

The Strategy Factor in Successful Language Learning

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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The Strategy Factor in Successful Language Learning

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Contents

Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	ix
1 A Conceptual Perspective	1
1.1 Basic Concepts	1
1.2 Terminology	2
1.3 Definition	5
1.4 Effectiveness	15
1.5 Theoretical Underpinnings	38
1.6 Classification	40
1.7 Issues in Research Methodology	45
1.8 Conclusion	49
1.9 Conceptual Areas for Further Research	50
2 A Quantitative Perspective	52
2.1 Fundamental Questions	52
2.2 Is Frequency of Language Learning Strategy Use Related to Successful Language Learning?	53
2.3 Is Quantity of Language Learning Strategy Use Related to Successful Language Learning?	56
2.4 Are Some Strategy Types More Related to Successful Learning Than Others?	58
2.5 Are Learner Variables Related to Strategy Choice?	68
2.6 Are Situational Variables Related to Strategy Choice?	76
2.7 Are Target Variables Related to Strategy Choice?	79
2.8 Do Strategies Change Over Time?	83
2.9 How Do Strategy Changes Relate to Progress?	86
2.10 Which is the Chicken and Which is the Egg?	91

2.11	Conclusion	92
2.12	Quantitative Areas for Further Research	93
3	A Qualitative Perspective	95
3.1	The Individual Language Learner	95
3.2	What Can We Learn From the Interviews?	120
3.3	Conclusion	135
3.4	Qualitative Areas for Further Research	136
4	A Pedagogical Perspective	138
4.1	The Place of Strategies in Overall Theories of Teaching	138
4.2	Strategy Instruction	144
4.3	Previous Research Into Strategy Instruction	145
4.4	Strategy Instruction Programmes	149
4.5	Teachers' Perceptions	152
4.6	The Classroom Experience	159
4.7	HOW Should Strategy Instruction Be Conducted?	160
4.8	WHAT Should Be Included in Strategy Instruction?	162
4.9	The Issue of Confidence and the Tornado Effect	167
4.10	Learner Variables	168
4.11	Situational Variables	172
4.12	Target Variables	173
4.13	Teacher Training	174
4.14	Conclusion	176
4.15	Pedagogical Areas for Further Research	177
5	Overview	178
5.1	The Strategy Concept	178
5.2	Quantitative Research	179
5.3	Qualitative Research	180
5.4	Pedagogical Research	180
5.5	Conclusion	181
	Appendix 1: Language Skills Development Strategy Questionnaire	182
	Appendix 2: English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (Students' Version)	185
	Appendix 3: Interview Guide	186

Appendix 4: English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (Teachers' Version)	187
Glossary	188
References	199
Index	218

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Xie xie
Kam sa ham ni da
Çok Teşekkürler
Many thanks
Carol

Introduction

I.1 A Personal Perspective

I learnt about the importance of strategies at a relatively early age. Up until the time I was about 12 years old, my school life had been very happy. I had been blessed with patient teachers who encouraged me with praise and good advice. Therefore, I had done well at school and had enjoyed my time there.

Shortly after my 12th birthday, however, my father changed his job. My new school was very different from my old one. Instead of the kindly teachers I was used to, Miss Campbell was a strict disciplinarian who seemed to take great delight in finding fault with anything I did. She never called me by my name: I was always 'the new girl' to her. Discipline could be extremely punitive, from writing out many pages of repetitive lines to long periods of detention, although only the boys got the strap, for which, at least, I was grateful.

Although I found the whole atmosphere of the school repressive, this was not my major difficulty. The main problem was the curriculum. My previous school had emphasized creativity and self-expression, whereas my new school had a much more formal approach. I found myself being expected to answer questions on nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, prepositions, subjects, objects, complements, predicates. I had never even heard these terms, and had absolutely no understanding of what they meant. If Miss Campbell had been talking Martian I could hardly have been more bewildered. My grammatical ignorance proved to be fertile ground for Miss

Campbell's ridicule, since she knew almost certainly that if she asked me a question I would get it wrong.

The time came for a big test which, it was announced, would be held the following Monday. Forlornly, I went to Miss Campbell to ask for help. With a sweeping gesture of impatience, she told me to ask one of the other pupils. The other kids, however, had better things to do than to spend their lunch-time tutoring a newcomer.

I took my textbook home on Friday night and, without too much expectation of success, set to work to try to make sense of its contents. I read the definitions of the unfamiliar concepts, wrote them out to help myself remember them, read the examples, did the exercises and checked my answers from the back of the book. By means of these strategies I found myself gradually achieving some understanding of the alien subject matter.

By Sunday night, I found I could do the exercises and get most of them right. And on Monday I got full marks in the test. Miss Campbell seemed surprised and even a little disappointed: she now had to find someone else to serve as the object of her scorn. Although she never paid me the compliment of calling me by my name, I suppose I earned from her a kind of grudging respect for having achieved beyond her expectations. And although we never actually liked each other, at least she more or less left me alone after that.

This was a most uncomfortable experience, and a most unhappy time. However, it taught me a valuable lesson which I have never forgotten: in this life we are ultimately responsible for our own success or failure. Although other people, such as good teachers, can be very helpful, and can make the task easier and more enjoyable, in the end it is we who do the learning. If we develop sound strategies which are helpful to us, which suit our individual characteristics and which are appropriate for the situation and the task at hand, there is almost nothing we cannot achieve with sufficient effort and determination.

I.2 Overview

The language learning strategy concept was first brought to wide attention with the publication of Joan Rubin's seminal article 'What the "Good Language Learner" can teach us' (1975). At the time, few people probably expected that it would sow the seeds of controversies which would still be unresolved several decades later. The debates which have raged over the intervening years have often been quite heated, but have frequently failed to produce the desired illumination.

I.2.1 Objectives

In the hope of resolving some of the controversies, the objectives of this book are therefore to:

- clarify basic concepts, especially of terminology, definition, effectiveness, theoretical underpinnings and classification;
- address fundamental questions regarding the relationships among successful language learning and strategy frequency and quantity, strategy type, strategy use according to learner, situational or target variables and strategy development;
- consider strategy effectiveness from an individual point of view, particularly in relation to a range of learner variables;
- discuss pedagogical issues, especially relating to teacher perceptions and training, classroom and learner factors, methodology and content, as well as considering situational and target variables;
- identify areas still requiring research clarification.

I.2.2 Aims

The book aims to achieve these objectives by means of:

- an extensive review, analysis and re-interpretation of the existing literature;
- providing quantitative research evidence for the fundamental questions noted above by means of empirical studies;
- providing qualitative research evidence regarding individual strategy use by means of interviews;
- providing pedagogical research and drawing implications for classroom practice and teacher education;
- recommending areas still requiring further research.

I.2.3 Audience

The strategy concept is of interest to a potentially wide range of readers, but this book is especially intended for an audience of:

- students working on a variety of diploma or degree programmes in the language learning area for whom the discussion and references would be extremely useful when completing assignments or theses;
- teacher educators, practising teachers or teacher trainees for whom the pedagogical implications of the numerous findings described in the book are especially relevant;

- researchers, for whom the numerous under-researched areas pointed out may help to indicate directions for future useful studies.

I.2.4 Organization

The topics of the book are organised into four main chapters:

- Chapter 1 deals with the essential concepts of terminology, effectiveness, underlying theory and classification, and attempts a definitive definition based on essential elements extracted from the literature.
- Chapter 2 looks at the answers to some basic questions regarding strategy use and its relationship with other variables and to successful learning outcomes. It reports on a number of studies which address some of the vexed issues involved.
- Chapter 3 approaches the strategy issue from the individual student's point of view. Although quantitative findings such as those presented in Chapter 2 are valuable, and may well be used to inform teaching practice, individuals never quite conform to statistical expectations, and it is essential to allow for individual variation when considering effective language learning and strategy use.
- Chapter 4 looks at the pedagogical research. Studies of teacher perceptions and of strategy-based instruction are reviewed, along with findings regarding methodology and content. Learner, situational and target variables are considered, as well as issues for teacher training.

I.3 How This Book Is Different

- The learning strategy field has at times been criticized for being atheoretical (e.g. Dornyei, 2005; Dornyei & Skehan, 2003; Macaro, 2006). This book addresses underlying theoretical issues in the first chapter by looking at terminology, definition, theoretical underpinnings and classification systems.
- Rather than merely discussing the concepts, this book presents evidence from empirical studies for each of the fundamental questions posed in Chapter 2.
- In addition to the quantitative view taken in Chapter 2, the book takes a qualitative look at strategy use by individuals in Chapter 3 and considers the implications of the interview data.
- Finally, in Chapter 4, rather than looking at strategies divorced from the 'real world' of the classroom, this book looks at the issues from the teaching/learning point of view.

In addition, the book contains:

- multiple suggestions for further research;
- a glossary which explains essential terms;
- an extensive bibliography;
- appendices containing the instruments used in the studies which might be useful for replication studies;
- an index for ease of reference.

It is my own firm belief that effective strategies are an essential tool for learners who want to succeed at learning language. I therefore hope that this book may contribute to this success.

1 A Conceptual Perspective

1.1 Basic Concepts

There is an old proverb which states: ‘Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime.’ Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this proverb might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. However, if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they may be empowered to manage their own learning. It is on this fundamental premise that this book is based.

Over the years, a great deal of effort has gone into developing theories, methods and approaches for *teaching* language (such as the Grammar Translation Method, audiolingualism and the communicative approach). However, issues relating to the learner have been treated with ‘relative neglect’ (Dansereau, 1978: 78) and much less attention has been paid to the language development process from the *learning* point of view (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Although valuable work has been and continues to be done on the questions of how language is acquired/learnt/developed (e.g. Doughty & Long, 2003; Eckman *et al.*, 1984; Ellis, 1986, 1994, 2008; Krashen, 1981; Spada & Lightbown, 2002; Winitz, 1981), when it is considered that the learner forms one half of the teaching/learning partnership, it might be considered surprising that, in general, the significance of the learner’s role has continued to be ‘underestimated’ (Larsen-Freeman, 2001: 12).

In the 1970s, the possibility that success in language learning might be related to *how* students go about the task was explored by writers such as Naiman *et al.* (1978), Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). Writers such as O’Malley (1987), Oxford (1990, 2011b), Wenden (1991), Cohen (1998, 2011), Chamot (2001, 2008), Macaro (2006) and Griffiths (2008a) have continued to suggest that learners might be able to learn language more effectively by the use of

language learning strategies, which have the potential to be ‘an extremely powerful learning tool’ (O’Malley *et al.*, 1985: 43). O’Malley *et al.* (1985: 22) noted, however, that there was ‘no consensus’ regarding basic concepts such as terminology, definition, classification and underpinning theory. Although this was written more than 20 years ago, much of the ‘conceptual ambiguity’ (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003: 610) remains to this day.

1.2 Terminology

Some of this ambiguity arises at the very basic level of terminology. This applies especially to the learning tool phenomenon itself, to the language being learnt, and to those who are trying to learn a new language.

1.2.1 Strategies

Although promising in terms of its potential to facilitate successful learning, there is ‘considerable confusion’ (O’Malley *et al.*, 1985: 22) in the language learning strategy field; indeed, there is a great deal of controversy over the very term *strategy* itself, before we even begin to think about definition, classification and theory. Consensus is not assisted by some writers’ use of conflicting terminology such as *learning behaviours* (Politzer, 1983; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Wesche, 1977), *tactics* (Seligler, 1984) and *techniques* (Stern, 1992). These rival terms are often used more or less (but not always exactly) synonymously with the term *strategy* as used elsewhere in the literature.

Strategy, of course, is originally a military term, as some (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Oxford, 1990, 2011b) point out, and there are those who find the somewhat bellicose overtones of the term unfortunate. A military strategy tends to be an overall plan of attack or ‘plans for winning a war’ (Oxford, 2011a: 168); the term *tactics* tends to be applied to smaller manoeuvres within the overall strategy. Perhaps, however, we do not need to concern ourselves too much with the way the term was used in battle when we are applying it to language learning, although it is an interesting comparison!

According to Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 199), the term *strategy* was used by Rubin (1975) ‘in perhaps the earliest study in this area and it enjoys the widest currency today’ (for instance, among many others, Chamot, 1987; Cohen, 1991, 2011; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Lam & Wong, 2000; O’Neil, 1978; Oxford, 1990, 2011b; Pearson, 1988; Purpura, 1999; Weinstein, 1978; Wenden, 1985). It is acknowledged, however, that *strategy* is not the only term which has been, or which might be, used to cover the thoughts and behaviours involved.