Strategies-Based Instruction in the Foreign-Language Classroom

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Abstract

Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assist their progress in developing second or foreign language skills (Oxford, 1990). Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency among the language learners.

Language learning strategies are believed to play a vital role in learning a second language, as they may assist learners in mastering the forms and functions required for reception and production in the second language and thus affect achievement (Bialystok, 1979). Many researchers have suggested that the conscious use of language learning strategies makes good language learners (Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco, 1975; Oxford, 1985; Wenden, 1985). Other researchers believe that strategies of successful language learners can provide a basis for aiding language learners (Rubin, 1975; Reiss, 1983). O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo & Kupper (1985) asserted that the learning strategies of good language learners, once identified and successfully taught to less proficient learners could have considerable effects on facilitating the development of second language skills. Therefore, if language teachers know more about effective strategies that successful learners use, they may be able to teach these effective strategies to less proficient learners to enhance these learners’ language skills.

Keywords: Language Learning, language teaching, strategies.

Introduction

What are language strategies?

Cohen (1998) defines language learning strategies 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 FL, through the storage, recall and application of information about that language" (p.4). O’Malley and Chamot (1990) consider strategies as tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing FL communicative ability.

Language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assist their progress in developing second or foreign language skills (Oxford, 1990). For example, one learner seeks out conversation partners. Another groups words to be learned and then labels each group. Ahmed uses gestures to communicate in the classroom when the words do not come to mind. Mai Qi learns words by breaking them down into their components. Young consciously uses guessing when she reads. Strategies are the tools for active, self-
directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency.

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The types of strategies used by different learners vary due to different factors, such as degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality/ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, and purpose for learning the language (Oxford, 1990). Of all the learner factors, the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and success in mastering a second or foreign language has been the focus of considerable research over the past two decades (Oxford, 1989; Rubin, 1987).

There has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. In parallel to this new shift of interest, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of the researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning. This paper provides the background of language learning strategies, gives various definitions and taxonomies of language learning strategies presented by several researchers. It also stresses the importance of language learning strategies for foreign language learning and the teacher's role in strategy training. In the last section, the paper exhibits some questions for further research on language learning strategies.

The importance of language strategies

Related research shows that the conscious use of such strategies is related to
language achievement and proficiency (eg, Thompson & Rubin, 1993). Chamot and Kupper (1989) state that successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together with the requirements of the language task. These learners can easily explain the strategies they use and why they employ them (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Cognitive and metacognitive strategies are often used together, supporting each other (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Furthermore, there are links between certain strategies or clusters of strategies and particular language skills or tasks. For example, reading comprehension uses strategies like reading aloud, guessing, deduction, and summarizing (Chamot & Kupper, 1989).

Some other studies have attempted to examine the relationship between language learning strategies and success in FL learning and the researchers have had varied results. O'Malley et al (1985) revealed that students at all levels reported the use of an extensive variety of learning strategies. High-achieving students reported greater use of metacognitive strategies. They concluded that the more successful students are probably able to use greater metacognitive control over their learning. Ehrman and Oxford (1995) indicated that successful students preferred to use cognitive strategies more frequently in their study. Green and Oxford (1995) discovered that high-achieving students used all kinds of language learning strategies more frequently than low-achieving students. On the other hand, researchers have investigated what unsuccessful language learners do. Vann and Abraham (1990) observed that, although their unsuccessful students appeared to be active strategy users, they "failed to apply strategies appropriately to the task at hand".

Existing research shows that motivation (Kaylani, 1996), cultural background (Oxford, 1996b), attitudes and beliefs (Oxford et al 1990) and gender (Kaylani, 1996) are some of the factors which influence choice of strategies used among students learning a FL. Language teachers must have content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of the learner and his/her characteristics to be effective teachers.

Language learning strategies are used with the explicit goal of helping learners improve their knowledge and understanding of a target language. They are the conscious thoughts and behaviors used by students to facilitate language learning tasks and to personalize the language learning process. Language learning strategies have been differentiated into four distinct categories: cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective (based on Chamot 1987, Oxford 1990). Cognitive strategies usually involve the identification, retention, storage, or retrieval of words, phrases, and other elements of the target language (e.g., using prior knowledge to comprehend new language material, applying grammar rules to a new context, or classifying vocabulary according to topic).
Metacognitive strategies deal with pre-planning and self-assessment, on-line planning, monitoring and evaluation, as well as post-evaluation of language learning activities (e.g., previewing the language materials for the day’s lesson, organizing one’s thoughts before speaking, or reflecting on one’s performance). Such strategies allow learners to control the learning process by helping them coordinate their efforts to plan, organize, and evaluate target language performance. Social strategies include the actions that learners select for interacting with other learners, a teacher, or with native speakers (e.g., asking questions for clarification, helping a fellow student complete a task, or cooperating with others). Affective strategies serve to regulate learner motivation, emotions, and attitudes (e.g., strategies for reducing anxiety, for self-encouragement, and for self-reward).

Conclusion

The paper tried to show whether strategies-based instruction play a role in the foreign-language classroom. It would seem that the results of various researches speak in favor of such a role. If instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that can help students speak the target language more effectively, their students may well improve their performance on language tasks. The findings would also suggest that explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom can have a direct payoff on student outcomes. It also seems to endorse the notion of integrating strategy training directly into the classroom instructional plan and embedding strategies into daily language tasks. In this way, the students get accustomed to having the teacher teach both the language content and the language learning and use strategies at the same time. Such an approach calls for training the teachers in how to deliver strategies-based instruction so that the strategies become an integral part of the fiber of the course, while preserving the explicit and overt nature of the strategy training. In this manner, the students should be better able to consciously transfer specific strategies to new contexts.

References


