



# A Synthesis of Language Learning Strategies: Current Issues, Problems and Claims Made in Learner Strategy Research

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## Abstract

The current paper presented theoretical assumptions behind language learning strategies (LLS) and an overview of methods used to identify learners' strategies, first, and then summarized what have been reported from large number of descriptive studies of strategies by language learners. Moreover, the paper tried to present the variety of definitions and classifications of learning strategies can be counterproductive in a number of ways. Finally, the researchers argued that in spite of the lack of coherence and clarity in the description of second language learning strategies, the relevant research findings can be profitably incorporated into classroom activities and that further research and application in this area can make our understanding of learning strategies deeper and our facilitation of language learning more fruitful.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies; Identification Method of Learners' Strategies, Current Issues of LLS, Methodological and Practical Issues of LLS

## 1. Introduction

The learners of a second language who achieve satisfactory levels of proficiency and who are successful in language learning have their own "special ways of doing it". These good learners can probably help us with both understanding more about the nature of language learning and facilitating language learning for our less successful learners. About three decades ago this was seriously brought up by two prominent scholars of the field of SLA: Stern (1975) and Rubin (1975). They tried to show us how good language learners could teach us with the strategies, which they employed for language learning. That was the beginning of the tradition of research dealing with second language learning strategies. Since then, Cohen (1998, cited in Shmais, 2003) believes "most of the research in the area of foreign language learning strategies has focused on the identification, description, and classification of useful learning strategies". Such research has identified valuable collections and classifications of good strategies for language learning. This paper will enumerate some of the well-known classifications (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998, cited in Chamot, 2005). The criteria used for classification and description are different and sometimes contradictory.

In recent years, there has also been a shift of emphasis from the identification and classification of learning strategies to their application in the language classroom. According to Cohen (1998, cited in Shmais, 2003), explicit training in the use of a broad array of strategies for learning foreign language vocabulary and for grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills has become a prominent issue in SLA research. And training learners to be better at the learning and use of language has been growing.

Grenfell & Harris (1999, cited in Chamot, 2005) claims that second language learning strategies are, therefore, significant at least for two reasons. The first reason is that they can provide some explanations for the variability of language learning outcomes and can reveal a lot about the processes involved in second language learning. The second reason is that these strategies can be used to help language learners learn better and to provide language teachers with new ways of helping their unsuccessful learners.

Language learning strategies can be really effective in the abovementioned significant areas because of the properties they are believed to have. Oxford (1990 cited in Chamot, 2004) offers a good summary of the characteristics of language learning strategies. He believes that language learning strategies:

1. *Contribute to the main goal [of language learning], communicative competence.*
2. *Allow learners to become more self-directed.*
3. *Expand the role of teachers.*
4. *Are problem-oriented.*
5. *Are specific actions taken by the learner?*
6. *Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.*
7. *Support learning both directly and indirectly.*
8. *Are not always observable.*
9. *Are often conscious.*
10. *Can be taught.*
11. *Are flexible.*
12. *Are influenced by a variety of factors.*

Of these features, numbers 9 and 10 are particularly emphasized here. Second language learning strategies are often conscious. This implies that good language learners can tell us what they do to learn language. In other words, if language learning strategies are conscious, then language learners can report the strategies which caused their success. They are also teachable. It follows from this feature that one way of overcoming language learning problems would be the teaching of language learning strategies.

## **2. Theoretical Assumptions behind LLS: LLS as Cognitive Process**

According to Griffiths & Parr (2001), there are two main theoretical perspectives behind language learning strategies. The theory of LLS hypothesize that differential rate of learners' success is related to various methods and strategies which are used by a variety of learners on a task. Based on cognitive perspective, learners have the capability to impact their own learning consciously. McLaughlin (1987) believes language learning is a cognitive process so that it is similar in a number ways to any other sort of learning. In contrast to cognitive view is Krashen's monitor and language acquisition hypothesis. He emphasize that learners are not able to learn language consciously, while they acquire language through natural communications. Thus, this view neglects the applicability of learning consciously in terms of the development of language learning. Further, he assumes that strategies used by more successful language learners may be learnt by those who are less successful. Additionally, teachers have key role in the process of language learning by giving awareness and encouraging them in the use learning strategies. LLS theory with feature of "teachability" gives opportunities to current educators and also researchers are highly interested in analyzing the potential of LLS in promoting the ability language learners

## **3. Identification of Language Learning Strategies**

LLS research has been commenced with the seminal work of Joan Rubin in 1970. He constructed a model of "the good language learner" by identifying specific strategies that successful L2 students used when learning a second language. The identification of learner characteristics and strategic techniques regarding the effective second and foreign language learning are followed by other researchers (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978/1996; O'Malley, & Chamot, 1990, cited in Chamot, 2005). Takeuchi (2003) conducted a research and used biographies to identify the characteristics of Japanese good language learners. Consequently, according to previous studies, characteristics of good language learner are identified as a learner who actively and mentally involved in learning process, tries to monitor language comprehension and production, to communicate in the language, to use prior linguistic and general knowledge, to apply various memorization techniques, and to ask questions for clarification.

### *3.1 Methods for Identifying Learners' Strategies*

According to Chamot (2005) different self-report procedures can be utilized to identify Learning strategies. He used self-reports methods such as retrospective interviews, stimulated recall interviews, questionnaires, written diaries and journals, and think aloud protocols concurrent with a learning task. At the present time these methods are used as the ultimate way to identify learners' unobservable mental learning strategies however these methods have some limitations.

#### **3.1.1 Interviews**

According to Macaro (2006), in retrospective interviews that teacher asked students to complete a learning task, teacher encourages learners to recall and to describe how they complete the task. Whereas the stimulated recall interview is conducted instantaneously after completing learning tasks, it is expected that students determine their actual learning strategies. Interviewer videotaped the tasks and interviews.

### 3.1.2 Questionnaires

Dornyei (2005, p. 178) states that “questionnaire is the most common method for identifying students’ learning strategies.” Many researchers have used questionnaires in their descriptive studies which are developed by Oxford (1990, cited in Dornyei 2005), the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). When there are a large number of language learner, researchers will extensively use SILL standardized questionnaires with English version and other variety of languages to collect and analyze data. Using Strategy with other variables such as learning styles proficiency level, culture and gender are correlated in different studies.

### 3.1.3 Diaries and Journals

To identify language learners ‘strategies, learners can write diaries and journals. According to Carson & Longhini (2002) when learners encounter a problem during language learning they attempt to solve these problems and to write their personal observations regarding their own learning experiences. Rubin (2003, cited in Chamot, 2005) used diaries to improve instructional purposes and help students to raise their metacognitive awareness regarding their own learning processes and strategies.

### 3.1.4 Think-Aloud Protocols

Cohen (2003) and Chamot (2004) think-aloud protocol is defined as giving a target language task to the learner and ask him/her to explain about thoughts and strategies as they are working on the task in form of interview. Open -ended question will be asked in interview such as “What are you thinking right now? Why did you stop and start over?” Thinking aloud Interview is recorded and will be analyzed in terms of learning strategies evidences.

## 4. Claims Made in Learner Strategy Research

Researchers have conducted empirical studies and offered the practical applications that have resulted in a body of evidence as follows:

A) There is correlation between strategy use and various aspects of language learning success. According to some studies strategy use correlated generally with learning success (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) or high strategy use correlated generally to motivation (Nunan, 1997). It has been found that there is a relationship between success and a preference for certain kinds of strategies that are used by good language learners (Naiman et al., 1978/1996, cited in Macaro, 2006).

B) The level of strategy use is different between genders and individuals. Results of different studies reveal that females use more strategies than males (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Sheorey, 1999, cited in Shmais, 2003), or they use different strategies in comparison to female .(Bacon, 1992; Gu, 2002). Van Hell & Mahn (1997, cited in Wenden, 2003) stated that strategies used by experienced L2 learners are different from those of inexperienced L2 learners.

C) Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995) draws attention to this fact that the method of eliciting learner strategy use is acceptable in terms of validity and reliability however it is imperfect in some ways. Comprehensive information is provided by questionnaires and inventories; verbal reports (think-aloud techniques and task based retrospectives) effectively generate into skill-specific or task-specific strategy use. L2 strategy researchers and researchers operating in other fields related to cognitive processing claimed that verbal reports are considerably effective.

D) Although teachers encounter many obstacles to train strategies to learners (O’Malley, 1987; Wenden, 1987b cited in Macaro, 2006) this training will promote successful learning if it considers metacognition and if it is performed over a long periods. For instance, Aziz (1995) and; Conti (2004) cited in Macaro (2006) mentioned researchers have conducted empirical studies to train learners writing strategies and communication strategies and oral interactions to become effective writers and speakers.

## 5. Language Learning Strategies: Issues of Definition & Classification

### 5.1 Definitions

A number of definitions of LLS within ESL/EFL have been suggested. To verify the point, five definitions of learning strategies collected by and quoted in Ellis (1994) are mentioned below. The list of definitions is not necessarily exclusive and it represents the fact that second language learning strategies have not been uniformly defined so far.

1. According to Stern strategy use is defined as general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach that language learner employ , and these particular forms of observable learning behavior is appeared in form of techniques (Stern, 1983).

2.“Learner is involved in behaviors and thoughts during learning which is called Learning strategies and encoding process are affected by learning strategies” (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986).

3.“Techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that are employed by students to facilitate the learning, retrieving of both" linguistic and content area information" are called learning strategies. (Chamot, 1987).

4.“Strategies and techniques that promote the development of the language system and have direct effect on language learning are referred to learning strategies” (Rubin, 1987).

5.“Behaviors or actions which are taken by learners to make language learning more successful, selfdirected, and enjoyable are defined as language learning strategies” (Oxford, 1989).

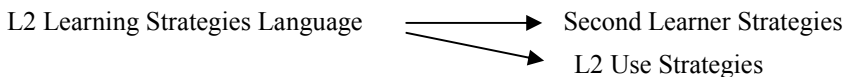
It is not only that there are numerous definitions for language learning strategies but that there are also different terms used to describe them. To Cohen (1998), the first terminological and conceptual issue in need of clarification concerns a distinction made among strategies, sub-strategies, techniques, and tactics, and the lack of clarity that this distinction has generated in the literature.

### 5.2 Problems of Having Different Definitions

The fact that there are different definitions and different terms to describe second language learning strategies can be counterproductive in a number of ways. Oxford & Cohen (1992, cited in Oxfords & Hsiao, 2002) believe that L2 strategy field has experienced conflict regarding definition and classification. The first problem is that the abundance and the variety of terms and definitions can be indicative of the fact that the nature of second language learning strategies has not been clearly captured yet and that so far research has provided a very vague picture of the concepts involved. In other words, if we accept the complexity of second language learning strategies and if we take the analogy of "the elephant in the dark", we can argue that we are still in need of a comprehensive and a well-supported definition to describe second language learning strategies. The second problem is a practical one: if we assume that for any given group of learners the learning strategies already in use need to be identified before any remedial action can be taken, then the imprecision of definitions can become really problematic. The last but not necessarily the least important drawback is that when different definitions are assumed in different research projects, the comparison and the synthesis of results becomes extremely difficult.

### 5.3 Taxonomies of Language Learning Strategies

Different criteria are used to classify second language learning strategies causing inconsistencies and mismatches across the taxonomies. Cohen (1998) considers the elements of choice and consciousness very important in the classification of language learning strategies. Here is the schematic representation of his classification:



A second classification system offered by Oxford (1990, Oxfords & Hsiao, 2002) is based on a different criterion. For Oxford whether the strategies affect language learning directly or indirectly are important. Using this criterion, he offers a very broad classification of strategies, the simple outline of which is as follows:

1. *Direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies)*
2. *Indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies)*

For each of the direct and indirect strategies mentioned above, Oxford (1990) later defines many sub- classifications.

O'Malley and Chamot (1982, cited in Chamot, 2004) present the third categorization of second language learning strategies. They classify learning strategies according to whether they are cognitive, affective, or socio-affective. Strategies have been classified by many other different criteria. Some researchers have emphasized the role of consciousness in their classifications. Others have stressed the kinds of learners who use the strategies, i.e., successful or unsuccessful learners. Still Tarone, Cohen, and Dumas, (1976, cited in Chamot, 2004) have classified strategies according to whether they relate to the phonological, morphological, syntactic, or lexical components of the language.

To make a long story short, there are many different systems of classification for second language learning strategies, each of which is based on a unique criterion.

### 5.4 Conflict Regarding Different LLS Classifications

Although the categorizations are valuable descriptions of second language learning strategies, their multiplicity and their various underlying criteria can bring about some major conceptual and practical problems. The first major disadvantage is the conflict, which arises when a particular strategy is to be put in a category of strategies. Oxford (1990, cited in Oxfords & Hsiao, 2002, p.370) exemplifies the point by stating that "there is confusion among some strategy specialists as to whether a particular strategy, like self-monitoring, should be called direct or indirect". Ellis (1994) also argues that the categories that have been established are 'high-inference' in nature, their identification often requiring considerable interpretation on the part of the researcher.

Another disadvantage as noted by Oxford and Ehrman (1995, p.363) is that "the proliferation of strategy systems has caused problems for those researchers who believe it is important to compare results across studies.

A third problem as cited by Ellis (1994) is that strategy classifications employ very different (and sometimes questionable) assumptions and methodologies. For instance, the assumptions that there are "good" learning strategies and that they are causal in language learning have been questioned.

Gass and Selinker (1994, p. 256) believe that such problems are understandable because the area of second language learning strategies has a very short history of research behind it and because "this is indeed a difficult area to be clear about". Despite all these problems, the study of second language learning strategies is an important area of investigation in SLA research. It will be discussed in the following section that the application of research results in this area to language teaching problems can be very promising.

## 6. Methodological and Practical Issues in LLS Instruction

The study of learning strategies is significant in a number of ways. Ellis (1994) believes that the study of learning strategies holds considerable promise, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in L2 learning. He also writes, "these problems [of definition and classification] are serious blocks to reliable research, but they are, perhaps, less important when learner training is concerned".

As Horwitz (1987, cited in Ehsanzade, 2006 p. 410) has claims, "the ultimate purpose of studying learner strategies is, of course, an applied one; researchers and teachers hope to determine which strategies are most effective and help students adopt more productive learning procedures". That is to say, by studying the special strategies, employed by successful learners and by putting them at the disposal of less successful learners, language teachers may be able to help their students much more than they can in any other way.

Not all researchers agree with the claims made in the previous paragraph. Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998), among many others, have extensively argued in favor of strategy training and have offered evidence of its success. On the other hand, Gass and Selinker (1994) and Ellis (1994) have expressed doubts in this respect. They believe that if a successful student reports having used strategy "X", one cannot be sure that an unsuccessful student will also prosper if he or she uses that strategy.

### 6.1 Strategy Training: Learning To Learn

Chamot (2005) argues that to teach students learning strategies is to teach them how to learn. The purpose of education, it has been said, is to replace an empty mind with an open mind. There are good reasons to suggest that training students in the use of language learning strategies can contribute to such long-term goals of education in general and language education in particular.

Another reason for training language learners in the use of learning strategies as Macaro (2006) notes learner autonomy, self-reliance, and independence is the final goal of every language teaching program. In addition, the major role of language teachers is to facilitate the language learning process. Strategy training can be a very good way of facilitating learning.

Strategy training can be an alternative to the existing methods of language teaching. As a matter of fact, training learner in the use of learning strategies may significantly increase the efficiency of other common methods of language teaching.

### 6.2 Impact of Task and Learner Context

According to Chamot (2004) and Cohen (2003) different tasks are assigned to different context of second language or foreign language and also in process of learning a language the learner's goal to acquire social or academic language or both plays an important role. It can be noticed that different learners with various proficiency levels use different strategies. Takeuchi's (2003) conducted multiple case studies regarding learner journals, reported that when learners advance to higher proficiency levels, they use more advanced strategies. Similarly, a recent reading study by Oxford et al., 2004, cited in Chamot, 2005 found that when students faced difficulty of the task, consequently they employ challenging learning strategies.

### 6.3 Metacognitive Models

Many researchers have argued about the development of students' metacognition or their ability to understand and regulate their own thinking and learning. (Shmais, 2003; Reid, 1987; Cohen, 2003; Wenden, 2000). Chamot (2004) believes that both declarative (task knowledge self-knowledge, strategy knowledge, world knowledge) and procedural knowledge (planning for learning, monitoring a learning task, and evaluating learning are involved in metacognition. A metacognitive model for learning strategy instruction is proposed by Chamot. This model includes four recursive (rather than sequential) processes: planning, monitoring, problem-solving, and evaluating. In this metacognitive model, if teachers assign difficult learning tasks they teach some strategies to help learners. For instance, in case that student cannot progress well in tasks, she /he is taught to monitor their comprehension, production, and select problem solving strategies in order to identify and address difficulties.

## 7. Learner Strategy Research: Criticism

Although there is a growing interest in the domain of learner strategy, it has been criticized in different ways. Some researchers criticize the methodology, which is applied to elicit, measure, and categorize strategies; some researchers criticized the method which is utilized for performing intervention studies; some researchers criticized the assumption regarding the influence of strategy use; and some of them generally criticized the lack of strength in theory of learner strategy research. Seliger has questioned applying qualitative methods for obtaining learner strategies, (1983, p. 180) and also questioned whether "the verbalizations of learners strategies lead to some form of internal reality". Locastro (1994) regarding strategy measurement maintained that, transferability of large and general learner strategy inventories [SILL], Oxford, (1990) is not feasible across sociocultural domains and therefore it leads to invalidity of the results and conclusions. Furthermore, Dornyei (2005) has argued that the SILL is considered to be defective and inconsistent psychometrically since the scales in the SILL must be cumulative. Stevick (1990, p. 144), investigated and identified two major problems in aforementioned definitions. First problem is related to "Size-Abstractness Dilemma" according to his classification, it illustrates that some strategies describe a phenomena that are larger than others and that some strategies describe a phenomena that are more abstract than others, since this classification varies in two various size

and abstractness category it might result in imprecision and confusion. Second problem according to Stevick (p. 144), is "Outside-Inside Problem," explains "there is not any relationship between external acts and the mental constructs".

### 8. Future Directions of LLS Research

Chamot (2005) has demonstrated that second language acquisition researchers will continue the study of language learning strategies to understand different learner characteristics and the complex cognitive, social, and affective processes involved in processing language. Whereas, methodologists assume that instruction of learning strategies plays an essential role in teacher preparation and curriculum design and language educators and methodologists will continue to apply effective instructional approaches and, learner-centered instruction and learner empowerment in all areas of education. First area for further studies is intervention of language learning strategies during instruction and it's the effects on achievement and language proficiency. A second area of research is promoting language teacher expertise in order to integrate learning strategies into classroom instruction. Moreover, the relationship between effective learning instruction and language teachers' characteristics such as attitude and teacher beliefs and teaching approach can be undertaken.

### 9. Implications for EFL/ESL Instruction

Although the research improvements cited earlier are necessary, there are some important implications for EFL/ESL instruction based on existing findings.

ESL teachers can help their students recognize the power of consciously using language learning strategies to make learning quicker, easier, more effective, and more fun. To help all students become more aware of their strategy choices. ESL teachers can assist students in identifying their own current learning strategies by means of diaries surveys or interviews.

ESL teachers can then weave learning strategy training into regular classroom events in a natural but highly explicit way, providing ample opportunity for practicing strategies and transferring them to new tasks. Strategy instruction can include information about learning styles on which the students partially base their choice of learning strategies and can highlight cultural differences in learning strategies and styles that exist in any ESL/EFL classroom. ESL/EFL teachers should tailor strategy training to the real, communicative needs of learners in the particular situation.

Strategy training can help students make effective use of multiple strategies. Metacognitive strategies help students keep themselves on track; cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies provide the necessary intellectual tools; and affective and social strategies offer continuous emotional and interpersonal support. Teachers' action research on language learning strategies or on strategy training should cover this wide array of strategies and should not be limited to just one or two types of techniques.

L2 learning strategy research is in its early stages, having only begun in earnest in the 1980s. As might be expected in any new research area, difficulty still exists in conceptualizing and defining learning strategies in a uniformly meaningful, comprehensive way. Nevertheless, recent L2 strategy research offers potentially significant implications for all ESL/EFL teachers who want to improve their instructional effectiveness. These teachers and their students can benefit greatly from what the research has already found and will gain more from future investigations.

### 10. Conclusion

One of the very recent areas of investigation in the field of SLA is the area of second language learning strategies. The major assumption of this tradition of research is that the study of LLS and training language learners for better uses of learning strategies contribute to the solution of some of the major conceptual and practical problems of the field.

Research on language learning strategies is still in its infancy. Naturally, there are still many problems unresolved. The major problems are terminological and classificatory. Language learning strategies have been defined and classified differently causing some conflict and confusion. For every local strategy training program, this article has suggested that' research needs to be conducted in that context because the good language learner of a community with his or her own set of successful strategies may not necessarily succeed in another community. Nor may his /her set of strategies help the unsuccessful learner of a different community.

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