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What have we learnt from Good Language Learners? And what do we still need to learn?

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Abstract

In the 40 years since the Good Language Learner introduced the strategy concept to the ELT profession, vigorous debate has revolved around both theoretical (including definition, classification, theoretical foundation and the relationship of strategies to successful learning) and practical issues (including teachability and the relationship to learner, contextual and target variables). This article reviews these areas and concludes that strategies are teachable, especially if teachers employ theoretically sound principles and include both explicit and implicit instructional techniques in their programmes to raise awareness, provide practice and encourage evaluation. A number of areas still requiring further investigation are suggested, especially further exploration of how strategies might be taught more effectively, and seeking evidence that this makes a difference in terms of “good” language learning.

Keywords: strategies, explicit, implicit, awareness raising, individual differences, context, target

Introduction

It is now 40 years since the publication of two landmark articles: Rubin's (1975) "What the 'good language learner' can teach us", and Stern's (1975) "What can we learn from the good language learner?" These two similarly titled articles are generally credited with establishing the *strategy* concept in language learning, since, although strategies were well-known in the psychology literature, up until this time they were not commonly used by language teachers. Rubin (ibid.) identified seven learning strategies which she believed to be typical of good language learners: guessing/inferring, communicating, managing inhibitions, attending to form, practising, monitoring one's own speech and the speech of others, and attending to meaning. Stern (ibid) argued that good language learners are characterised by positive learning strategies, among which he included experimenting, planning, developing the new language into an ordered system, revising progressively, searching for meaning, practising, using the language in real communication, self-monitoring, developing the target language into a separate reference system, and learning to think in the target language.

Rubin (ibid) further argued that we needed to learn about what good language learners do so that "we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record" (p.42). However, the early optimism that merely teaching about strategies would enable all learners to learn language successfully and effortlessly has proven to be overly simplistic, and in the years since, the strategy question has been debated on a number of levels, both theoretical (including definition, classification, theoretical foundation and the strategy/success relationship) and practical (are strategies teachable, if so, how can this be achieved, and what are the other factors which need to be considered?). We will look at these key areas in turn.

Theoretical issues

Since the theoretical basis of language learning strategies has often been questioned, sometimes quite harshly (e.g. Dornyei and Skehan, 2003), and since the underlying theory does ultimately affect pedagogical practice, let us first look at the theoretical issues which underpin (or sometimes, perhaps, undermine) what goes on in the classroom.

Definition: Rubin (1975) provided a definition of language learning strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (p.43). This definition, however, proved to be controversial, and ten years later, O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) were lamenting the lack of consensus regarding a definition. Nevertheless, over the next two decades controversy continued, leading Macaro (2006) to abandon the attempt to achieve a decisive definition and opt instead for a list of defining characteristics. Meanwhile, Dornyei and Skehan (2003) had gone even further and recommended abandoning the term *strategy* in favour of *self-regulation*, which, they argued, was “more versatile” (p.610). Griffiths (2008), however, argued that *strategy* remains a useful concept since it refers to how learners go about learning, and it provides teachers with a potential tool for helping their learners to learn more effectively. From an extensive review of the literature she distilled a definition of language learning strategies which might be summarized as *actions chosen by learners (whether deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language*. This definition stresses the active nature of learning strategies, which are selected by learners in order to achieve a language learning goal. (For a more thorough discussion of the issues involved with this definition, see Griffiths, 2008, 2013)

Classification: Classification of strategies has been another highly contentious issue.

Rubin (1981) divided strategies into two categories: those which contribute directly to learning, and those which contribute indirectly.

Direct strategies included

- clarifying
- monitoring
- memorizing
- guessing
- deductive reasoning
- practising

The indirect learning strategies included just two types:

- creating opportunities for practice
- production tricks for maintaining communication.

Attempting to achieve mutually exclusive categories, O'Malley et al. (1985) opted for three groups:

metacognitive (knowing about learning, e.g. planning, monitoring, evaluating)

cognitive (specific to distinct learning activities, e.g. repeating, translating, grouping)

social (relating to interaction with others, e.g. cooperating with peers)

The best known and most widely-used strategy inventory (*The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* or *SILL*, Oxford, 1990) identified six strategy types:

memory - relating to how students remember new language (e.g. as using flashcards or relating it to a cognate in the L1)

cognitive – relating to direct interaction with the material to be learnt (e.g. looking for patterns, note-taking or summarizing)

compensation - enabling students to make up for limited knowledge (e.g. gesturing or guessing)

metacognitive - relating to how students manage the learning process (e.g. paying attention, noticing mistakes or controlling schedules)

affective - relating to emotional control (e.g. trying to relax or talking about feelings)

social - involving learning by interaction with others (e.g. asking for help or talking to classmates).

All of these systems, however, have been criticised on theoretical, statistical or contextual grounds, and over the years there has been little or no consensus over the question of strategy classification. In light of this, Griffiths (2008, 2013) produced a questionnaire (the *English Language Learning Strategy Inventory*, or *ELLSI*) which does not rely on fixed, pre-determined strategy categorization. Instead, categorization is carried out *post hoc*, according to the themes which emerge from the data. For teachers wanting to find out more about their students' strategy use so that they might be more effectively taught and learnt, the decision regarding which instrument or approach is best must be made according to their own situations and in consideration of the characteristics and learning goals of their own students.

Theoretical foundation: The theoretical foundation underlying language learning strategies has also come in for its share of controversy (e.g. Dornyei and Skehan, 2003). Attempting a rationalization of strategy theory, Griffiths (2013) concluded that, although learning strategies are essentially cognitive, this cognitive base is complicated by a number of other contributing theoretical influences, including Behaviourism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Information Processing Theory, Schemata Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Activity Theory, Chaos/complexity Theory, individual difference theories, psycho-affective theories, and perhaps others. In other words, the theory underlying language learning strategies is eclectic and extremely complex; it is as complex, in fact, as any other human

behaviour, suggesting that attempts to oversimplify it should be approached with great care.

From a teacher's point of view, this suggests a need for flexibility rather than a rigid adherence to one fixed theoretical position or another.

The strategy/success relationship: The relationship between strategies and successful learning has also been hotly disputed. Although Rubin (1975) recommended learning strategies as a means to promote successful learning, in fact this relationship has proven to be not so straightforward. Porte (1988), for instance, discovered that his unsuccessful learners frequently used a large number of strategies, although their choices were not always appropriate, and they did not always coordinate (orchestrate) their strategy repertoires effectively.

Other researchers, however, have discovered a positive relationship between strategy use and successful learning. Green and Oxford (1995), for instance, during a study of 374 students at the University of Puerto Rico, found a significant relationship between language proficiency and learning strategy use, indicating that the more proficient students used strategies more frequently than the lower level students. Likewise, using the *ELLSI* to survey 131 students at a language school in Auckland, New Zealand, Griffiths (2008) reports that the higher level students in this study were found to frequently use more strategies of different types than the lower level students. A similar conclusion was reached in a study with 348 participants (Griffiths, 2013) which discovered that, in addition to using strategies more frequently, the more successful learners used an extensive array of strategies, including those related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, function, skills, interaction with others, tolerance of ambiguity, managing emotions, self-regulation and use of resources. Although space does not permit further exemplification within the scope of the present article, many other examples of a positive relationship between strategies and successful language learning

can be found in contemporary journals (e.g. *ELTJ*) or books (e.g. Oxford, 1990, 2011; Cohen, 2011; Griffiths, 2008, 2013). From these findings, we might conclude that it makes sense for teachers to encourage learners to expand their strategy repertoires and to make frequent use of the strategies that they have at their disposal in order to maximize their chances of success.

Teachability

A consistent message throughout Rubin's (1975) article was the need for teachers to provide strategy instruction in order that less successful learners might be able to use language learning strategies and thereby achieve successful learning. However, teachability is another area which has proven to be not as straightforward as originally hoped. In language learning strategy terms, teachability refers to the extent to which it is possible to extend or modify a learner's existing strategy repertoire.

Are strategies teachable? Some researchers have come to quite negative conclusions about strategy teachability. According to Rees-Miller (1993), for instance, attempts to train learners to use learning strategies more effectively have not been very successful. Possible reasons include the student's age, educational background, life experience, curriculum demands, varying cognitive styles, culture, and incompatibility of student and teacher beliefs regarding how to learn language. Given the level of unresolved debate which surrounds the issue, Rees-Miller (ibid.) questions whether the time spent raising awareness of strategy use might not be better spend directly teaching the language.

Other studies, however, have reported positive results. Cohen (2011), for instance reports the results of a study conducted at the University of Minnesota with 55 intermediate-level students, who chose to enter either an experimental (N=32) or a comparison (N=23) group. Three tasks were included in the study: self-description, story retelling and city description.

Cohen (ibid.) describes the findings as “complex and at times somewhat contradictory” (p.193), but he concludes that “if instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies...their students may well improve their performance on language tasks” (p.225).

In another study conducted at a Chinese middle school over a period of one school term, Tang and Griffiths (2013) report that students were divided into a control class (45 students, who were taught according to standard methods) and an experimental class (50 students, who were given strategy training). The training consisted of a series of 30 strategies chosen from Oxford (1990) and delivered during one 40-minute lesson per week. The instructional sequence involved a five stage programme of raising awareness, providing explicit instruction, practising so that new strategies become automatic, consolidating new strategies implicitly by means of exercises or activities, and finally evaluating new strategies in order for learners to assess their suitability for their own individual needs within the given context. End-of-semester results indicated that students from the experimental class had improved their test scores by an average of 9.3% compared with the entry scores, while the improvement for the control class was only 4.4%. Furthermore, student feedback from the training was overwhelmingly positive, with 90.9% saying they thought it had improved their English, 89.1% saying they liked the programme, 87.2% saying it had given them more confidence, and 85.5% saying it had made their learning easier and more interesting.

Again, space does not permit further examples relating to strategy training within this article, but if readers would like further information, there are many others in journals such as *ELTJ*, or in books such as Cohen (2011) and Griffiths (2013).

How can strategies be taught? Even where the benefits of strategy instruction have been agreed upon, there has not always been unanimity on how best to go about it. Nevertheless, there are several important stages which seem to occur in most successful strategy instruction

programmes. These include using both explicit and implicit instruction to raise awareness, providing practice, and encouraging evaluation.

- Raising awareness: Oxford (1990) suggests that an important element of strategy instruction is the raising of learners' awareness of language learning strategy options. If learners know the alternatives they have available, they are in a better position to make informed choices regarding the most effective strategies to achieve their learning goals.
- Explicit instruction: According to Cohen (2011), strategy training needs to be explicitly stated. If learners do not clearly understand what they are doing and why, they will not be able to transfer the new strategies beyond the immediate task.
- Practice: Oxford (1990) suggests that practice is an important ingredient of strategy training. If the new strategies of which learners have been made aware are rehearsed, they will become automatic and stored in a learner's individual strategy repertoire to be called on and transferred to new tasks as needed.
- Implicit instruction: In addition to explicit instruction, Cohen (2011) argues that strategy instruction should also be embedded into regular classroom activities aimed at learning language. If this is done, learners are less likely to see the strategy instruction as just a waste of time and a distraction from the real goal of learning new language.
- Evaluation: According to Tang and Griffiths (2013), by means of evaluating their own strategy use, learners can reflect on the advantages or disadvantages of the new strategy and adapt their existing strategy repertoires accordingly if required, or adjust their strategies to suit new tasks.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that a well-designed programme is all that is required when it comes to successful strategy instruction. In the years since Rubin (1975) and

Stern (1975) first alerted the language learning field to the potential to use language learning strategies to promote effective learning, awareness has steadily grown of the importance of various other factors when it comes to successful learning. Particularly important are the individual characteristics of the learners themselves, the features of the learning context, and the nature of the learning target.

Other factors - individual characteristics: Rubin (1975) identified four points of “variation between learners” (p.48) which she considered needed to be taken into account: the learning stage, the learner’s age, the culture to which the learner belongs and the individual learning style. In addition, there are numerous other factors (including personality, gender, autonomy, beliefs, affect, aptitude, motivation, volition and investment) commonly debated in the literature. And, of course, all of these multiple factors contribute to learner identity, which has emerged as a major area of research interest in recent years. Learners’ sense of identity is seen as a major contributor to motivation, to their willingness or ability to be autonomous, to invest time, effort and resources in the learning endeavour, to attitudes towards gender roles and varying age groups, and to their beliefs and affective reactions. In short, learners’ sense of identity is critical to whether they become successful language learners or not, and to the strategies they are willing or able to employ in order to achieve their goals. In terms of teachability, it is essential that learner identity, whatever it may be, is respected by teachers, as otherwise resistance may develop, which may be counter-productive in terms of learner willingness to adopt strategies which might promote effective learning.

Other factors - context: Also critical to learners’ sense of identity is context, both the context from which they originate and the context in which they are learning. Teachers may well have little power to control the context from which a learner originates, but the learning context is much more within a teacher’s sphere of influence, whether it be a face-to-face classroom environment, one-to-one tuition, an online distance course, a study-abroad

situation, or any of the other possible variations in teaching/learning environment. However, it must be remembered that teachers' power to make changes in the learning environment may be limited by constraints such as institutional demands or examination requirements.

Other factors - goal orientation: The learning target, or, as Rubin (1975) calls it "the task" (p.48) is yet another variable with which good language learners must deal in order to achieve success. Although it is sometimes considered an aspect of context, learning target is distinct in as far as the context might be considered the existing situation, whereas the target is future-oriented. It would seem to be self-evident that successful learners need to be able to adapt to the varying demands of different learning goals, and, ideally, teachers should have the knowledge and the willingness to be able to assist the adaption process. Strategies will vary, for instance, according to whether learners are aiming to develop skills, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation or pragmatic competence. Learners studying General English may need to adopt different strategies if their goal changes to passing an international exam. Issues of strategy selection and deployment, learner identity, and context will also need to be considered if learners are to successfully complete a course in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) such as Business English, English for Tourism, Secretaries or Airline Pilots or any of the other goals for which such courses have been developed. In more recent years, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) courses have become popular. In these courses, learners must deal with the dual demands of learning the content as well as developing the language if they are to be successful. In order to promote success, teachers need to be able to suggest appropriate strategies in the light of the multiple goal-oriented variables involved.

As we can see, then, in addition to a well-designed strategy instruction programme, a teacher needs to consider learner characteristics, context and learning target if strategy instruction is to be successful and to lead to effective learning.

Implications for the teaching/learning situation

Since language learning strategies (defined here as actions chosen deliberately or automatically by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language) have been shown to be related to successful language learning (e.g. Green and Oxford, 1995; Tang and Griffiths, 2013), it would seem only sensible to suggest that it is useful for teachers to help learners to develop this “extremely powerful learning tool” (O’Malley et al., 1985, p.43). Successful strategy development programmes must be based on sound theoretical principles and should include several key elements: awareness raising, practice and evaluation, and these should be taught using both explicit and implicit instructional techniques. It is important to remember, however, that learners are different from each other, and a one-size-fits-all approach to strategy instruction will not suit all learners. Individual learner differences must be considered, as must the learning situation and the learning target. In short, the process of identifying the strategies used by “good language learners” and teaching them to less successful learners has proven to be much more complex than originally anticipated. A much more holistic answer is required which involves the strategies, but also the learners’ unique characteristics, the context from which the learners originate and in which they are trying to learn, and the goal to which the learners aspire.

What is still needed?

In the last 40 years we have learned a lot about strategies and about how to promote successful language learning. However, there is still much to do. Perhaps surprisingly, although the potential of strategies to facilitate the learning process is widely recognized, there is often little, if any, mention of them in language learning textbooks or in teacher education programmes, whether pre-service or in-service. In order to rectify this lacuna, we

need to continue with efforts to achieve consensus over theoretical issues in order that research findings might be better used to inform pedagogical practice. Further exploration of the relationship of strategies to successful learning and to individual, contextual and target variables is required, as well as further investigation into how best to provide effective strategy instruction, bearing in mind the multiple variables involved. Teachers who wish to carry out classroom research should be encouraged and supported in such efforts, and the role of the teacher him or herself in strategy instruction, including the teacher's beliefs, assumptions and knowledge, needs much more investigation, since teachers themselves are individual, and the one-size-fits-all principle does not apply to the teachers any more than it does to the learners.

Conclusion

So, to return to the questions posed in our title, what have we learnt over the last four decades since Rubin's (1975) and Stern's (1975) landmark articles about the "good language learner" were published? We have learnt that strategies are important, and that successful learners have a large repertoire of different types of strategies which they use frequently. But strategies are not the whole answer, and the strategies that are chosen and which are effective depend on the context, the learning goal, and the learner's own unique set of individual characteristics. In addition, effective strategy instruction programmes seem to include both extrinsic and intrinsic teaching techniques which provide awareness raising, practice and evaluation.

And what do we still need to learn? The challenge for today is to continue with attempts to find answers and consensus to the theoretical questions which underpin any sound practice in order that we might find ways to help learners "improve their performance" (p.41)

as Rubin put it 40 years ago. We need to explore ways of providing effective strategy instruction bearing in mind all the individual, contextual and target factors, and these ideas also need to be built into text books and teacher training. What is needed, therefore, in order to cope with this actually extremely complex question, is an holistic approach which considers all of these multiple variables.

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