

Learner strategies and language learning

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Abstract. Learning strategies or learner strategies has recently become the research interest of many scholars and has been considered the new decisive factor in the learning process. In the article, the author has summarized and presented some theories concerning learning strategies or learner strategies and later has proposed her own ideas on the importance of and ways to introduce the strategies to the learners in an EFL context.

1. An introduction to learner strategies (or learning strategies)

Within the field of language education over the last few decades, a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. We are living in the post method era where teaching methodology is no longer the focal or decisive point in the teaching - learning process. 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 many studies and books, whose authors can be named such as Wenden and Rubin [1], Richards and Platt [2], Stern [3], O'Malley [4], and Oxford [5].

The term "language learning strategy" has been defined by many researchers.

According to Wenden and Rubin [1] strategies are any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Richards and Platt [2] state that learning strategies are "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information." According to Stern [3], "the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques". All language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or subconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom. Since language classroom is like a problem-solving environment in which language learners are likely to face new input and difficult tasks given by their instructors, learners' attempts

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to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required, that is, using language learning strategies is inescapable.

Since there are several ways to define learning strategies, there are also more than one way to classify them. At least four classifications are found common in recent studies: they are by Rubin and Wenden [1], by O'Malley [4], by Stern [3], and by Oxford

[5]. However, due to the scope of the article, only two classifications by the first two writers will be mentioned below.

Rubin, one of the pioneers in the field of learning strategies, makes the distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. His classification can be best summarized in this stable (Rubi and Wenden [1]):

Table 1. Rubin and Wenden's classification of learning strategies

Learning strategies	Cognitive strategies	1. Clarification/Verification	- Steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin identifies 6 main cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning
		2. Guessing/Inductive Inferencing	
		3. Deductive Reasoning	
		4. Practice	
		5. Memorization	
		6. Monitoring	
	Meta cognitive strategies	These strategies are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning. They involve various processes as planning, prioritising, setting goals, and self-management	
Communication strategies	- They are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker.		
Social strategies	- Social strategies are those activities learners engage in which afford them opportunities to be exposed to and practise their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin and Wenden) [1].		

O'Malley has a similar view on learner strategies as Rubin's but his classification, which is thought to be more simple and comprehensible, is slightly different. O'Malley et al. [4] divide language learning strategies into three main categories:

Metacognitive Strategies: strategies which require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Among the main metacognitive strategies, it is possible to include advance

organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation.

Cognitive Strategies: Cognitive strategies work directly with the target language and are more limited to specific learning tasks. These strategies involve identifying, remembering, storing or retrieving words, sound or other aspects of the target language..

Social/affective Strategies: Social affective strategies are things that learners do

to manage their feelings or to manage their interaction with others. Some common examples of these include cooperation, questioning for clarification and self talk.

2. How important are the strategies to the development of English language competence?

From what the author has observed from her own language learning and teaching experience, she is convinced that all the three types of learning strategies as mentioned above by O'Malley are important to the language learning process. They are considered as tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative and language competence. However, if we take a close look at all the strategies we may find out that each group has its own functions in facilitating learning.

Metacognitive strategies are helpful to the learning process as a whole in the sense that learners will take control over and monitor what and how they learn; so these strategies can be good and applicable to any kind of learning, not just for language. Meanwhile, cognitive strategies are more closely linked to the studying of specific language skills, involving the optimal techniques learners can use to cope with language tasks. Social/affective strategies, on the other hand, are more to do with feelings and self-control, which is thought to have their role in developing self-confidence, cooperativeness, and will. Again, like metacognitive strategies, social/affective strategies can be involved in all learning, regardless of the content and context. Apparently, these three groups of strategies can be combined in the learning process for the learners to tackle learning issues and tasks. To put it another way, they

are sometimes overlap when learners use them. For example, to tackle a reading text for comprehension, learners can at first use metacognitive strategies to think about the topic, to make some predictions and to decide what they want to find out in the text. Later when they read they can make use of cognitive strategies to guess meaning of certain words from context or to work out main ideas and supporting ideas by analyzing the structure of the paragraph. During the process, they may find it sometimes very difficult to understand the text so they should know how to encourage themselves to carry on, which is the part of social/affective strategies.

Agreeably, all the types of learning strategies are useful and necessary in the language learning process. However, if one makes the language competence the main focal aim, then the cognitive strategies may be of more importance because these strategies are closely linked to the language tasks. In other words, they are used mainly for learning the target language (Reinders & Cotterall [6]. It would be too ambitious to list all the cognitive strategies learners can use because there are numerous of them involving the learning of different skills and language components. Below are just some examples of the cognitive strategies:

Reinders and Cotterall [6] divided cognitive strategies into two types: (1) those for learning the target language and (2) those for using it. Belonging to the group (1) they mention rehearsal and elaboration, and for group (2) they discuss approximation and paraphrase.

- *Rehearsal*: Saying for writing something again and again when learning new vocabulary and preparing to make a phone call or to give a talk

- *Elaboration*: Making links between new information and what learners already know

- *Approximation*: Choosing more general words than the target words to express their meaning.

- *Paraphrase*: Paraphrasing when learners do not know a word in the target language. The chance is that the listener will help them find out that word.

Rubin and Wenden [1] propose the following types of cognitive strategies:

- *Clarification/Verification*: verifying or clarifying their understanding of the new language. They seek confirmation of their understanding of the language

- *Guessing/Inductive inferencing*: using the previously obtained linguistic or conceptual knowledge to derive explicit hypotheses about the linguistic form, semantic meaning or speaker's intention.

- *Deductive Reasoning*: is a problem solving strategy in which the learner looks for and uses general rules in approaching the target language.

- *Practice*: the strategies which contribute to the storage and retrieval of the language while focusing on accuracy of usage.

- *Memorization*: focusing on retrieval and storage of language. Examples are drill and repetition.

- *Monitoring*: this refers to the strategies in which the learner notices errors, observes how a message is received and interpreted by the addressee, and then decides what to do about it.

The above mentioned are just some examples of cognitive strategies. They are clearly useful in developing the learner's language competence because they involve telling learners what to do and how should they do it with the target language in order to master it. In the following part of the article,

the author will give more explanation on four selected strategies and how they should be taught to the students.

3. How students should be encouraged to adopt and use the strategies

As a language teacher of the post-method era and fully aware of the move towards learning process as the focus of language teaching, the author believes that the students should be taught the learning strategies so that they can carry on their study even outside the classroom. In encouraging the students to adopt and use the strategies, it is suggested that teachers base themselves on a few basic principles as follow:

- The strategies should be taught explicitly; students see the rationale for learning about them.

- The strategies should be taught together with the language skills (speaking, reading, listening or writing) or language components (grammar, vocabulary of phonology). There should be no lessons about learning strategies only.

- Students should be given hands-on experience to experiment and to see how the strategies work

- The following is the illustration of how some strategies should be taught:

a) Guessing: This strategy is typically useful in developing reading skills so it should be introduced in reading lessons. (The strategy can later be used in other skills like listening as well). Before learners read a text, the teacher will tell them to look at the title, subtitle, pictures and graphs (if any) and ask them to think about what they are going to read. They will be asked to make predictions about the text and tell what they expect to

find out from the text. When they read, they may have to try to find what they want to know only (as the first task). The teacher will tell them that they should always bring a purpose and some expectations to their reading activity so that they are really reading for meaning. And when they meet new words, they should try to guess the meaning from the context or from any clues that they have in mind. After they understand about the strategy, they will experiment it with the reading text of the lesson with the help and encouragement from the teacher. The strategy should be taught repeatedly over a period so that the learners can build up a habit of using it.

b) Practice: This strategy, as the author guesses, is familiar with the learners though they may not know it is a cognitive strategy. The strategy can be most useful in helping the learners remember certain grammar rules and vocabulary so it can be introduced when grammar or vocabulary is the focus of the lesson. The teacher will tell the students that "practice makes perfect" and show them meaningful ways to practice. The tasks may range from controlled practice of repetition, application of rules, imitation and so on to less controlled practice like writing their own sentences or other more creative tasks. The learners should be told that the practice will focus on language accuracy.

c) Memorization: At a first glance, this strategy may sound like the previous one: practice. Students should be explained explicitly the difference between the two. Though they both involve practice and may use the same drill and repetition, the former focuses on *accuracy of usage* while the latter on the *storage and retrieval* process. The goal of the memorization strategy is organization. This strategy should be introduced when

vocabulary is the focus of the lesson. The teacher together with the students may discuss ways to learn and memorize vocabulary in effective ways. Some ways may have already been used by the learners so they can share them with the whole class. Some examples can be learning words in association, learning words of a certain class, learning word stress basing on suffix rules, etc. Students are encouraged to choose one way that they find most useful and start using that way. The teacher will keep track of their learning or encourage them to keep track of themselves then report back to the teacher sometimes.

d) Monitoring: The monitoring process appears to be in combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The learners need to be able to identify a problem, determine a solution and make a correction. In fact, this strategy can be used in different aspects of language learning, especially in learning skills of speaking and writing. One way is to introduce this strategy in the speaking lesson where learners will produce their oral speech and have chance of getting instant feedback. The teacher will tell them to notice the reaction of the listeners when they speak to them and realize what is missing in their own language. According to the interactionists' point of view, through interaction, interlocutors may see their mistakes and look for the correction of the partner then they can learn from it. The teacher will tell the learners that this strategy is not only helpful in their learning process but also of use when they actually have to communicate in the target language. They can always realize their mistakes from the addressees and manage to correct these mistakes in their way. As for practice of the strategy, role playing and pair works in the speaking class can best help.

In summary, if we want our learners to become life-long learners, we should teach them the learning strategies so that they can “teach” themselves when the teachers are no longer around. Metaphorically, if we teach people how to fish, they will survive their whole life; but if we give them a fish, they may survive one day. That’s why researchers have moved their interest towards trying to find out more about the learners and the learning process to help teachers do best in facilitating learners’ learning. As learning may not and should not necessarily happen inside the classroom but most of the time, it happens outside the classroom where there is no teacher and no teaching activity at all. What can the learners do if they are not equipped with the skills of coping with such type of learning? They certainly need to be taught the learning strategies to become

autonomous learners so that they can manage and control their own learning.

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Chiến lược học tập và việc dạy học ngoại ngữ

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Chiến lược học tập (learning strategies hay learner strategies) gần đây đã trở thành đề tài nghiên cứu của rất nhiều học giả và được xem là yếu tố mới quyết định đến hiệu quả của quá trình học tập. Trong bài báo này, tác giả đã tổng hợp, trình bày một số lý thuyết về chiến lược học tập và đưa ra ý kiến của bản thân về tầm quan trọng cũng như cách thức giảng dạy chiến lược học tập trong việc dạy ngoại ngữ, dựa trên quan sát và kinh nghiệm của tác giả như một người học và người dạy ngoại ngữ.