

Language Learning Strategies in Independent Settings

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Edited by

Stella Hurd and Tim Lewis

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Rebecca L. Oxford is Professor and Distinguished Scholar-Teacher at the University of Maryland. She is the author of books and articles on language learning strategies, motivation, cultural identity, and learning technologies. She served as series editor of an ESL/EFL program, *Tapestry*, published by Heinle/Thomson Learning and received a Lifetime Achievement Award, which states: 'Rebecca Oxford's research on learning strategies has changed the way the world teaches languages'.

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Cynthia White is Professor in the School of Language Studies, Massey University, New Zealand. She has research interests in language learning strategies, distance and online language learning, metacognition and teacher cognition. In 2004 Cynthia received the International TESOL Virginia French Allen Award for Scholarship and Service. In 2003 her book *Language Learning in Distance Education* was published by Cambridge University, and a co-edited book entitled *Languages and Distance Education: Evolution and Change* appeared with Multilingual Matters in 2005.

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Note

1. The Centre for Language Teaching and Research (CILT) changed its name to The National Centre for Languages (CiLT) in 2003. For ease of reference, the current name is used throughout.

Introduction

Language learning strategies have long been the subject of research. However, the majority of studies and overviews have been based on classroom contexts, and less attention has been paid to strategies appropriate for independent language learning settings, where for all, most or some of the time the teacher is physically absent. These settings include all those that require students to take a degree of responsibility for their learning, and cover self-access, self-directed, resource-based and distance learning environments. The acknowledged link between strategic competence in language learning, learner autonomy and successful outcomes is a powerful argument for bringing together state-of-the-art research into the theory and practice of language learning strategies in learning environments that do not rely on the physical presence of a teacher.

This volume of collected papers covers language learning strategies from a variety of standpoints in an international context. Its contributors are researchers and practitioners from the UK, the United States, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Canada, all of whom have written extensively in the field. Two of them (Andrew Cohen and Cynthia White) were keynote speakers at the 'Independent Language Learning: New Research Directions' conference hosted by the Open University, UK in December 2003. Others have been invited to contribute on the basis of their previously published work. A number of chapters are written by members of the Department of Languages at the Open University, who have considerable experience of the theory and practice of distance language learning. Their inputs are equally applicable to other independent settings.

The book is divided into three sections: Part 1 sets out the theoretical context in terms of the setting, the impact of individual difference on strategy choice and use, and the links between strategies and autonomy. Part 2 concentrates on strategies involving cognitive and metacognitive development in relation to the four language skills, grammar, vocabulary and intercultural learning. Metacognitive and affective strategies for self-management in independent learning contexts are the focus of Part 3, and these include learning logs, self-correction, collaborative and online strategies. The final chapter of the book examines ways of integrating strategies into independent learning.

Language Learning Strategies: Theory, Research and Practice

In Chapter 1, Cynthia White gives a comprehensive overview of the field of language learning strategies in independent learning. She starts with three dimensions of independent language learning (ILL) – context, philosophy and attributes – and explores the ways in which all of these contribute to a wider understanding of the concept and, in the case of learner attributes, relate to learning strategies, learner autonomy and learner support. Her learner-context interface theory provides a framework for understanding ILL from a learner perspective in which learners draw on their metacognitive knowledge of self, task and strategy use in order to develop ‘a meaningful interface with the learning environment’ as autonomous agents in their own learning. White’s discussion of selected landmark studies within the field of ILL focuses on two broad areas: first, the strategies learners use to respond to their particular learning contexts, and second, strategy training to enhance learner independence. She concludes that, as the field of ILL continues to evolve and diversify, sustained research is needed into the ways in which learners engage with ILL contexts, both real and virtual.

Phil Benson and Xuesong Gao investigate the interaction between individual variation and language learning strategies in Chapter 2. In the absence of research into strategy use in structured as opposed to naturalistic independent settings, their stated aim is to ‘clear the theoretical ground for further studies in this area’. From an individual differences perspective, they explore internal, external, task and contextual factors moving on to learner experience and agency. They postulate that patterns of strategy preference and use are acquired, socially constructed and context-sensitive, but highlight the difficulty of establishing a consensual view. Issues of personal and social identity are raised in their examination of studies using qualitative research methods to investigate strategy use from a sociocultural perspective, leading to a discussion of the role of agency, and the ways in which individual strategy use can change over time in response to different language learning settings. Referring to White’s (1999) learner-context interface theory, they suggest that independent language learners need to act strategically to ‘create’ environments that suit their own individual needs and the specificities of the learning setting.

Rebecca Oxford explores in Chapter 3 the relationship between independent language learning, autonomy and learning strategies. Her ‘hero with a thousand faces’ is a visual metaphor for the learner in a ‘massive globally scattered, independent L2 learning enterprise’. Oxford guides us first through the concept of multiple autonomies, including stage theories, autonomy as an element in a spiral, autonomy by degree, decision-making, and individual autonomy versus social autonomy. She then goes on to

discuss learning strategies and tactics (the use of specific strategies for particular tasks, problems and situations), focusing on strategies with particular relevance to independent language learning. Following an examination of learner development for autonomy through strategy instruction and learner reflection, Oxford moves on to a discussion of learning strategies to promote autonomous practice in six 'sample' independent learning settings, including self-access, online and distance. In conclusion, she calls for more mixed methods studies of variables likely to influence autonomy, with a stronger socio-cultural focus, and greater coordination to encourage comparability and ensure a more coherent approach.

Strategies for Skills Development in Independent Language Learning

In Chapter 4, Carolyn Gascoigne discusses reading as an interdependent process. She explores first two well-known models of reading. The first of these is 'bottom-up' and text-driven. The second is 'top-down', focuses on the reader and can be understood in terms of 'schemata', the mental frameworks that organise our world and can explain underlying connections or relationships. She then focuses on interactive models which involve the reader engaging with the text, and therefore involve both bottom-up and top-down processes working interdependently, as readers autonomously negotiate and co-construct meanings. Gascoigne goes on to identify global, interactive and metacognitive reading strategies, tools and techniques that emphasise the reflective and creative aspects of the reading process and can thus enable learners to become successful readers in independent, including technologically-mediated, learning environments. She concludes that independent learners need to be guided in reading strategy development to help them manage this aspect of their learning.

Strategies for listening comprehension are the subject of Chapter 5. Here, Larry Vandergrift presents an overview of listening strategies and how independent learners can acquire them. He highlights the multi-dimensional nature of listening comprehension and the subsequent need to take control of listening through acquiring word recognition and segmentation skills, as well as metacognitive strategies specific to L2 listening which enable learners to interpret what they hear. He focuses in particular on the development of metacognitive awareness about listening processes and its link with reflection, motivation and learner autonomy. The learning cycle he presents guides learners through the planning, predicting, monitoring, verification and reflection stages needed to acquire good listening skills and knowledge of the metacognitive processes related to them, as skilled autonomous learners.

In Chapter 6 Melanie Bloom discusses cognitive strategies to support the writing process. She makes a strong case for writing strategies to have a

more central place in ILL than they are currently afforded in conventional contexts. Bloom looks first at the theory of second language writing, before exploring ways in which cognitive strategies used in conventional learning settings could be adapted for independent contexts. She categorises these under pre-writing (e.g. resourcing, analysing, elaborating and grouping), writing (e.g. rereading, substitution and strategic use of the L1), and revising between drafts (e.g. guided proofreading, resourcing and recombining). Bloom concludes that the interrelated characteristics of L2 writing – communicative, cultural, social and linguistic – call for a range of cognitive strategies, and that independent language learners need, in addition, to develop metacognitive knowledge and strategies such as self-evaluation and planning to give them more control over their learning.

Andrew Cohen presents an original approach in Chapter 7 to the development of speaking strategies through the use of pragmatics in virtual environments. He demonstrates how speech acts are dependent on the socio-cultural situation in which they are being performed. Cohen emphasises the need to support learners in developing the strategies needed for learning and performing speech acts in different cultural settings and the ability to monitor and evaluate pragmatic performance (metapragmatic strategies). His innovative project *Dancing with words* takes us into Second Life where students can communicate in an online virtual world via avatars, and through taking part in role-plays, develop strategies to improve their speaking skills in given socio-cultural contexts. Cohen concludes with a focus on the key role of language learning strategies in enhancing pragmatic performance and the benefits of different technologies for pragmatic and cultural instruction in independent language learning contexts.

Elsbeth Broady and Nick Dwyer 'bring the learner back into the process' in Chapter 8 in their discussion of strategies for grammatical development in independent learning. Their overview of the research relevant to grammatical development takes us from the 'good language learner' equipped with cognitive grammar-focused strategies, to the metacognitively aware learner who is, in addition, able to plan, orchestrate and monitor his or her strategy use. Broady and Dwyer suggest that there is an important role for metacognitive awareness in the area of grammar, particularly for independent learners who need to adopt meaning-focused strategies which 'overcome the limitations of decontextualised grammatical practice', while at the same time making choices about when and how to focus on grammatical form. They conclude with an outline of the context for future research which will mark a renewed focus on learners' own interventions in this highly complex area.

Strategies for vocabulary acquisition are the topic of Chapter 9. In this chapter, John Klapper reviews current research into vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) and evaluates its relevance for independent language