot, 2004).\

Influence of Culture and Context
Important factors such as learner's goals, the context of learning, cultural values of the learner's society have great influence on the choice of language strategies. Researchers should find the strategies which learners used in learning .Based on student's used strategies teachers can find out what cultural and contextual factors influence them (Chamot, 2004).

Language of Instruction
To teach first language, this factor is not important, but in the second language contexts, there are some problems because beginning learners do not have enough L2 proficiency to understand lessons in foreign language, and also they do not know how to use language learning strategies. For beginners learning these strategies should not be delayed because they should use them to increase their motivation and learn better (Chamot,2004). According to few studies in this field, (Chamot,2005) stated that "it seems clear

that the issue of language of instruction in teaching language learning strategies is far from resolved, and may need to be addressed as a context-specific factor"(p.123).

Explicit and Integrated Strategy Instruction

"Explicit instruction includes the development of students' awareness of their strategies, teacher modeling of strategic thinking, identifying the strategies by name, providing opportunities for practice and self-evaluation" (Chamot, 2005, p.123). Given the related studies, teachers should choose explicit instruction. They also should integrate the chosen instruction into their courseworkthat they have regularly. They should not prepare separated courses for learning strategies (Chamot, 2004). Although some researchers believe in positive effects of integrated strategy instruction (Chamot& O'Malley, 1994; Chamot et al., 1999; Cohen, 1998; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Nunan, 1997; Oxford & Leaver, 1996), other researchers concerned about its negative impact. Similarly, some scholars believe in the use of explicit strategy instruction Chamot et al., 1999; Cohen, 1998; Nunan, 1997; O'Malley &Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Shen, 2003) while other researchers do not.

3. Conclusion

As mentioned in this paper, different researchers have identified various definitions for language learning strategies. General concepts of them have been described. These strategies can help students to learn and understand a foreign language better. When teachers have enough knowledge about these strategies, they can teach better and be a successful teacher. The most influential strategy system is Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL) introduced by Oxford.

Moreover, the studies indicated that there were correlations between affecting variables and language learning strategies, for example the level of learner's proficiency influenced learning strategies. According to the analysis of learning styles, beliefs, language being learned, degree of awareness and motivation were some affecting factors that influenced on learner's choice of learning strategies. Motivation had strong effect on choosing these strategies.

Some current issues in language learning strategies were mentioned. Studies indicated that these issues related to research and instruction such as identification of language learning strategies, terminology and classification of language learning strategies, learning strategies and learning characteristics, influence of culture and context, language of instruction, and explicit and integrated strategy instruction.

Finding learner's language strategies is complex because they are related to student's cognition. Successful teachers use methods to understand their students' behaviours and learning strategies to help the students learn better and enjoy learning.

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