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Strategy Training for Effective Learning in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

Although we have long been aware of the importance of strategies in successful language learning, the question of how to provide effective strategy instruction remains controversial. This article will discuss some of the issues involved, especially definition and the relationship between strategies and successful learning. Some of the other factors involved in successful language learning will also be considered, especially learners' individual characteristics, the learning context and the learning target. A sequence of instructional steps will be recommended and the article will conclude by suggesting the need for an holistic view of learners as situated, goal-oriented individuals if strategy training is to be effective

Introduction

Since about the mid-1970s, the role of language learning strategies in successful language learning has been increasingly recognized (e.g. Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). In the years since, many others have added to our knowledge about language learning strategies (e.g. Cohen, 1998, 2011; Gao, 2010; Griffiths, 2003, 2008, 2013; Gu, 2014; Oxford, 1990, 2011). Nevertheless, although language learning strategies have the potential to be “an extremely powerful learning tool”, many students use them “inefficiently” (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo, 1985, p.43).

There has been a great deal of controversy about a definition of language learning strategies over the years (for instance, Dornyei and Skehan, 2003; Macaro, 2006). However, a careful review of the literature reveals a number of essential elements. Firstly, they are active – that is, students must take action and make their own decisions to do something to promote their own learning. They cannot just passively accept what they are taught and expect to learn effectively (e.g., Oxford, 1990, 2011; Rubin, 1975). Secondly, they are chosen – not all strategies suit every learner. It is the learners' responsibility to take an active role in selecting strategies which are suitable for their own needs, situations and learning goals (e.g., Cohen, 1998, 2011). This choice may, however, be either deliberate (especially when learners are learning something new) or automatic (especially for experienced learners), a distinction suggested by Wenden (1991) as more suitable than the conscious/unconscious dichotomy, which, according to McLaughlin (1990, p.617) has “acquired too much surplus meaning and should be abandoned”. Thirdly, they are purposeful – activities which are just chosen at random are not strategic; strategies are chosen with care because they are suitable for a particular goal or situation (for instance, Macaro, 2006). Fourthly, they are for learning or regulating the learning of language (there are other kinds of strategies: communication strategies, for instance, help to convey a message, e.g. Tarone, 1980, 1981), but do not

necessarily result in learning. These elements together produce a concise definition of language learning strategies as:

actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language

(for further discussion of issues involved with this definition, see Griffiths, 2008, 2013; Griffiths and Oxford, 2014; Griffiths, 2015)

According to previous language learning strategy research, the relationship between language learning strategies and successful learning is not uncomplicated. Although they did not always use strategies appropriately, Porte (1988), for instance, discovered that his under-achieving students were using many strategies. Vann and Abraham (1990) came to a similar conclusion with their unsuccessful learners. Other studies, however, have produced more positive results. Green and Oxford (1995), for instance, discovered that the higher-level students in their study reported using strategies of all kinds significantly more frequently than the lower level students. Griffiths (2003) also discovered that language learning strategies are a significant factor in successful language learning. According to this study

successful students frequently use a large repertoire of strategies.

Strategy training

Over the years, there has been little consensus over the issue of strategy training. According to Rees-Miller (1993), for instance, attempts to train learners to use strategies more effectively have often produced “only qualified success” (p.679); as a result, she questions whether the time spent raising awareness of strategy use might not be better spent directly teaching language. There have, however, been some successful strategy training programs, including the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA, Chamot and O’Malley, 1986) and the Learning to Learn course (Ellis and Sinclair, 1994). In addition, a number of studies have produced positive results for the effects of strategy training:

- At an Australian university, a study of strategy use by four independent learners, carried out by Simmons (1996) over a period of six weeks consisted of a series of intensive individual training sessions aimed at raising awareness of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. At the end of the six weeks, Simmons concluded that students had increased the number and variety of their strategy use and were more aware of the strategies which suited themselves as individuals.
- After studying a group of language students who were participants in a strategies-based instructional program at the University of Minnesota, Cohen, Weaver and Li (1998) concluded that the program had made a positive difference in speaking performance.
- The effects of strategy intervention on the writing skills of two teenage British learners of French were studied by Macaro (2001). When the students’ pre-intervention written work was compared with their post-intervention output, Macaro (ibid.) concluded that their writing had improved, which he attributed in part to the planning, composing and checking strategies that they had learned to use.
- In Japan, 210 college students were divided into two groups for reading instruction (Ikeda and Takeuchi, 2003) and classes were held weekly for one and a half hours, with explicit strategy instruction for 20 minutes. The researchers found no increase in

frequency of strategy use among the low-proficiency students, but increased frequency in strategy use was found among the high-proficiency learners, and this increase was retained when students were re-tested five months later.

- The effects of strategy instruction on vocabulary acquisition were studied by Eslami Rasekh and Ranjbary (2003) who divided 53 Iranian EFL students into a control group who were taught according to the regular curriculum, and a treatment group who received metacognitive strategy instruction. According to the researchers, the treatment group showed significantly higher gains in vocabulary than the control group.
- Nakatani (2005) divided 62 female students studying on a 12-week oral communication course into two groups, one of which received metacognitive strategy instruction and significantly improved their speaking test scores, while improvements in the control group, who were taught according to normal communicative methods, were not significant.
- The effectiveness of listening strategy instruction with 106 students of French at the University of Ottawa in Canada was investigated by Vandergrift and Tafaghdatari (2010). The students in the experimental group, who were given instruction in metacognitive strategies, were found to significantly outperform those in the control group.
- Tang and Griffiths (2014) report on a study conducted in a Chinese middle school over a period of one school term. 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). One 40-minute lesson per week was devoted to this training. The training proceeded according to an instructional sequence which involved a five stage programme of raising awareness of strategy options, learning the new strategy by means of explicit instruction, then practising it so that it becomes automatic, consolidating it implicitly by means of exercises or activities, and finally evaluating it in order to assess its suitability for individual needs within the given context. At the end of the semester, it was found that the students from the experimental class had improved their test scores by an average of 9.3 points compared with the entry scores, while the improvement for the control class was only 4.4 points. 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,

In addition to these empirical studies, a systematic review of strategy training was conducted by Hassan, Macaro, Mason, Nye, Smith and Vanderplank (2005) and a metaanalysis was carried out by Plonsky (2011). Both of these overviews concluded that, although not always successful, the results of strategy training programmes could be considered positive overall.

Other factors which interact with the uptake of strategy instruction

Although strategies have been shown in many studies to be an effective tool for promoting successful language learning, it would be naïve to assume that they are the whole answer, and that, in order to become a “good” language learner, all that is required is to learn the strategies that “good” learners use. In fact, there are many other factors which interact with strategies and which may influence how effective or otherwise a given strategy may be. First and foremost among these “other” factors are the individual characteristics of the learners

themselves, since learners cannot be assumed to be identical clones of each other, and one-size-fits-all can definitely not be assumed when it comes to individually appropriate strategies. In addition, learning situations vary considerably, both the situation from which learners originate, and the situation in which they are trying to learn. Furthermore, the learning target at which the learner is aiming will also impose its own set of constraints on the strategies which may or may not be most effective. Let us look at these three major variables one by one:

The learners

Rubin (1975) identified four points of “variation between learners” (p.48) which she considered needed to be taken into account: the learning stage, age, culture and individual style. In addition, there are many other individual variables (e.g. personality, gender, autonomy, beliefs, affect, aptitude, motivation, volition, investment, and identity) commonly debated in the literature.

As for learning stage, Griffiths (2008, 2013) discovered that the higher level learners in her studies used many more strategies more frequently than lower level students. She also found that the higher level students used different types of strategies from the lower level students. More than half of the strategies used more frequently by lower level students were memory-related, while higher level students reported a wide range of strategies relating to interaction, vocabulary, grammar, ambiguity tolerance, affect and reading. From these results, she concluded that good language learners frequently use a large number of different types of strategies.

Influenced by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), the idea that language learning becomes more difficult or even impossible with advancing age has been influential. Increasingly, however, the idea that the CPH represents a fixed and inevitable barrier is being challenged. Griffiths (2013, p.74-75) presents the findings of a study which correlated strategy use and achievement at a language school with age. She found no difference for strategy use according to age, and the slight difference for level of achievement was not significant.

Another individual difference mentioned by Rubin (1975) is culture, which is likely to have a major influence on whether language learners are successful or otherwise and on the strategies they are willing or able to use. Cultural expectations may well affect how motivated learners are to succeed, or even on how “success” itself is defined. Care should be taken to avoid confusing culture (the ways people behave and relate to each other) with the other closely associated concepts of ethnicity (usually defined in terms of race) and nationality (a political concept). Although these three concepts may be identical, it cannot always be assumed to be the case, and differences, for instance, in ethnicity, may well affect a learner’s motivation to be a successful language learner and to employ particular strategies compared with another student who might have the same nationality.

One of the earliest applications of the term style to language learning used the *Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ)* to research the concept. However, although identified by Rubin (1975) as a key learner variable which might interact with strategies to contribute to successful language learning, it has proven difficult to establish a clear relationship between learning style and successful learning. It would seem that successful learners are flexible and can engage in style-stretching to suit the demands of the situation and the task.

Style and personality are often considered together, since personality is thought to influence learning style. However, they are different concepts, and they each have their own literatures. Personality is a complicated personal attribute, not least because of the difficulties of measuring it, and none of the commonly used tests, such as the *Eysenk Personality Questionnaire (EPQ)*, the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*, or the *Big-Five Model* is without its critics in terms of underlying theories, validity, reliability or utility. Most available research on the subject does not appear to show any strong link between personality type and strategy use or successful language learning, although there is some suggestion that, somewhat counter-intuitively, introverts may be better language learners than extroverts (see Griffiths, 2013, pp.29-31).

Although girls/women are often believed to be better language learners than boys/men, evidence for gender-related differences have proven difficult to obtain, and the available evidence is often contradictory. Griffiths (2013, pp.75-76) reports a study which found that although the women were working at a slightly higher level and used strategies slightly more often than the men, the differences were not significant. These findings suggest a need to be careful about the dangers of gender stereotyping in language learning.

Defined as a learner's ability to take charge of his or her own learning, autonomy is widely recognized as important for successful language learning, and it has generated a lot of interest among researchers, especially with the development of digital technology which has made autonomous learning a much more viable option than it might have been in the past. Autonomy is dependent on a proactive approach, especially in relation to metacognitive strategies such as time management, actively seeking learning opportunities, and affective strategies such as boredom control (see Griffiths 2013, pp.31-32 for more information and references on this topic).

Although learner beliefs have attracted considerable research attention (e.g. *The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory* or *BALLI*), the relationship between beliefs and successful learning remains vague. Rather than holding rigid beliefs, successful language learners appear to be able to adapt existing beliefs in order to maximize the affordances of a given learning situation (e.g. Griffiths, 2013, pp.32-34). Two beliefs which do seem to relate to successful language learning, however, are the belief in self as a good language learner (that is, the belief that I can do it, which might be called self-efficacy), and the belief that the language being learnt is worth learning (in other words, positive attitudes towards oneself and towards the learning goal, and willingness to adopt appropriate strategies are required).

An awareness of the importance of affect in successful language learning has been around since at least the mid-70s, when Alberto's lack of progress in learning English was attributed to affective difficulties. It was also around this time that the *Affective Filter* metaphor appeared on the scene, suggesting that negative affective states can block language acquisition. In turn, affect has been broken down into numerous sub-categories, each of which has its own literature. These include anxiety, attribution, empathy, inhibition, and various aspects of self-concept. However, in spite of a great deal of activity and interest in the area, there is very little empirical evidence to link affect to successful language learning or to strategy use. Nevertheless, intuition would tell us that our emotional state underlies success or failure in any undertaking, and there would seem to be no reason to suspect that language learning is an exception.

Yet another highly contentious question has been the role of aptitude in successful learning. At one time, it was common practice to administer aptitude tests to students seeking to enter language courses and to use this as the basis for acceptance or rejection. In more recent years, however, this “undemocratic” practice (Dornyei and Skehan, 2003, p.601) has tended to fall out of favour. As with personality, a major difficulty with establishing aptitude has resided with questions over test validity, and none of the commonly used tests (such as the *Modern Language Aptitude Test–MLAT*; the *Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery–PLAB*; or the *Cognitive Ability for Novelty in Acquisition of Language–Foreign–Canal-F*) is universally accepted as valid or reliable, in addition to which, they are not readily available for research purposes. Contemporary thinking tends to suggest that it is quite possible that motivation may compensate for low aptitude as indicated by test results, and those who do not perform well on aptitude tests can be assisted to achieve beyond test predictions by means of effective strategies.

Of all possible learner variables, it would seem to be self-evident that motivation is essential to success in any endeavour, including language learning. Although traditionally seen in dichotomous terms as instrumental/integrative or intrinsic/extrinsic, motivation has more recently been viewed as a complex and dynamic phenomenon which may vary according to numerous factors which may impact on an individual’s desire to achieve a given objective, and to employ volition (defined as the will to continue with a chosen course of action once initial motivation has subsided) to persevere in spite of such obstacles as there may be (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2010). It is motivation that determines the degree to which a learner is willing to invest time, effort, attention or financial or other resources in the language learning endeavour. It will also affect the strategies a learner is willing to employ. Motivation, however, is not a static phenomenon: it is dynamic and may vary as other factors in a learner’s background change.

And all of the factors noted above contribute to learner identity. Learners’ sense of identity contributes to motivation, to a willingness to be autonomous and to invest time and effort, to gender attitudes, beliefs, affective reactions, and to the strategies they choose to employ. In other words, learners’ sense of identity is critical to whether they become successful language learners or not

The learning situation/context

Rubin (1975) also acknowledged the importance of context in successful language learning. The central role of the learning environment has long been recognized, but it was, perhaps, Norton and Toohey’s (2001) article which really highlighted the concept of the situated learner. In this article, the authors describe two immigrant learners, one an adult, the other a child. Although they both faced initial difficulties being accepted into their new environments, they both managed to maximize the affordances provided by these environments to construct positive identities for themselves.

Learning situations can vary in a number of ways and require quite different strategies if learners are to be successful. A student who is used to a traditional classroom setting, for instance, may need to make considerable adjustments to his/her strategy repertoire (especially in terms of metacognitive strategies) in order to be equally successful in a distance learning situation. Likewise, students who go to study abroad in an environment where the target language is spoken may struggle to adapt familiar strategies to suit the new context

The learning target

Yet another factor with which learners must deal is the selection of strategies to suit their particular goal orientation or “task” (Rubin, 1975, p.48). Clearly, strategies will need to vary according to the demands of what it is the student is trying to achieve. A student who is studying General English, for instance, will need different strategies in order to be successful in an international exam course, or if studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). All of these different goals have particular demands which are likely to require flexibility on the part of learners in terms of their strategy selection and deployment.

Implications for the teaching/learning situation

According to the results of a number of studies, strategy training programmes can be effective in terms of promoting successful learning. The study by Tang and Griffiths (2014), however, suggests that such training should include several essential elements. In particular, such programmes should:

- raise awareness of strategy options so that students are able to make informed choices about the strategies which are most appropriate for themselves as individuals, in their specific context, working for their particular goal
- provide explicit instruction so that learners have a clear idea of what they are doing and why and are able to transfer the new strategies beyond the immediate task
- provide practice opportunities to help strategies become automatic, so that learners can include the new strategies in their own individual repertoires and employ them effectively as required
- provide implicit instruction, embedded in the regular learning programme, so that students feel they are making progress with their learning target rather than merely engaging in an activity whose relevance many may fail to see in relation to their own needs
- encourage evaluation so that students can decide which strategies are appropriate for them personally given whatever individual, contextual or target constraints or affordances they might have.

Conclusion

Although there has been controversy over the relationship of language learning strategies (defined here as actions chosen by learners (either deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language) to successful learning, there are a number of studies which have demonstrated that, overall, successful learners do indeed frequently use a large repertoire of language learning strategies. There are also numerous studies which have shown a positive relationship between strategy training programmes and successful language learning, especially when the programme uses both explicit and implicit instruction to raise awareness, provide practice, and encourage evaluation. Nevertheless, although this may provide a useful basic formula around which to build a strategy instruction programme, it is important to remember that strategy choice is a very individual matter, which may also vary according to situation and goal-orientation. Strategy training programmes should therefore be designed to not only provide instruction in particular strategies, but to view the learners holistically in terms of their individual characteristics, their contexts (both that from which they originate and that in which they are trying to learn) and their learning targets. This provides a very complex scenario which is likely also to be dynamic in that

learners do not necessarily remain the same, but are likely to change, and their strategies may also need to change accordingly.

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