

Language Learning Strategies Among EFL/ESL Learners: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The results of previous studies on second/foreign language learning indicate that language learning strategies play an influential role in the process of language learning. In this regard, the present paper makes an attempt to present a synthesis of research results on language learning strategies among EFL/ESL learners and highlights the importance of these strategies in second/foreign language learning and teaching. It summarizes the results of previous studies on the good language learner, defines the concept of language learning strategy, and outlines various classifications of language learning strategies proposed by several researchers. It also discusses the factors influencing strategy choice and explores the relationship between learning strategies and language learning achievement.

Keywords: Language learning strategy. Language learning. Strategy use, Strategy choice

Introduction

Research findings in the area of second language acquisition have repeatedly verified the significant role that learners can play in the process of language learning. The research has also gone through deliberate changes from teachers and teaching methods towards learners and learning techniques to show its correspondence with these fundamental moves during the past decade (Chamot, 2005; Lee, 2003; Reiss, 1985). While learners received more attention and a more prominent place in research studies on second language learning, so did the engaged strategies and techniques they employed to learn the language and overcome its barriers. From among these techniques, language learning strategies have received a particular attention since the late 1970s (Zare, 2010; Brown, 2007; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2007; Baker and Boonkit, 2004; Oxford, 2003).

The current paper discusses the characteristics of the good language learner, provides numerous definitions of learning strategies, demonstrates taxonomies of learning strategies, discusses factors influencing strategy choice, and explore the relationship between learning strategies and language learning achievement. In the last section, the paper also presents a brief conclusion which is provided based on the findings of previous studies in the area of learning strategies.

The Good Language Learner

Many of the initial studies on language learning strategies were aimed at defining the “Good” language learner. As the knowledge of second language acquisition increased during the 1970s, teachers and researchers concluded that no single method of language teaching and research findings would mark the start of universal success in teaching a second language (Brown, 2007). It was realized that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or teaching techniques. “Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed; others lacked those abilities” (p.132). Observations and research studies led researchers (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Rubin and Thompson, 1994) to describe “good” language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. They believe that good language learners:

1. Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning,
2. Organize information about language,
3. Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words,
4. Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom,
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word,
6. Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned,
7. Make errors work for them and not against them,
8. Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language

9. Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension,
10. Learn to make intelligent guesses,
11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform “beyond their competence”,
12. Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going,
13. Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence,
14. Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation.

While the results of the studies on defining the good language learner (are not based on empirical findings, they create characteristics of good language learners as students who are actively involved in language learning and are able to solve problems regarding their own learning. These studies provide a basis for our understanding of what good language learners do to acquire the target language. Once the strategies of successful language learners are identified, these strategies can be taught to less successful learners. It has been consistently reported (Wenden and Rubin, 1987) that all language learners report or have been observed using some type of strategies in learning a foreign or second language. However, they insist that successful language learners have reported to use wider range of learning strategies.

On the contrary, the methods and criteria of determining a good language learner is unclear and under question. Although it is easy to classify a language learner as a good one, if she/he has developed the four basic skills and can use them successfully, it remains difficult to determine whether someone who has only learned one or two of these skills is also a good language learner. Speed of acquisition, learner’s previous exposure to English, learner’s goal, and student’s level of proficiency should be taken into account in determining the good language learner (Sewell, 2003).

However, being aware of the characteristics, techniques, and strategies of a good language learner facilitate students’ language learning and help them enhance learning efficiency. In addition, with this knowledge and awareness, students’ language learning can be improved through learner training by their instructors.

Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

There has been an increasing interest toward language learning and language learners since 1970s with the emergence of cognitive revolution, and since then great attention has been paid to language learning strategies. The pattern shifted from behaviorism to cognitive science in psychology and education. Research led to efforts to explain the cognitive processes in all aspects of learning, including language learning. Initial studies of language learning focused on describing externally observable behaviors of language learners, followed by attempts to label strategic behaviors and ultimately to categorize those strategic behaviors and link them to language proficiency.

In studies of good language learners, researchers mentioned lots of various behaviors that they referred to globally as strategies; some managed to describe strategies more specifically. Learning strategies have been described (Wenden and Rubin, 1987) as “any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (p.19). It was argued (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992) that “learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information” (p.209). Learning strategies were also illustrated (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990) as “special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p. 1). Hence, learning strategies were seen as special ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning, or retention of the information.

Whereas prior descriptions of learning strategies paid more attention to products of learning and behaviors reflecting unobservable cognitive processes, definitions eventually provided clearer understanding of what learners think and do during language learning. Furthermore, it was stated (Cohen, 1990) that “learning strategies are processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language” (p. 4).

One of the most applicable definitions which have been cited most frequently in the literature was provided by (Oxford, 1990). She defines language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). It is, indeed, a reflection of what the learner intends to do and the specific actions he can take. She also, prominently, includes how context plays a crucial role in the language learning process.

Classifications of Language Learning Strategies

Research on language learning strategies started at the 1970s. For the most part, the progress in cognitive psychology had a great effect on the research studies on language learning strategies (Williams and Burden, 1997). In most of the research studies done on language learning strategies, identifying what good learners do to learn a second or foreign language has been the main issue. In 1971 Rubin conducted a study in which the main focus was on the strategies of successful language learners. In her study she argues that, once identified, such strategies could be offered to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) classifies learning strategies according to processes which contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. It is believed (Wenden, 1986) that reading and discussing the strategies of good language learners is a constructive preliminary activity which can help students to get aware of the concept of learner’s strategies.

Learning strategies that language learners employ in the process of learning a new language have been identified and described by the researchers. Consequently, these strategies have been classified by many professional experts in the area of language learning (Oxford, 1990; Bialystok, 1981; O'Malley, *et al.* 1985; Willing, 1988; Stern, 1992; Ellis, 1994). This progress not only helped categorize strategies and link them to a variety of cognitive processing phases during language learning, but also assisted in creating instructional frameworks.

Nonetheless, most of these attempts to categorize language learning strategies reflect relatively the same categorizations of language learning strategies without any fundamental changes. They developed their own taxonomies of strategies according to their research findings by applying different methods of data collection. For that reason, it might not be appropriate to compare them and assess their influence on teaching and learning process. But, studying them possibly will help both language teachers and language learners to understand language learning strategies and different methods which are involved in strategy use.

In what follows, taxonomies of language learning strategies will be demonstrated:

O'Malley's (1985) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley *et al.* (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories:

A. Metacognitive Strategies, B. Cognitive Strategies, and C. Socioaffective Strategies

A. Metacognitive Strategies

O'Malley *et al.* (1985) state that metacognitive is an expression to indicate an executive function, strategies which involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, observing of one’s production or comprehension, correcting your own mistakes, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Based on O'Malley’s classification, advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, and self-evaluation are included among the major metacognitive strategies.

B. Cognitive Strategies

It has been stated (Brown, 2007) that “Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself” (p.134). Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, and inferencing are among the most important cognitive strategies.

C. Socioaffective Strategies

Socioaffective strategies have close relationship with social-mediating activity and interacting with others. The main socioaffective strategies include cooperation and question for clarification (Brown, 2007).

Rubin's (1987) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Rubin, who allocated a great deal of effort in the field of language learning strategies, made a distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning.

Direct strategies include metacognitive and cognitive strategies and indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. They are: A. Learning Strategies, B. Communication Strategies, and C. Social Strategies.

A. Learning Strategies

Learning strategies which are divided into two main types (Cognitive Learning Strategies and Metacognitive Learning Strategies) contribute directly to the development of the language system created by the language learner.

Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures which are taken in learning or problem-solving that involves direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials Rubin's (1987). Six major cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning are identified by Rubin as: Clarification / Verification, Guessing / Inductive Inferencing, Deductive Reasoning, Practice, Memorization, Monitoring.

Metacognitive strategies are used to supervise, control or self-direct language learning. They involve different procedures as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

B. Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are not as much of directly related to language learning since their emphasis is on the process of communication through conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are exploited by speakers when they are faced with some troubles regarding their communication and conversation or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. A usual communication strategy is to make use of one's linguistic or communicative knowledge to remain in the conversation.

C. Social Strategies

Social strategies are activities in which learners are exposed to the opportunities that can be a great help to practice their knowledge. Even though these strategies offer exposure to the target language, they contribute to learning indirectly since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin, 1987).

Oxford's (1990) classification of Language Learning Strategies

By referring to the literature, it seems that the most inclusive taxonomy of language learning strategies is provided by Oxford's (1990). Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, direct and indirect strategies which are also subdivided into six classes.

Direct strategies, which involve the new language directly, are divided into Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. As Oxford's (1990) says, "all direct strategies require mental processing of the language" (p.37). Memory strategies entail the mental processes for storing new information in the memory and for retrieving them when needed. These strategies consist of four sets that include: A. Creating mental linkages, B. Applying images and sounds, C. Reviewing well, and D. Employing action. Cognitive strategies entail conscious ways of handling the target language and fall into four sets which include: A. Practicing, B. Receiving and sending messages, C. Analyzing and reasoning, and D. Creating structure for input and output. Compensation strategies enable learners to use the language either in speaking or writing despite knowledge gaps. These strategies are divided into two sets: A. Guessing intelligently and B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. According to Oxford's (1990), compensation strategies are employed by learners when facing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing.

Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Indirect strategies provide indirect support for language learning by employing different strategies such as focusing, arranging, evaluating, seeking opportunities, and lowering anxiety Oxford's (1990). Metacognitive strategies enable learners to control their own cognition. They are strategies which entail overviewing and linking with material already known, paying attention, delaying speech production, organizing, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self evaluating. Affective strategies assist students to manage their emotions, motivation, and attitudes associated with learning. They can be achieved through lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature.

Social strategies facilitate language learning through interactions with others. Language is a form of social behavior and learning it involves other people, and it is extremely important that learners employ appropriate social strategies in this process Oxford's (1990). These strategies are divided into three sets, namely as asking questions, cooperating, and empathizing with others.

Sixty two strategies have been illustrated which include every strategy that is referred to in previous studies conducted in language learning strategies. In fact, this effort provided a basis for an instrument, The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), designed to obtain information concerning strategy use of language learners in learning a second language. Even though Oxford's classification system is defined plainly, but she highlights that the present understanding of learning strategies is still in its primary stages, and "it is only a proposal to be tested through practical classroom use and through research" (p. 16).

Stern's (1992) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies have been classified into five groups by Stern's (1992). They are as follows:

1. Management and Planning Strategies
2. Cognitive Strategies
3. Communicative - Experiential Strategies
4. Interpersonal Strategies
5. Affective Strategies

1. Management and Planning Strategies

These strategies are actually connected with the learner's purpose to control his own learning. A learner has the capability to take responsibility for the improvement of his own planning when the language instructor supports him only as an adviser or a resource person. In other words the learner must:

1. Decide what dedications to make to language learning,
2. Set reasonable objectives,
3. Decide on a suitable methodology, select proper resources, monitor progress, and
4. Evaluate his success based on previously determined objectives and expectations.

2. Cognitive Strategies

These strategies refer to procedures and activities which learners apply to improve their ability to learn or remember the materials, and solve the problems, especially those actions which learners use with specific classroom tasks. According to Stern (1992) the cognitive strategies include, Clarification / Verification, Guessing / Inductive Inferencing, Deductive Reasoning, Practice, Memorization, Monitoring.

3. Communicative - Experiential Strategies

Communication strategies, such as gesturing, paraphrasing, or asking for repetition and explanation are methods employed by learners to keep the conversation going. In other words, communication strategies involve the use of verbal or nonverbal instruments for the useful transfer of knowledge. The purpose is to avoid interrupting the course of communication.

4. Interpersonal Strategies

According to Stern (1992), interpersonal strategies monitor the learners' development and evaluate their performance. Learners need to have communication with native speakers and cooperate with them. Learners need to get familiar with the culture of the target language.

5. Affective Strategies

Evidently, in the process of language learning, good language learners use various kinds of affective strategies. Sometimes, it can be frustrating to learn another language. It can arouse feeling of unfamiliarity and confusion. In some other cases, learners might not have a positive perspective towards native speakers. On the other hand, good language learners are relatively aware of these emotions, and they try to build positive feelings towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as the learning activities. To a great deal, training can be of assistance to the students to face these controversial feelings and to overcome them by drawing attention to the possible frustrations or mentioning them as they come up (Stern, 1992).

Factors Influencing the Choice of Learning Strategies

The results of previous research studies have demonstrated that many factors affect the choice learning strategies. Those factors might include degree of awareness, age, sex, nationality, learning style, personality traits, motivation, learning context, and language proficiency (Zare& Nooreen, 2011; Khamkhien, 2010; Rahimi, *et al.* 2008; Chamot, 2004; Griffiths, 2003; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2007; Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989).

Studies have shown significant gender differences between males and female language learners in which females have demonstrated to use more and wider range of strategies than males (Zare, 2010; Lee, 2003; Green, and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). Moreover, many research studies have explored the relationship between learning strategies and learners' proficiency in which the findings have indicated that more proficient language learners use a greater variety and often a greater number of learning strategies (Rahimi *et al.*, 2008; Griffiths, 2003; Lee, 2003; Anderson, 2005; Bruen, 2001; Green and Oxford, 1995; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Ehrman, and Oxford, 1989). Motivation is another influential variable which has been widely examined with respect to its relationship with learning strategies. Findings have demonstrated that learners with high motivation use a significantly greater range of learning strategies than less motivated students (Oxford, 1990; McIntyre and Noels, 1996; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989).

Moreover, learning styles of language learners play a crucial role in choice of language learning strategies. It has been argued that learning styles and learning strategies of an individual learner can work cooperatively with a given instructional methodology (Oxford, 2003). If a harmony exists between these factors, the learner will perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety (Oxford, 2003). Studies in the area have shown that an individual's learning style preferences influence the type of learning strategies that they use (Rahimi *et al.*, 2008; Chamot, 2004; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). For instance, extroverts have demonstrated strong preference for social strategies, while introverts use metacognitive strategies more frequently (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). Learners who favor group study are shown to use social and interactive strategies, such as working with peers or requesting clarification (Rossi-Le, 1995).

The findings of research studies in the area of language learning strategies provide a greater understanding of strategy use among EFL/ESL learners and support language instructors and curriculum developers to improve their approaches toward teaching and learning goals. These findings also strengthen the fact that strategy use is a complex phenomenon that interacts with a number of variables. These variables have influences on the use of overall strategies, strategy categories, and individual strategies in different ways. So, to obtain a clear idea of learners' patterns of strategy use, it is important to take all these aspects into consideration (Rahimi *et al.*, 2008).

Language Learning Strategies and Language Learning Achievement

The findings in the area of language learning strategies have repeatedly demonstrated that the use of language learning strategies leads to better proficiency or achievement in mastering the target language (Lee, 2003; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Rahimi *et al.*, 2008; Griffiths, 2003; Hong, 2006; Oxford, 1993). O'Malley *et al.*, (1985) clearly highlighted the importance of learning strategies by defining them as "any set of operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information" (p.23). In a study (O'Malley *et al.*, 1985), it has been found that successful language learners have reported to use more and wider range of learning strategies than less-successful students. The same conclusion has been reached in another study (Green and Oxford, 1995) in which language learning strategies of all kinds were used more frequently by more proficient students. In a different study (Griffiths, 2003), a strong positive correlation between learning strategy use and language proficiency has been discovered. The findings revealed that advanced language learners have reported to employ learning strategies more frequently than elementary students.

In this regard, language instructors should take their students learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students' learning strategies in order to support less successful student to achieve success and master the target language. Teachers can identify these strategies through observations, language diaries, questionnaires, interviews and so on. By doing so, teachers will be able to assist language learners to recognize and appreciate the power of language learning strategies in the process of second or foreign language learning. Through learning strategies, teachers can also help the students to maintain their motivation, autonomy, and confidence and keep on going and try to accomplish the goal of learning the target language.

Conclusion

As it was mentioned before, early research studies on language learning strategies put more emphasis on identifying strategic behaviors and characteristics of “the good language learner”, while more recent studies have tried to illuminate taxonomies of language learning strategies and classify strategies which are employed by language learners in the process of language learning. Besides, by conducting numerous studies, researchers have discovered that there is an association between the use and choice of learning strategies and different variables like learning contexts, learner characteristics and learning experiences, language proficiency, or cultural and educational backgrounds (Oxford, 2003; Khamkhien, 2010; Hong, 2006; Deneme, 2008; Fuping, 2006).

The findings have concluded that the employment of language learning strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learner in different ways. It is also found that a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and language learning achievement (Griffiths, 2003; Yang, 2007; Ya-Ling, 2008). Learning strategies are oriented towards the main goal of communicative competence, allow learners to get more self-directed, and support learning (Oxford, 1990).

In this regard, language instructors need to incorporate language learning strategies into their teaching methods and approaches, train the students to apply the appropriate strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and encourage them to use the strategies as frequently as possible. Students can learn to use language learning strategies to improve their language skills.

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