

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: AN OVERVIEW

Zoe Gavriilidou* and Angeliki Psaltou-Joycey**

Democritus University of Thrace,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki***

Abstract: The present article offers a brief overview of the field of language learning strategies by following the growth of relevant research over the past thirty years or so, which developed alongside the increased attention to learner-centred instructional models of foreign language teaching. As such, it highlights key concepts, relates the use of strategies to other learner variables, and touches on the issue of strategy instruction and its effect on language learning.

1. Introduction

The present volume gathers studies on language learning strategies from research conducted in Greece. International research on language learning strategies has a history of a little more than thirty years. The 1980's and early 1990's were a period of prolific research on the subject which focused mainly on the strategies that good language learners use, and the factors that affect choice of language learning strategies. Strategy instruction, while crucial, remained a secondary concern in those studies. In the years that followed, there was a loss of interest in language learning strategies but recently an important number of new investigations has been published, thus providing new directions to the field.

In order to set the scene and provide a background for interested readers, we will focus on the evolution of research on language learning strategies. Firstly, we will define language learning strategies, secondly, we will review methods for identifying learner strategies, thirdly, we will refer to the strategies

good language learners use and, fourthly, we will consider the main factors that affect choice of these strategies. Finally, we will review language learning strategy instruction efforts.

2. Definitions of learning strategies

Several definitions of leaning strategies can be found in the literature as the term remains controversial, since scholars have variously interpreted strategies respectively in a broad or narrow sense. Without wishing to involve the reader in this scholarly dispute, we will provide some definitions that have been widely circulated in second language acquisition research and which we consider complementary rather than opposing.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) define learning strategies as “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information”. Oxford (1990: 1) considers them as the “steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning”, and later (1999: 518) she elaborates on the term by referring to “specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language. These strategies can facilitate the internalisation, storage, retrieval or use of the new language”. Also Cohen (1998: 4) maintains that,

“Language learning and language use strategies can be defined as those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action 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”.

According to Chamot (2005: 112), “strategies are most often conscious and goal-driven especially in the beginning stages of tackling an unfamiliar language task. Once a learning strategy becomes familiar through repeated use, it may be used with some automaticity”.

What becomes apparent from the above definitions is that learning strategies refer to initiatives that learners take consciously – at least at the initial stages of learning – in order to facilitate their language learning and become more responsible and autonomous learners. Inherent also in these definitions is the assumption that teachers can contribute to such learner efforts by instructing them how best to approach their learning tasks.

3. Methods for identifying learning strategies

Self-report procedures such as interviews, questionnaires, diaries and journals or think-aloud protocols, while sometimes subject to errors, are mainly used

for identifying learner strategies. The reason is that most of learning strategies can not be observed in the classroom because they occur only covertly and require introspective forms of data collection. This explains why classroom observations are coupled with self-report procedures in many experimental protocols (For a review on methods and research see Chamot 2005: 113, O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 85).

In *interviews* learners are asked to recall a learning task and then describe in detail the way they completed it. In *diaries* and *journals* learners write personal observations about experiences they have had during the learning procedure, problems they have encountered, and the way(s) they have solved them. This method can help students raise their metacognitive awareness (Rubin 2003) since they evaluate the efficacy of specific learning strategies to specific language tasks. *Think-aloud protocols*, on the other hand, are used in individual interviews where learners are asked to perform a language task and then describe the way they completed it. They usually involve immediate retrospection. However, the most frequently used method of data collection is through *questionnaires*, that is, by asking students to reflect and report on how they approach certain tasks and how they complete them. For that reason, Oxford (1990) has developed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which has been used in relevant research worldwide.

Of course all of the above mentioned methods have their limitations, since learners do not always report truthfully either because they cannot recall their thinking or because they cannot describe it in detail. It is, therefore, advisable to use more than one of the above methods when collecting data for strategy research.

4. What strategies do 'good language learners' use?

Data collected through the above mentioned methods have identified the strategies used by successful learners in comparison with the ones used by weaker language learners. In her pioneer work, Rubin (1975) claimed that the 'good language learner' has a strong desire to communicate, is not afraid of making mistakes in order to learn and communicate, is an accurate guesser, is looking for language patterns, creates opportunities for speaking, and monitors his/her own learning.

According to Oxford (1989, 1990), good language learners manage their own learning process through metacognitive strategies, practise the new language with cognitive strategies, overcome learning or communication problems through compensatory strategies, control their emotions through affective

strategies and collaborate efficaciously with their peers or teachers by using social strategies.

However, while previous research (Oxford 1989, 1990, Rubin 1975, 1981) claimed that good language learners use more and better learning strategies than do poor language learners, more recent studies (Chamot and El-Dinary 1999, Chamot and Keatley 2003, Oxford *et al.* 2004), which compared more and less effective language students, have shown that less successful learners do use learning strategies, “sometimes even as frequently as more successful peers, but their strategies are used differently” (Chamot 2003: 116). Good language learners have the ability to select the appropriate strategy or a set of strategies for each task, while less successful learners do not have the so-called metacognitive task knowledge to opt for the appropriate strategies.

5. Factors affecting choice of language learning strategies

Many factors are found in research to influence learning strategy choice.

5.1 Proficiency level

The relation of language proficiency with the selection of strategies and frequency of use has been researched quite extensively. The majority of studies points towards a linear pattern, that is, students from different age groups with higher language proficiency use more strategies, more frequently than students with lower proficiency (Chamot and El-Dinary 1999, Green and Oxford 1995, Griffiths 2003, Lan and Oxford 2003, O’Malley and Chamot 1990, Purdie and Oliver 1999). Language proficiency has also been found to influence the types of strategies that are selected by second/foreign language learners (Mochizuki 1999, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Peacock 2001) with higher proficiency learners using more cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

It should also be noted, however, that a smaller number of studies have produced curvilinear results between reported frequency of strategy use and language proficiency level (Hong-Nam and Leavell 2006, Kantaridou 2004, Kazamia 2003, Phillips 1991) as lower or intermediate proficiency learners were found to use more strategies than advanced level learners. Yamamori *et al.* (2003) found distinct differences in the preference for certain types of strategies among their proficiency groups and their findings led them to the conclusion that “the relationship between strategy use and achievement is complex, multi-factorial, and often non-linear” (Yamamori *et al.* 2003: 407).

Moreover, a few studies have found no significant differences between different proficiency groups of learners (Brown *et al.* 2001, Oxford *et al.* 1993,

Psaltou-Joycey 2008), as a number of other intersecting factors may have affected the final employment of strategies.

The diverse findings of the above studies are indeed indicative of the complex interaction between proficiency level and strategy use in language learning which should not be considered independently from other factors.

5.2 Age

Studies related to *age* differences have examined differences between young learners, adolescents, and adults in strategy use. In the majority of these studies, results have shown that age is a strong determinant of strategy choice and of the ability to report them, as different age groups use different strategies both on an individual basis and as categories. In general, older students are more aware of their use of strategies, can use them more spontaneously, and can regulate their learning process better than young learners (Brown *et al.* 1983 as cited in O'Malley and Chamot 1990: 106, Peacock and Ho 2003).

5.3 Gender

The majority of studies concerned with *gender* differences in learning strategy use have found that females use overall more strategies than males (Ehrman and Oxford 1989, Green and Oxford 1995, Lan and Oxford 2003, Lee 2003, Mochizuki 1999, Nyikos 1990, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Peacock and Ho 2003, Politzer 1983, Sheorey 1999). A number of these studies have also reported superiority of females in the use of individual strategies and in the categories of compensatory and affective strategies. Few studies (Tercanlioglu 2004, Tran 1988) have reported opposite results, whereas a small number of studies did not find any significant differences in strategy use between the two genders (Griffiths 2003, Kojima and Yoshikawa 2004, Psaltou-Joycey 2008), especially when examining multinational and multicultural groups. It should also be noted that these differences do not result in differences in language achievement, as proficiency level is not affected by gender differences (Kaylani 1996, Phakiti 2003).

5.4 Motivation

Gardner (1985: 56) has stated that motivation is the “prime determining factor” in language learning, and subsequent research findings have verified his statement, as motivation has been found to interact with several learner individual differences, learning strategies being among them (Gardner, Tremblay, and Masgoret 1997, Kantaridou 2004, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Pintrich 1989, Pintrich and De Groot 1990). It seems that highly motivated learners use more strategies (Lan and Oxford 2003, Mochizuki 1999, Okada, Oxford and Abo

1996, Schmitt, Boraie and Kassabgy 1996, Schmitt and Watanabe 2001) which consequently affect language achievement (Ehrman and Oxford 1995, Oxford *et al.* 1993, Psaltou-Joycey 2003, Wharton 2000).

5.5 Learning style

We consider the term *learning style* as one referring to the way(s) in which an individual prefers to approach a learning situation or tries to solve a learning problem (Cassidy 2004, Cohen 2003, Oxford 2003, Oxford, Ehrman and Lavine 1991, Peacock 2001). In SLA research the following learning style dimensions have been considered especially useful and relevant to the language learning process: sensory preferences, personality types, and cognitive styles (Cohen 2003, Cohen and Dörnyei 2002, Ehrman 1996, Ehrman and Oxford 1990, Oxford, Hollaway and Horton-Murillo 1992, Reid 1995). These dimensions have been investigated, among other variables, in relation to learning strategies.

Several scholars (Brown 1994, Cohen 1984, Ehrman and Oxford 1990, O'Malley *et al.* 1985) have argued that there is a reciprocal link between learning styles and learning strategies, as in a number of empirical studies it has been found that individual learners employ different strategies because of differences in sensory preferences, personality characteristics, and cognitive styles (Carson and Longhini 2002, Li and Qin 2006, Littlemore 2001, Wenden 1986).

5.6 Field of study/Career orientation

Several studies have investigated the field of study or career orientation of second/foreign language learners (Mochizuki 1999, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Peacock 2001, Peacock and Ho 2003, Politzer and McGroarty 1985, Psaltou-Joycey and Kantaridou, this volume) and found significant differences in language learning strategy choice and use among different groups of subjects. The differences mainly hold between, on the one hand, students of humanities, social sciences, and education majors, and, on the other, students of science and technical majors.

5.7 Culture

“Language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context” (Oxford 1996: x). Culture constitutes an important variable in learning strategy research because the culture of an individual as a learner is made up of his or her beliefs, perceptions, and values concerning language learning, and which are formed from prior formal or informal educational experiences. Studies concerned with cultural influences on learning strategy selection and use have provided examples of different preferences among groups of people coming from various

cultures and speaking different languages (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1996, Reid 1995, Rossi-Le 1995). Cross-cultural similarities and differences seem to affect the way people approach language learning, and, consequently, the types of strategies they select for language learning (Psaltou-Joycey 2008).

5.8 Beliefs

Learners' beliefs about the effectiveness of strategies on their language learning have attracted a number of researchers (Carrell 1989, Horwitz 1987, Wen and Johnson 1997, Wenden 1991, Yule 1988). For instance, a number of studies have found that learners' beliefs about their self-efficacy have an effect on the frequency of strategy use (Yang 1996), especially of metacognitive and cognitive strategies (Purdie and Oliver 1999), and that learners use many kinds of strategies if they find the course material interesting (Pintrich and De Groot 1990).

5.9 Task requirements

Task requirements in instructional settings seem to direct learners' selection of strategies (Oxford and Nyikos 1989, Rubin 1975, Psaltou-Joycey 2008), as research has shown that the requirements of a task often direct the learners' responses (Doughty and Williams 1998, Skehan, 1998), and selection of specific strategies (Bialystok 1981, Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1987).

5.10 Language Teaching Methods

Language teaching methods often influence language learning strategy use. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that student's strategies reflected analytical rule-based instruction methods used in the university, while Politzer (1983) underlined an interaction between teaching methods and learning strategy use for university students learning French, Spanish and German. Ehrman and Oxford (1989), on the other hand, found greater use of communication-oriented strategies among adults whose teachers used more communicative instructional methods.

5.11 Language being learned

It has been reported in many studies (Chamot *et al.* 1987, Politzer 1983) that the language being learned has an influence on the strategies used by learners. For example, Politzer (1983) found that students of Spanish used fewer positive strategies than did students of French and German. However, this could be explained if we consider that sometimes more effective learners prefer more 'difficult' languages such as French or German rather than Spanish, which is known to be easier for English speakers.

6. Language learning strategy instruction

As mentioned before, most language learning strategy research has focused on the identification and classification of strategies used by second language learners. The small number of strategy instruction studies could be assigned to the difficulty to adequately control in natural classroom settings the number of variables involved, as well as pre- and post-tests of experimental and control groups with reliable instruments before and after a specially designed intervention programme.

Furthermore, three important theoretical issues remain unresolved in strategy instruction: The language of strategy instruction, the integration or not of the instruction programme in the normal curriculum, and whether the instruction should be direct or embedded.

6.1 Language of strategy instruction

In first language contexts, strategies are taught through a language in which students are proficient, while in second or foreign language contexts this is not the case especially for beginners and sometimes intermediate students. This implies that beginners could reach at least intermediate levels in a second/foreign language before receiving strategy instruction, and consequently they wouldn't be able to benefit from tools that could facilitate their learning. In some recent studies, however (Chamot and Keatley 2003, Grenfell and Harris 1999), the authors opted for a combination of the native and target language for strategy instruction.

6.2 Integration of strategy instruction

In separate strategy training programmes instruction focuses only on learning strategy teaching, while in the integrated ones instruction is integrated with language or teaching content. Researchers in favour of *separate* training programmes (Derry and Murphy 1986, Gu 1996, Jones *et al.* 1987) have argued that students will learn strategies more effectively if they can direct all their attention towards developing strategic skills rather than trying to learn content at the same time, whereas others have voiced their concern about separate strategy instruction (Chamot and O' Malley 1987, Chamot *et al.* 1999, Nunan 1997, Oxford 1990, Oxford and Leaver 1996, Wenden 1986). Their arguments in favour of *integrated* strategy instruction programmes support the position that practising strategies in authentic language tasks facilitates the transfer of strategies to similar tasks in other occasions.

6.3 Direct or embedded instruction

In direct instruction students are informed of the value and purpose of each strategy, whereas in embedded instruction this is not the case. Direct instruc-

tion programmes raise students' metacognitive awareness and thus guarantee the transfer of learnt strategies to other similar tasks (Wenden 1986).

A considerable number of studies have checked the effect of strategy instruction programmes for listening comprehension (Thompson and Rubin 1996, Vandergrift 2003), speaking and oral communication (Cohen 1998, O' Malley and Chamot 1990), reading comprehension (Chamot and Keatley 2003, Ikeda and Takeuchi 2003), vocabulary learning (Cohen and Apehke 1981, Fan 2003, Schmitt 2000) and writing strategies (Macaro 2001, Pearson and Dole 1987).

7. Conclusion

In this introductory article we have provided an overview of central issues in language learning strategy research in order to prepare the reader for the topics that will be dealt with in the articles of this special volume. The volume is an attempt to inform interested bodies about relevant research in Greece, to sensitise concerned foreign language teachers who have frequently wondered why their students' language progress is not uniform, and to bring together researchers who are actively involved in the study of language learning strategies, in order to open new paths to the future of the challenging field of second language strategy research. We hope that the selected articles in this volume will add a new dimension to what we know about language learning strategy research in Greece, and will promote the continuation of and improvement of such research for the benefit of our language learners.

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