

Language learning strategies and their role in the context of effective language learning

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Abstract

Knowledge of a foreign language, especially English, is a valuable tool in today's international, globalized world. It opens the door to the whole world in the way of knowing, understanding and communicating with other cultures. The call for the strengthening of linguistic competences by improving the quality and efficiency of education and training has been announced by the Education Council of European Union. Therefore, language learning strategies, as factors affecting success or failure of language learning process, should be taken into consideration.

Key words Language learning, Language learning strategies, Effective language learning

1 LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia*, which describes „*steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. The warlike meaning of strategia has fortunately fallen away, but the control and goal directedness remain in the modern version of the word* (Oxford, 2003, p. 8). Although language learning strategies have been widely defined by many researchers of foreign/second language learning, there has been little agreement on defining language learning strategies among researchers for a long time.

Oxford (1990, p. 1) presented a definition that language learning strategies are “*specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use—often consciously—to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2*”. However, Cohen (1998, p. 4) described language

learning strategies as *“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”*. Moreover, Chamot (2004, p. 14) defined language learning strategies as *“the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal”*.

Due to controversial debates over defining language learning strategies various technical terms have been introduced in defining language learning strategies: *mental process* (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990), *behaviors* or *actions* (Oxford, 1990), *skills* or *operations* or *plans* (Rubin, 1975), *techniques* (Stern, 1975), *thoughts* (Chamot, 2004), etc. Language learning strategies, as a mental process, have been identified by many researchers. Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford (2003) argued that there had been potential vagueness in language learning strategies definition due to no explicit definition of cognitive learning. In the same sense, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) pointed out that clear theoretical demonstration had been missing to decide whether strategies are cognitive processes, behavioral actions, or psychological responses. In defining learning strategies, Macaro and Cohen (2007) explained that strategies are not simply knowledge but contain a mental action that can be described by the teacher or researcher. Therefore, in the field of foreign/second language learning, researchers have focused on questioning how language learners themselves contribute cognitively and psychologically to learning language concerning how language learners learn, comprehend, store language, and retrieve it for use.

1.1 THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Although already mentioned academic consensus on definition of language learning strategies is missing, the role of language learning strategies is unquestionable. As widely known, some language learners are more successful than others in their language learning, because of the use of language learning strategies. Oxford (1990, p. 1) stated that *„strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence“*.

When a language learner consciously chooses strategies which fit his or her learning style in her or his language learning process, these strategies become a *„useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning“* (Oxford, 2003, p. 2). Strategies can be used in combination with other strategies or used simultaneously. As proposed by Oxford (1990), there is no good or bad strategy; strategy is essentially neutral until its use is thoroughly considered. And now the question is *„What*

makes a strategy positive and helpful for a given learner? A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: (a) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies“ (Oxford, 2003, p. 8). Strategies that fulfill these conditions “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). In addition, learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners. (Oxford, 2003)

Furthermore, Oxford (1990, p. 9) presented the key characteristics or features of language learning strategies as follows: „ 1) contribute to the main 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 learners, 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, and 12) are influenced by a variety of factors”. Oxford (1990) further emphasized that these characteristics of strategies instruction help to facilitate a learner driven learning atmosphere rather than the transmission of knowledge from teachers to learners.

The main reasons for using language learning strategies in the foreign language learning process are presented as follows:

- Strategic differences between more and less effective learners have been documented. Better learners have greater metacognitive awareness, which helps them select appropriate strategies for a specific task.
- Most students can learn how to use learning strategies more effectively.
- Many strategies can be used for a variety of tasks, but most students need guidance in transferring a familiar strategy to new problems.
- Learning strategies instruction can increase students' motivation in two main ways: by increasing students' confidence in their own learning ability and by providing students with specific techniques for successful language learning.
- Students who have learned how and when to use learning strategies become more self-reliant and better able to learn independently. (Teaching language learning strategies, p.3)

1.2 OXFORD'S CLASSIFICATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

The Oxford's classification is well-known and has been referred to in many studies. She categorized language learning strategies into six major categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies,

comprehension strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies which “*involve direct learning and use of the subject matter, in this case a new language*” (Oxford, 1990, p. 11) whereas Indirect strategies fall into the metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, which “*support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language*” (Oxford, 1990, p.135)

Direct Memory strategies help learners store and retrieve new information. Various memory strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard). For language learning, the arrangement and associations must be personally meaningful to the learner, and the material to be reviewed must have significance. Memory strategies enable learners to store and then retrieve new information when needed for communication. Moreover, structured reviewing helps learner move information from the „fact level“ to the „skill level“, where knowledge is more procedural and automatic. Although memory strategies are viewed as powerful contributors to language learning, some researches (e.g. Nyikos and Oxford, 1987) reported that language students rarely use these strategies. (In: Oxford, 1990)

Direct Cognitive strategies enable the learner to understand and produce new language by many different ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally. Cognitive strategies are considered to be essential in language learning, moreover, are reported to be the most popular among language learners. The findings of O'Malley et al (1985) (In: Oxford, 1990) showed that high school and college students of foreign/second language use more cognitive strategies than metacognitive. The leading position among the cognitive strategies belongs to strategies for practicing. There is not enough practicing the language not only in class but also outside the class. The researches (Bialystok, 1981, Ramirez, 1986) highlighted naturalistic practicing (e.g. authentic material) at all levels of language learning. (In: Oxford, 1990)

Direct Compensatory strategies (e.g., guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and “talking around” the missing word to aid speaking and writing; and strictly for speaking, using gestures or pause words) allows learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in

knowledge because of inadequate learners' repertoire of grammar and, especially, of vocabulary. Compensation mostly occurs not just in understanding the new language but also in producing it, i.e. compensation strategies allow learners to produce spoken or written expression in the new language without complete knowledge. In addition, compensatory strategies help learners overcome limitation connected with the knowledge of the target language in all four language skills and at all levels of the language competence. Furthermore, learners skilled in compensatory strategies can communicate better than learners who know more target language words and structures when they run into the knowledge roadblocks. Researches (e.g. Rubin, 1975) (In: Oxford, 1990) pointed out that good language learners can guess the meaning of the unknown word/structure correctly due to their prior experience, knowledge. On the other hand, not so successful students get anxious, look every word up in dictionaries, which make their learning process slower, moreover, have negative influence on their motivation and further language learning. (Oxford, 1990)

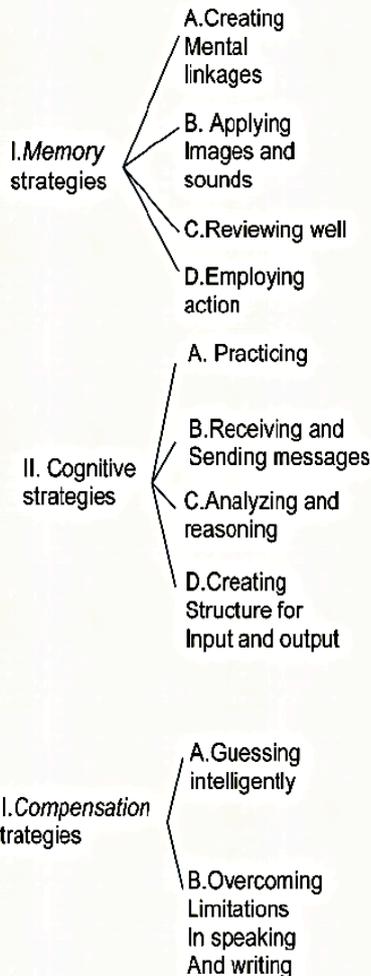
Indirect Metacognitive strategies allows learners to control their own cognition – their own learning process, i.e. to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, evaluating (e.g., identifying one's own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy). They are considered to be essential for successful language learning, especially accurately evaluating progress in language learning and seeking practice opportunities are considered to be crucial. Although metacognitive strategies are extremely important, research by Chamot et al (1987) (In: Oxford, 1990) shows that learners use these strategies sporadically and without much sense of their importance. In several studies of foreign language learning students used metacognitive strategies less often than cognitive strategies and were limited in their range of metacognitive strategies, with planning strategies most frequently employed and with little self-evaluation and self-monitoring. (Oxford, 1990)

Indirect Affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations, attitudes, and values (e.g. identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk). The affective side of the learner is probably one of the biggest influences on language learning success or failure. Good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning because negative feeling can stunt language learning progress, whereas positive emotions and attitudes can make language learning far more effective and enjoyable. In addition, research findings (e.g. Gardner et al, 1985) (In: Oxford, 1990) suggested that the combined attitude/motivation factor strongly influences whether the learner loses or

maintains language skills after language training is over. Self-encouragement strategies are powerful ways to improve attitudes and, thus, motivation. Another study (Naiman et al, 1978) (In: Oxford, 1990) discovered that tolerance for ambiguity is one of the two factors that predicts success in foreign language learning. Other studies (e.g. Chapelle, 1983, Ehrman and Oxford, 1989) (In: Oxford, 1990) have found that language learners who are tolerant of ambiguity are more successful in certain language tasks and may use somewhat more effective learning strategies. Few studies (Chamot et al, 1987) (In: Oxford, 1990) have examined the frequency of use of affective strategies, the results reveal that these strategies are underused - reported about 1 in every 20 language learners. (Oxford, 1990)

Indirect Social strategies help the learner learn through interaction with others and understand the target culture as well as the language (e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms). Language is a form of social behavior, it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Therefore, social strategies are very important in language learning process. One of the most basic social interactions is asking questions. The conversation partner's response to the learner's question indicates whether the question itself was understood, thus providing indirect feedback about the learner's production skills. In addition, cooperating in with peers and with more successful learners of the target language is imperative for language learners. Many studies (e.g. Sharan et al, 1985, Dansereau, 1988) (In: Oxford, 1990) outlined that cooperative learning shows the following significant effects: higher self-esteem; increase confidence and enjoyment; greater and more rapid achievement; more respect for the teacher, the school and subject; use of higher level cognitive strategies; decreased prejudice; increased altruism and mutual concern, better student and teacher satisfaction; stronger language learning motivation; more language practice opportunities; more feedback about language errors, and greater use of different language functions. However, research (Reid, 1987) (In: Oxford, 1990) showed that language learners do not typically report a natural preference for cooperative strategies. It can be due to competition which is strongly promoted in competition for approval, attention, and grades among students in school environment. Therefore, it should be crucial for teachers to create cooperative language learning environment. (Oxford, 1990)

Direct Strategies



Indirect Strategies

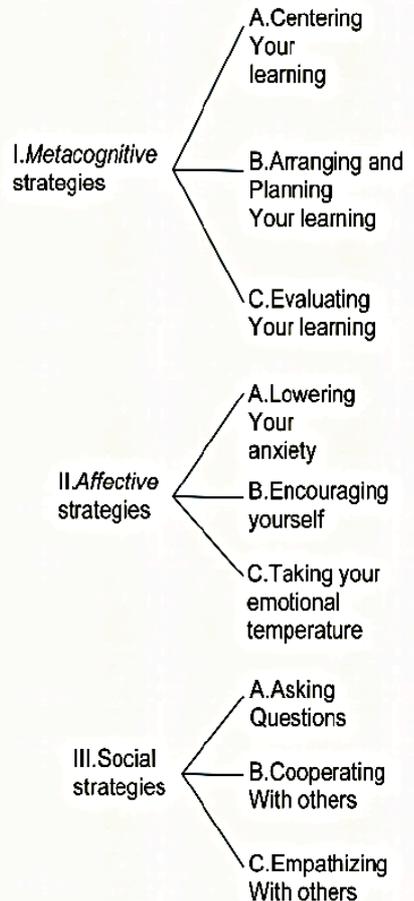


Figure 1 Oxford's Classification of Language Learning Strategies (Oxford, 1990, p. 17)

2 CONCLUSION

Despite of the missing agreement on definition, it can be said that language learning strategies could be described as some kind of decisions or steps affecting learner's behavior in his or her language learning process in order to maximize the effort on his or her path of enhancing the target language learning. Students are not always aware of the power of consciously using language learning strategies for making their learning quicker and more effective. Therefore, skilled teachers should be the one who would help

their students develop the awareness of language learning strategies and enable them to use a wider range of appropriate strategies for further success in their students' language learning.

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