GOING ABOUT LEARNING: LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The focus of research on second language strategies has been on identifying the behaviors and thought processes used by language students to learn a foreign or second language. The importance of such research lies in the fact that learning strategies not only enable students to take responsibility of their own learning but also expand the role of teachers. Thus, researchers have tried to identify what strategies are involved in the process of learning. One of these researchers provides one of the most comprehensive classification of strategies with a system of two classes, six groups and nineteen sets. Research on learning strategies has also shared some insights about the factors that influence the choice of learning strategies. Among those factors are motivation, L2 stage, and type of task.

Resumen

Las investigaciones sobre las estrategias de aprendizaje de una segunda lengua se han enfocado en tratar de identificar los procesos de pensamiento y comportamiento usados por el estudiante para aprender un segundo idioma. La importancia de dichas investigaciones se debe a que las estrategias de aprendizaje no solo le permiten al estudiante tomar responsabilidad por su propio aprendizaje sino que también expanden el papel del profesor. En un intento por identificar cuáles estrategias están involucradas en el proceso de aprendizaje, una de las clasificaciones de estrategias más completa consiste en un sistema de dos clases, seis grupos y dieciséis series. También existen factores que influyen en el escogimiento de estrategias de aprendizaje usadas por el alumno. Algunos de estos factores son el tipo de ejercicio por realizar, el nivel de competencia en la segunda lengua, y la motivación.

Introduction

In recent years, educational research has focused mainly on the manner in which the teacher instructs rather than on what the learner does to acquire knowledge. Nevertheless, learners bring in the process of learning their own individual characteristics, personality, attributions and perceptions of themselves to the learning situation. It is because of the interest on what skills and strategies learners use and what processes they go through in order to make sense of their own learning. Unlike teaching strategies, which are actions taken by the teacher to structure and present information in a way that will help students learn (Stewner-Manzanares, Chamot, O'Malley, Kupper and Russo, 1983), learning strategies are steps taken by the learner to facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information (O'Malley, Russo and Chamot, 1983). As a matter of fact, research on learning strategies begins with the recognition that learners are far from passive in their learning. Rather, they are actively involved in making sense of the tasks with which they are faced in order to learn.

As a result, according to Rubin (1989), there are some assumptions that are the starting point for learning strategies research to take place:

1. Some language learners are more successful than others.
2. The learning process includes both explicit and implicit knowledge.
3. Consciousness-raising is not incidental to learning.
4. Successful strategies can be used to good effect by less effective learners.
5. Teachers can promote strategy use.
6. Once trained, students become the best judge of how to approach the learning task.
7. Self-direction promotes both
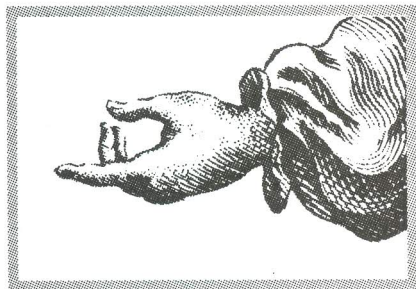
inside and outside the classroom.

8. Language learning is like other kinds of learning.

9. The success of learner training is applicable in other subjects.

10. The "critical" faculty used by all humans in communicating is important in language learning.

Existing research

In order to assess students' L2 strategies, research studies include techniques such as informal observations, formal observational rating scales, informal or formal interviews, group discussions, think-aloud procedures, language learning diaries, dialogue journals between the student and the teacher, open-ended narrative-type surveys, and structured surveys of strategy frequency. And although research on learning strategies has some limitations because of the difficulty to obtain evidence for particular strategies since they are notoriously difficult to observe (Williams and Burden, 1997), researchers have tried to define, identify, and classify learning strategies.

Among those researchers are O'Malley, Russo, Chamot, Stwener-Manzanares, and Kupper (1983, 1985), who interviewed beginning and intermediate high school ESL students to identify learning strategies in classroom activities. The researchers found that the interviewees reported using 26 strategies. These were divided into two categories: cognitive (strategies that directly involve language itself) and metacognitive (support strategies which help students regulate their learning). Both groups of students used more cognitive strategies (including repetition, note-taking, cooperation, and clarification) than metacognitive strategies. The metacognitive strategies used were related to planning and attention enhancing; and the students reported little use of self-evaluation and self-monitoring.

Contrary to other research studies whose results show the effectiveness of some learning strategies, Cohen and Aphek (1981), by using note-taking and diary studies, provided some insights about some strategies which are not useful for learning. They reported on the strategies used by English speaking students learning Hebrew on a junior year abroad. The students were asked to write down the strategies they were using during a vocabulary-learning task. In their results, word lists were initially helpful for memorization, but eventually, students were not able to use the words in context. In their conclusions, they argue that there are some strategies that prevent learning: (1) poor memory techniques, (2) poor inductive inferencing techniques, and (3) poor deductive reasoning.

On the other hand, Papalia and Zampogna (1977) examined the strategies that two groups of students used for two types of language learning functions: vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. They interviewed French II and Spanish II high school students and found that some key strategies to improve reading comprehension were reading aloud, reading for context, guessing, skipping inconsequential words, expecting the text to make sense, looking for cognates, and looking up unfamiliar words. Some vocabulary-related learning strategies included working with partners, learning concrete action words, using flashcards, developing meaningful conversations, playing games, drawing pictures, doing exercises and using repetition. In their findings, successful language learners used more and better strategies than poorer learners did.

Another research study that tries to identify the learning strategies used by learners is that of Ramírez (1986). He used a learning-behavior questionnaire to assess the language learning strategies used by adolescents studying French in rural and urban school settings. The questionnaire was adapted from Politzer's (1993) survey. Ramirez assessed the effect of learning strategies on French reading performance, French communicative performance and achievement on a French test. He concluded that eight strategies contributed the most to the success of learners in three areas: (1) clarification or verification, (2) inferencing skills, (3) creating practice opportunities, (4) memorizing, (5) vocabulary learning techniques, (6) employing available linguistic knowledge and contextual cues, (7) self-monitoring, and (8) practicing.

To O'Malley's et al. classification of strategies (cognitive and metacognitive), Russo and Stwener-Manzanares (1985) added a third category to the taxonomy of learning strategies: social strategies. These are the strategies that lead to increased interaction with the target language. Some of the strategies the students reported in their study were cooperation and requests for clarification.

Despite the different attempts to classify and define learner strategies, one of the most comprehensive definition and classification of learning strategies to date is the one provided by Oxford (1990). She provides a strategy system showing two classes, six groups and nineteen sets. The classification is made into memory strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies, compensation strategies and social strategies.

Importance of learning strategies

Not only has research on learning strategies provided a system of classification of strategies, but also it has expanded on the role of learning strategies themselves. Oxford (cited by Williams and Burdens, 1997:151) argues that learning strategies must help students participate in communication and build up their own language system; and she provides a list of twelve features of language learning strategies:

1.   They contribute to the main goal: communicative competence.

2.   They allow learners to become self-directed.
3.   They expand the role of teachers.
4.   They are problem oriented.
5.   They are specific actions taken by the learner.
6.   They involve many aspects of the learner, not just cognitive.
7.   They support learning directly and indirectly.
8.   They are not always observable.
9.   They are often unconscious.
10.   They are teachable.
11.   They are flexible.
12.   They are influenced by a variety of factors.
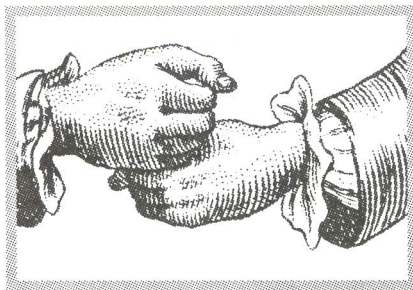
As a matter of fact, research on learning strategies has shown they are important for four main reasons (Oxford, Nyikos, Crookall, 1989). First, appropriate learning strategies are related to successful performance in languages. Second, using appropriate learning strategies enables students to take responsibility for their own learning. Third, learning strategies can be taught through well-planned training. Finally, if teachers address learning strategies in their programs, they can help students learn how to learn.

The choice of language learning strategies

What factors influence learners in their choice of learning strategies is one of the issues that researchers have tried to answer. For instance, Bialystok (1981) used a strategy inventory (focusing on practice with rules, functional practice, inferencing and monitoring one's errors) in a controlled study with tenth and twelfth grade French learners. In his results, functional practice (which concentrates on authentic language use) was the one that best promoted achievement on all tasks, and it was an effective strategy even for advanced learners. According to Bialystok, the nature of the task clearly determined the appropriateness of a particular strategy. Also, the use of strategies appeared to be regulated primarily to the learner's attitude and not to the language learning aptitude. Oxford (1987) states that Bialystok's result is supported by Gardner (1985). In his research on language learning attitudes and motivation, he demonstrated the importance of attitude and motivation on language learning, which affect students' choice of strategies.

Along the lines of Bialystok, Politzer and McGroarty (1985) reported how students' learning strategies, as assessed by a self-report survey, are related to motivation, achievement and other factors. Their findings indicated that many variables may be influential in the choice of learning strategies: professional interests, and orientation, motivation, national origin, course level, teaching

methods, language being studied and goal of language learning. They also concluded that a given strategy cannot be considered intrinsically suitable for all situations and for all purposes.

In an attempt to identify those factors mentioned before, Oxford (1989) synthesizes existing research on factors that influence the choice of learning strategies among L2 students. These are the main findings:

1. Motivation: students who are more motivated tend to use more strategies than less motivated students. It is also important the particular reason for studying the language (motivational orientation) (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; McGroarty, 1987).

2. Gender: In several studies, females report greater use of strategies than males (Green, 1991; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989: Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman, 1988, Park-Oh, Ito and Sumrall Forthcoming, Politzer, 1983).

3. Cultural background: Some Asian students use different strategies than those of students from other cultural backgrounds such as students from Hispanic background (Politzer n.d., Politzer and McGroarty, 1985; Reid, 1987; Russo and Stewner-Manzanares, 1985).

4. Type of task: The nature of the task helps determine the strategies students naturally employ to do the task (Bialystok, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, Tyacke

and Mendelson, 1986).

5. Age and L2 stage: students of different ages and L2 stages use different strategies; older or more advanced students use more sophisticated strategies (Bialystok, 1981; Chamot, O'Malley; Kupper and Impink-Hernández, 1987; Politzer, 1983; Tyacke and Mendelson, 1986).

6. Learning style: students' learning style determines the choice of L2 learning strategies (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989, Ely, 1989). Sometimes, students are able to stretch beyond their learning style boundaries to use strategies unrelated to their style (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989).

The good language learner

Due to the importance of learning strategies in the students learning process, the effectiveness and appropriateness with which the learners use those strategies have resulted in the concept of the good or the effective language learner. O'Malley et al. (cited by Oxford, 1993:178) argue that the use of appropriate learning strategies leads to improved proficiency in specific skills areas. In their study, they conclude not only that good language learners are able to combine effective strategies but also that successful language learners select strategies that work well aimed at the requirements of the language task.

Along the lines of O'Malley et al., Nyikos (cited by Oxford, 1993:179) states that strategies of less effective learners are fewer than

those of more successful learners. She argues that strategies of less successful learners often involve noncommunicative behaviors such as translation with heavy use of dictionaries, rote memorization, folding papers into columns to create vocabulary self-tests, and uncreative forms of repetition. She adds that less effective learners are able neither to know what strategies they use nor to readily describe their strategies.

According to Rubin (1975), the good language learners are those students who use affective, social and compensation strategies such as positive self-talk, self-monitoring, cooperation strategy, practice creating strategy and inferencing strategies, respectively. He states that by using the strategies mentioned above, these learners fit the following characteristics of good language learners:

1. They are willing and accurate guessers.
2. They have a strong drive for communication.
3. They take advantage of all practice opportunities.
4. They monitor their own speech and that of others.

Conclusion

The fact that learning strategies are teachable is an
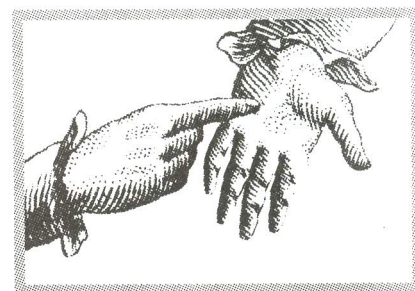
incentive for those teachers who are constantly looking for different ways to help their students in their learning process. In fact, in order to enhance students self-perception, it is important to encourage the learners to use learning strategies so that they feel that those strategies can make them effective language learners regardless of their proficiency level. Also, the factors that influence the choice of learning strategies is a crucial element to be considered in the classroom as students effectiveness as language learners may be influenced by those factors. Research on language learning strategies has shown that students' internal motivation as well as self-confidence can make a difference in their ability to succeed in learning the language. That is, the more motivated the learner is the more opportunities he or she will look to increase interaction. As Gardner says (cited by Nyikos, Oxford, Crookall, 1987), "Attitudes and motivation are important because they determine the extent to which individuals will actively engage themselves in learning the language… The prime determining factor is motivation."
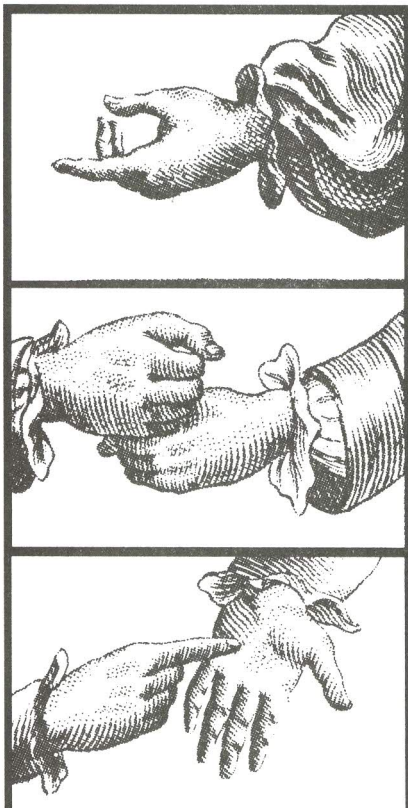
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