

## Learning Strategies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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**Abstract** *The aim of this paper is to provide a contemporary portrait of second language learning and teaching and to illustrate ways teachers can incorporate these ideas in their own teaching practice. It attempts to clarify some of the fuzziness by trying first of all to establish basic terminology and going on to discuss definition and classification of language learning strategies. This article provides an overview of language learning strategies for second language teachers. Using language learning strategies and training in the L2 class not only encourages learners in their language learning but also helps teachers reflect on and improve their teaching. The development of language learning strategy theory and how it fits into the framework of contemporary language teaching and learning for students who speak other languages is examined, and research on language learning strategies to date is reviewed.*

**Key-word:** *learning strategies, research, second language acquisition, teaching.*

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### 1. Introduction

Within the field of education over the last few decades a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. In parallel to this new shift of interest, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of the researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning.

This paper aims to provide an overview of language learning strategies for second language teachers. It outlines the background of language learning strategies, gives various definitions of language learning strategies presented by several researchers, trying first of all to establish basic terminology and going on to discuss classification of language learning strategies by different researchers. It also stresses the importance of language learning strategies for foreign language learning and pedagogical implications.

### 2. Background of Language Learning Strategies

Research in language learning strategies began in the 1960s. Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies (Williams and Burden 1997:149). In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do, to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language." (Rubin and Wenden 1987:19).

Aaron Carton published his study entitled "The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study", which was the first attempt on learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research

focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, "once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners". Rubin (1975) classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Wong-Fillmore (1976), Tarone (1977), Naiman (1978), Bialystok (1979), Cohen and Aphek (1981), Wenden (1982), Chamot and O'Malley (1987), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Conti and Kolsody (1997), and many others studied strategies used by language learners during the process of foreign language learning.

### 3. Definition and Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies

All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required, that is, using language learning strategies is inescapable.

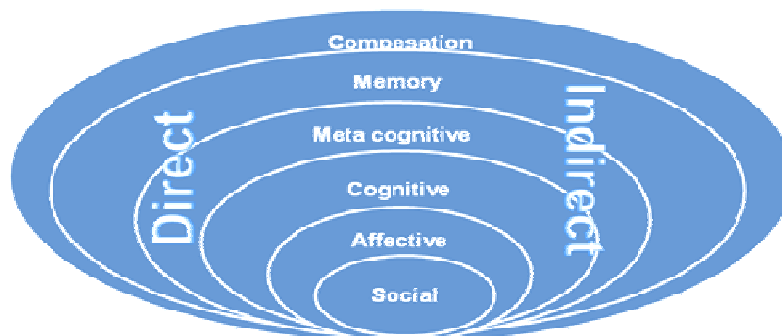
O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined Language Strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information"

Oxford (1992/1993) provides this helpful definition: "...language learning strategies -- specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing Second Language skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability." (Oxford, 1992/1993, p. 18)

From these definitions, a change over time may be noted: from the early focus on the product of Language Learning Strategies (linguistic or sociolinguistic competence), there is now a greater emphasis on the processes and the characteristics of Language Learning Strategies. At the same time, we should note that Language Learning Strategies are distinct from learning styles, which refer more broadly to a learner's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills, though there appears to be an obvious relationship between one's language learning style and his or her usual or preferred language learning strategies.

### 4. Language Learning Strategy Classifications

Oxford divides strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies refer to subconscious tasks, which are inherently learnt while indirect strategies refer to more conscious strategies. These two classes are again subdivided into six sub-groups of memory, cognitive, compensation, social, affective and meta cognitive. These subsets are interwoven with each other, creating an occasional overlap in the strategy groups. Oxford's inventory is attractive in number of ways.



O'Malley and Chamot (1990: p.99), on the other hand, have distinguished strategies into three categories: cognitive, meta -cognitive and social/affective. Cognitive strategies are specified as learning steps that learners take to transform new material, for instance, contextual guessing and relating new information to other concepts from memory. Meta -cognitive strategies involve consciously directing one's own efforts into the learning task. Social/affective strategies involve interaction with another person or taking control of ones' own feelings on language learning.

Macaro (2001) conceptualizes all language learning strategies as standing in a continuum without a clear line dividing the strategy types into particular areas. Cognitive strategies lie at one end with their inherent, subconscious and meta -cognitive/social/affective at the other end with their conscious, evaluative strategies.

## 5. Importance of Language Learning Strategies in Language Learning and Teaching

Since the amount of information to be processed by language learners is high in language classroom, learners use different language learning strategies in performing the tasks and processing the new input they face. Language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. In other words, language learning strategies, while non observable or unconsciously used in some cases, give language teachers valuable clues about how their students assess the situation, plan, select appropriate skills so as to understand, learn, or remember new input presented in the language classroom.

Meta cognitive strategies improve organization of learning time, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. Cognitive strategies include using previous knowledge to help solve new problems. Socio affective strategies include asking native speakers to correct their pronunciation, or asking a classmate to work together on a particular language problem. Developing skills in three areas, such as meta cognitive, cognitive, and socio affective can help the language learner build up learner independence and autonomy whereby he can take control of his own learning.

Lessard- Clouston (1997:3) states "*that language learning strategies contribute to the development of the communicative competence of the students*". Being a broad concept, language learning strategies are used to refer to all strategies foreign language learners use in learning the target language and communication strategies are one type of language learning strategies. Language teachers aiming at developing the communicative competence of the students and language learning should be familiar with language learning strategies.

Besides developing the communicative competence of the students, teachers who train students to use language learning strategies can help them become better language learners. Helping students understand good language learning strategies and training them to develop and use such good language learning strategies can be considered to be the appreciated characteristics of a good language teacher.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

The language teacher aiming at training his students in using language learning strategies should learn about the students, their interests, motivations, and learning styles. The teacher can learn what language learning strategies students already appear to be using, observing their behavior in class. Do they ask for clarification, verification or correction? Do they cooperate with their peers or seem to have much contact outside of class with proficient foreign language users?

Besides observing their behavior in class, the teacher can prepare a short questionnaire so that students can fill in at the beginning of a course to describe themselves and their language learning. The teacher can learn the purpose of their learning a language, their favorite / least favorite kinds of class activities, and the reason why they learn a language.

It is a fact that each learner within the same classroom may have different learning styles and varied awareness of the use of strategies. The teacher cannot attribute importance to only one group and support the analytical approach or only give input by using the auditory mode. The language teacher should, therefore, provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of his students possessing different learning styles, motivations, strategy preferences, etc.

In addition to the students, the language teacher should also analyze his textbook to see whether the textbook already includes language learning strategies or language learning strategies training. The language teacher should look for new texts or other teaching materials if language learning strategies are not already included within his materials.

The language teacher should also study his own teaching method and overall classroom style. Analyzing his lesson plans, the language teacher can determine whether his lesson plans give learners chance to use a variety of learning styles and strategies or not. The teacher can see whether his teaching allows learners to approach the task at hand in different ways or not. The language teacher can also be aware of whether his strategy training is implicit, explicit, or both.

In order to provide students with opportunities to use and develop their Language Learning Strategies and to encourage more independent language learning both in class and in out-of-class activities .

Whether it is a specific conversation, reading, writing, or other class, an organized and informed focus on Language Learning Strategies and training will help students learn and provide more opportunities for them to take responsibility for their learning.

However, in implementing Language Learning Strategies and training in the Second Language classroom, it is useful for teachers to reflect on their own positive and negative experiences in Second

Language acquisition. Beyond contemplating one's own language learning, it is also crucial to reflect on one's Language Learning Strategies training and teaching in the classroom. After each class, for example, one might ponder the effectiveness of the lesson and the role of Language Learning Strategies and training within it. Do students seem to have grasped the point? Did they use the Language Learning Strategies that was modeled in the task they were to perform? What improvements for future lessons of this type or on this topic might be gleaned from students' behavior?

In addition to the teacher's own reflections, it is essential to encourage learner reflection, both during and after the Language Learning Strategies training in the class or course. In an interesting action research study involving "guided reflection" Nunan (1996) did this by asking his students to keep a journal in which they completed the following sentences: This week I studied..., I learned..., I used my English in these places..., I spoke English with these people..., I made these mistakes..., My difficulties are..., I would like to know..., I would like help with..., My learning and practicing plans for the next week are... (Nunan, 1996,)

This is just an example from the current literature how to encourage learner reflection on language learning. Whatever the context or method, it is important for Second Language learners to have the chance to reflect on their language learning and Language Learning Strategies use.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief overview of Language Learning Strategies by examining their background and summarising the relevant literature. Language learning strategies, being specific actions, behaviours, tactics, or techniques, facilitate the learning of the target language by the language learner. All language learners use language learning strategies in the learning process.

Language learning strategies appear to be among the most important variables influencing performance in a second language. Much more investigation is necessary to determine the precise role of strategies, but even at this stage in our understanding we can state that teachers need to become more aware of learning strategies through appropriate teacher training. Teachers can help their students by designing instruction that meets the needs of individuals with different stylistic preferences and by teaching students how to improve their learning strategies.

Using language learning strategies and training in the Second Language class not only encourages learners in their language learning but also helps teachers reflect on and improve their teaching. The development of language learning strategy theory and how it fits into the framework of contemporary language teaching and learning for students who speak other languages is examined, and research on language learning strategies to date is reviewed.

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