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Anna Jaglińska

Towards the Definition of Language Learning Strategies

The present paper addresses the problem of defining the concept of 'learning strategy,' well-established in the field of second language acquisition, as compared with other frequently used designations such as 'technique' and 'study skills'. A suggested inventory of the characteristic features of language learning strategies will be discussed in order to identify the main areas of controversy about the definition of 'strategy.'

Introduction

The main body of literature on learning strategies in second language acquisition (SLA) emerged in the 1970s from an attempt at identifying the characteristics of successful versus unsuccessful learners. The so-called 'good language learner' studies, initiated by Rubin's (1975) pioneering article, *What the good language learner can teach us*, provided support for the postulation that there exists a significant correlation between the use of strategies and success in acquiring a language. The resultant shift in the focus of language instruction away from a teacher and towards a learner has led to an increased interest in the ways individual students process information in order to learn a language. Cognitive operations related to and directed at language learning have been thoroughly examined. Consequently, a vast body of empirical studies has yielded an extensive list of strategies that have been found to display potential to enhance the process of language learning. However, despite the fact that language learning strategy research is already at least twenty years old, SLA specialists have not been able to provide a clear answer to the most basic question of what

a learning strategy is.¹ The lack of consensus about the concept of 'learning strategy' is reflected in the relevant literature by a plethora of labels for strategies such as techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, basic skills, functional skills, processing strategies, cognitive abilities, problem solving procedures and language learning behaviours. Alternatively, learning strategies have been called thinking skills, thinking frames, reasoning skills, basic reasoning skills, and learning-to-learn skills (eg. Wenden 1991; Oxford 1990). The multiple designations as well as the large number of definitions of 'learning strategy' point to the elusive nature of the term.

Strategy, technique, and study skills

Most of the prominent researchers in the field appear to espouse the so-called "correlational approach" (Svensson 1977, quoted by Weinstein and Underwood 1985) viewing strategies as behaviours or activities that are correlated with successful studying, or learning.² Therefore, they frequently state that their purpose is:

- to improve target language competence,
- to facilitate learning and recall and
- to aid and enhance comprehension, learning and retention.

Dansereau (1985), Oxford and Crookall (1989) and Ellis and Sinclair (1989) also stress the element of correspondence between learning strategies and the increased effectiveness in learning a target language in their definitions. Oxford's (1990: 8) definition, however, seems to be the most comprehensive one:

Learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. [They are] specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster,

¹ Cohen (1990: 7) maintains that the year 1975, when J. Rubin's influential article appeared, "marked a decisive shift in focus away from the teacher in favour of greater concern for the learner and learning strategies".

² See for example Bialystok 1978 quoted by Cohen 1990, Chamot 1987, O'Malley and Chamot 1990.

more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.

There have also been other definitions that describe learning strategies in terms of their significance in the process of learning in general. They are perceived rather as certain processes essential for learning to take place (Cohen 1990). Therefore, the researchers who embrace that view put emphasis on the contribution of learning strategies to the overall development of the language system.³ Thus, strategies are most frequently referred to as:

- mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language,
- or
- behaviours and thoughts the learner engages in during learning, or
- mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language.

Weinstein and Underwood's (1985: 241) definition appears to connect the two aforementioned interpretations of 'learning strategies' stating that "the term is used in a very broad sense to identify a number of competencies [...] postulated as *necessary, or helpful*, for effective learning and retention of information for later use" (italics mine)

Other authors highlight the cognitive factor in their definitions of language learning strategies. Weinstein and Mayer (1986), for instance, focus on strategies' potential to influence learners' decoding and encoding processes. Their opinion is shared by Jones, Amiran and Katims (1985) who directly interpret learning strategies as mental operations that are used to encode, analyse, and retrieve information.

At this point it is vital to note that much as the discussed definitions differ, they are not mutually exclusive. Their distinction lies in the perspective they assume and their main focus.

³ See for example Wenden 1991, Nunan 1991.

Among the abundance of various definitions it is indispensable to pay attention to the distinction made between 'strategy' and 'technique'.⁴ As early as 1983, Stern (1983) found it important to differentiate strategies from techniques. The former were described as general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach to learning, whereas the latter as "particular forms of observable learning behaviour." Neiman et al.'s (1978, quoted by O'Malley and Chamot 1990) distinction overlaps with Stern's in so far as in their scheme techniques retain their concrete and specific character because, unlike strategies, they are focused on specific aspects of language learning.

Bearing in mind the definitions that have already been presented, it appears that the term 'strategy' is most frequently used to refer to the behaviours Stern calls techniques. Therefore, his distinction can neither serve to significantly clarify the difference between 'strategy' and 'technique' nor does it specify the way in which the term 'strategy' is to be understood.

Recently, Dieter Wolff (1997) has undertaken the difficult task of elucidating the difference between 'strategy', 'technique' and 'study skills'. The inclusion of 'study skills' in this set of basic terms in the field of SLA is substantiated by the recurrent presence of the concept in the relevant literature.⁵

The thesis is developed on the claim that the concept of 'learner strategy' is the psychological counterpart to the concept of 'learning technique'. The traditional concept of 'learning strategy' is, therefore, perceived as having potentially two interpretations, depending on the

⁴ There are, however, authors who use the two terms interchangeably e.g. Brown (1994), Oxford and Crookall (1989), Weinstein and Underwood (1985) and Chamot (1987).

⁵ The term 'study skills' appears in the works of numerous authors. Oxford and Crookall (1989), however, use the designation interchangeably with 'technique' and 'strategy'. Weinstein and Underwood (1985), on the other hand, distinguish between learning strategies and study skills, that are referred to as 'study strategies', 'active study strategies', and 'study techniques'. They admit that there is no consistent definition of study skills, yet they give specific examples such as note-taking, time management, work habits. O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 232) define 'study skills' in their glossary as "usually overt behaviours that are intended to enhance learning."

perspective that is assumed. From the purely practical, pedagogical point of view, "procedures which are used by the learner intentionally and systematically in order to prepare, to carry out and to control his or her language learning" (Rampillon 1989, quoted by Wolff 1997: 45) are called learning techniques or study skills. When considered from the theoretical perspective, they are referred to as learner strategies or processing strategies. It is concluded that there is ample evidence to postulate the existence of a correspondence between learning techniques (a concept in language teaching) and learner strategies (a concept in SLA research).

Wolff's definition of study skills is, however, lacking. Although he repeatedly makes the distinction between learning techniques and study skills, it is not overtly specified what exactly the latter means. It can only be inferred from the proposed categorisation of learning techniques into three groups,⁶ that study skills are those behaviours which focus on the independent use of resources related to language learning such as using reference books, dictionaries, organising, planning and spacing learning etc. Learning techniques, on the other hand, focus on the development of one's own resources such as inferring, recognising analogies, revising, classifying etc.

It is also pointed out that the term strategy has rarely been adequately defined in psycholinguistics, mostly due to the confusion between 'strategy' and 'process'. Following Faerch and Kasper (1983, quoted by Wolff 1997) Wolff suggests that it is possible to distinguish between the two concepts on the basis of the degree of consciousness involved – the first being highly conscious, and the other subconscious, or even unconscious mental operations controlled by the strategies. The same distinction is upheld by Cohen (1990) who

⁶ Wolff (1997: 45) suggests that learning techniques should be differentiated into three broad categories: general techniques of learning to learn, grammar and vocabulary learning techniques, and language processing techniques.

says that humans select specific strategies and thus trigger off a large number of small cognitive operations, i.e. 'processes.'

Features of language learning strategies

The lack of consensus about the concept of 'learning strategy' and consequently, the absence of a uniform and consistent definition can be attributable to the extremely complex nature of strategies. The following discussion of their basic properties constitutes an attempt at clarifying this still unresolved issue. It is based on the extensive, twelve-item list of key features of language learning strategies as developed by R. Oxford (1990). However, it has been deemed justifiable to extend the list by including three more proposals put forward by Bialystok (1990, quoted by McDonough 1995), and additional two suggested by Ellis (1994).

1. Learning strategies are often conscious

One of the most contentious issues frequently discussed in relation to language learning strategies is the degree of consciousness involved. It is often assumed that people are aware of the strategic choices they make, but this opinion has been challenged. Oxford (1990) suggests that many uses of learning strategies clearly reflect conscious efforts by learners to take control of their learning, whereas others may remain below consciousness.⁷ Originally conscious behaviours may, however, with time become automatized and, as a result, their deployment ceases to be conscious on the learner's part.

Some researchers, however, seem to imply that strategies are always intentional deliberate actions undertaken in order to aid learning a second language (e.g. O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Faerch and Kasper 1983, quoted by Wolff 1997). According to Rabinowitz and Chi (1987) strategies must be conscious in order to be strategic.

⁷ Oxford (1990), however, notices that it is impossible to make clear cut distinctions between conscious and unconscious strategies stating that it is not an inherent quality of any given strategy. Rather, she suggests, the particular learning situation, specific learning task may trigger unconscious use of a strategy that would otherwise be used deliberately.

When they become automatic, they no longer ought to be considered as strategic behaviour. Cohen (1990: 5) shares the opinion stressing the importance of conscious choice, which, he claims, is "what gives a strategy its special character." He further suggests that if a learner's move is totally unconscious, then it would rather be referred to as a 'process' and not as a 'strategy.' All the researchers who support this view regard the aspect of intentionality as the decisive factor in distinguishing strategic behaviours from non-strategic ones. Yet, taking into account the controversy relating to the degree of consciousness involved in learning strategies, it is, perhaps, sensible to follow Bialystok (1990, quoted by McDonough 1995) and dismiss that feature as a defining criterion for the concept of strategy.

2. Learning strategies are not always observable

The problem whether and which learning strategies are overt or covert behaviours has frequently been discussed by SLA scholars. Generally, there appears to be a consensus that in the case of some strategies there is an observable behaviour accompanying the mental act. Other strategies, on the other hand, show little or no external behaviour, and therefore are generally labelled as unobservable. The former, referred to by Cohen (1998) as *behavioural*, typically include co-operating, compensation strategies, asking clarification questions, note-taking, and referencing skills. The latter, referred to by Cohen (1998) as *mentalistic*, typically comprise making mental associations, inferring, and comparing.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) exemplify observable strategies with the behaviours that would normally be referred to as study skills. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that they claim that strategies that occur overtly cannot be qualified as mental processes. Thus, their definition of learning strategies is more restricted than others cited previously because it excludes the cases involving mental processing as well as observable external act, such as, for instance, asking questions.

3. Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner Oxford (1990) assumes "action basis" for the description of learning strategies. Thus, she distinguishes them from students' general characteristics such as personality traits, learning style, motivation, and aptitude. Strategies are referred to as specific actions, or behaviours. Ellis (1994) expands this view suggesting that not only do strategies relate to specific actions or techniques but also to general approaches to learning an L2 (again, the confusing terminology can be noted). Although slightly different, Ellis's view does not stand in opposition to previously cited opinions because he retains the important distinction between strategies and learner's general inherent characteristics. What is meant by 'general approaches' in Ellis's description are rather learner's beliefs and attitudes toward learning, or general study habits.

1. Learning strategies are problem-oriented

A number of researchers agree that strategies are problem-oriented as they are used to solve specific learning problems, to accomplish tasks, to meet objectives, or to attain goals (Oxford 1990; Bialystok 1990, quoted by McDonough 1995; Jones, Amiran, Katims 1985; Wenden 1987, 1991). According to McDonough (1995: 4) they are plans for meeting particular types of problems that students encounter or, as Brown puts it, "modes of operation for achieving particular ends" (Brown 1994: 104).

2. Learning strategies involve many aspects of the learner, not just cognitive

Oxford (1990) supports the most frequently followed descriptive division of learning strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective. It follows that language learning strategies do not solely involve learner's cognitive functions such as mental processing and manipulation of the new linguistic input. Learning strategies also include a variety of metacognitive functions aimed at monitoring, planning and controlling learning, as well as emotional (affective) and social functions.

3. Learning strategies support learning directly and indirectly Although Oxford is the author of the first taxonomy of learning strategies that divides them broadly into those that contribute directly to learning and those that contribute indirectly to learning, the issue has been addressed earlier (e.g. Wenden 1987). Dansereau (1985) also makes a similar distinction between strategies that may have direct impact on target information by calling them primary strategies. On the other hand, those that may have indirect impact by generally improving the level of the learner's cognitive functioning are called support strategies.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) use the same designations but define them in a slightly extended way, unlike Dansereau who limits himself to the cognitive sphere only. Therefore, according to O'Malley and Chamot, primary strategies are those which operate directly on the material to be learned, such as comprehension and memory strategies, whereas support strategies help maintain attention and an appropriate attitude for learning to be effective. This definition has basically the same sense as Oxford's definition of *direct strategies* – language learning strategies that require mental processing of the target language and *indirect strategies* – strategies that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. The scheme proposed by Rubin (1987) agrees with Oxford's one as far as the classification of cognitive (direct) and social (indirect) strategies are concerned. However, unlike Oxford, Rubin argues for the inclusion of metacognitive strategies within the set of direct strategies.

1. Learning strategies contribute to the main goal – communicative competence

Oxford (1990) claims that since communicative competence⁸ is the goal of all language learning, various learning strategies intended to

⁸ Canale and Swain's (1980) comprehensive model provides a four-component definition of *communicative competence*: *grammatical accuracy* (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, word formation), *sociolinguistic competence*

enhance, speed, or aid acquisition contribute to its development. They are shown to operate in both general and specific ways to encourage the growth of particular aspects of communicative competence. For instance, memory strategies, deductive reasoning, and using contrastive analysis may significantly strengthen grammatical accuracy. Social strategies such as asking questions, peer co-operation, cultural awareness-raising foster sociolinguistic competence. Contextual guessing, recombination and use of common routines can enhance discourse competence and finally, various communication strategies that are basically compensatory in nature are at the heart of strategic competence.

2. Learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed. Self-directed learning is an approach whereby learners make decisions about what they need or want to know, what objectives they will set, what resources they will use, and how they will evaluate their progress (Helmore 1987, quoted by Cohen 1990). It follows that learners need to be equipped with a repertoire of strategies to choose from in order to make informed choices. Self-direction, which is encouraged by deployment of strategies, is of great import not only because it is related to increased motivation but also because it is crucial for developing learner autonomy. Independent learners grow more and more comfortable sharing responsibility for the outcomes of the learning process, "as evidenced by their efforts to adapt the learning environment to fit their needs and goals" (Weinstein and Underwood 1985: 10). Gradually, learners are led to alter their whole representation of the learning process until they ultimately view it as a process which necessarily involves their active investment, so that "learning no longer means being taught" (Holec 1987: 153).

3. Learning strategies expand the role of teachers. The introduction of learning strategies into foreign language instruction provides a challenge to the traditional roles played by teachers and learners in a language classroom. It has been observed

(social context appropriacy, speech acts or functions), *discourse competence* (coherence and cohesion), and *strategic competence* (compensation strategies).

that conventional roles may significantly stifle communication and impede students' learning process. Therefore, teachers, perfectly in line with the communicative approach, should be prepared to assume new roles as facilitators, helpers, consultants, advisers, co-ordinators, diagnosticians, and co-communicators. From omniscient controllers of learning, they become competent language and language-learning resource persons whose function is to facilitate the learning process for their students (Holec 1987). Teachers should also be ready to conduct training in learning strategies and help learners become more independent. It is maintained that in a learner training programme that is implemented in a principled and systematic way, the teacher's instrumental role cannot be underestimated (Ellis and Sinclair 1989). Although some teachers may fear and thus not welcome such delegation of authority, the benefits yielded through learner training may be too great to ignore or reject since, as Póltzer notices, "successful learning strategy users become successful self-teachers" (Póltzer 1965, quoted by Chamot 1987: 82).

4. Learner strategies can be taught. Despite the fact that some researchers view the effectiveness of learning strategy training with only moderate optimism, it is generally accepted that learning strategies can be learned and modified through training. They are "part of our mental software" (Wenden 1991: 18) – amenable to change, and acquired in the same way as we acquire other skills, including language.

According to Anderson's (1980, quoted by O'Malley and Chamot 1990) information-processing model of learning, language is a complex cognitive skill whose acquisition entails the development of procedures that transform declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. The transition takes place in three stages: *the cognitive stage* (information is stored as facts), *the associative stage* (strengthening connections among the various elements of skill), *the automatic stage* (execution of skills becomes more or less autonomous and subconscious). Research on learning strategies is based on the

assertion that strategies, like complex cognitive skills, begin as declarative knowledge that can then be proceduralised with practice, proceeding through the cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages of learning.

It is also postulated that ineffective strategies can be altered or altogether rejected, and already well functioning ones adapted to new situations. An increasing number of interventionist studies and strategy training programs to enhance the effectiveness of low-achieving students are based on the above premise.

5. Learning strategies are flexible

Oxford (1990) maintains that another feature of learning strategies is their flexibility expressed insofar as strategies are not always found in predictable sequences but, rather, are subject to learners' idiosyncratic preferences. Therefore, Danserau (1985: 210) finds it justified to distinguish *algorithmic* and *heuristic* use of strategies. The first refers to sequences of processes that remain fixed over particular tasks, the latter to sequences that may be modified "depending on task conditions and the needs and skills of the individual learner."

6. Learning strategies are influenced by a variety of factors

Oxford (1990) mentions numerous factors that significantly affect student's choice of strategies and therefore, have been included in the set of strategy properties. These are: task requirements, teacher expectations, teacher's instructional and testing methods, learner's age, sex, nationality (ethnicity), general learning style, personality traits, motivation level and the purpose for learning a language. Ellis (1994) also emphasises the personal aspect of strategies stating that their choice is dependent both on the type of the task the learner faces and his individual preferences.

7. Strategies are effective

Although many researchers, not without sound empirical evidence, tend to relate the use of strategies with the enhanced effectiveness of the language learning process, there are some who treat such views with a considerable amount of caution (e.g. Cohen 1998). It is claimed that viewing strategies as being inherently good for all learners in all learning contexts is simplistic. Rather, as it is suggested, the

effectiveness with which learning strategies can be both taught and used depends on a number of factors. Cohen (1990: 7) comes to the conclusion that "too little may still be known to permit unequivocal recommendation of any given strategy as beneficial."

8. Strategies are systematic

Bialystok (1990, quoted by McDonough 1995) postulates that learners both uncover the strategies from their knowledge of a given problem, and employ them in a systematic manner.

9. Strategies are finite

Bialystok (1990, quoted by McDonough 1995) makes the rather controversial claim that "a limited number of strategies can be identified [as] they are not idiosyncratic creations of learners". The overwhelming majority of experts in the field, however, would rather espouse the opposite view claiming that a definitive list of learning strategies has not yet emerged (Ellis and Sinclair 1989: 5), or cautioning that no new taxonomy of learning strategies can be viewed as exhaustive (Schmitt 1997: 5).

10. Strategies involve linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour

Learning strategies can also be described in terms of the presence, or absence of linguistic behaviour. An example of the linguistic type of learning strategy is requesting the name of the object. Pointing to the object so as to be given its name, on the other hand, exemplifies non-linguistic kind of language learning strategies.

11. Linguistic strategies can be performed in either L1 or in L2

Ellis (1994) maintains that in the case of strategies that entail overt verbal behaviours, the linguistic medium itself (either L1 or L2) is of no great importance.

Conclusions

The concept of 'learning strategy' is one of the fundamental terms in the field of SLA. Its importance is amply evidenced by the vast body of literature devoted to the examination of the influence of learning strategies on the rate and quality of foreign language acquisition.

Therefore, it is rather surprising that the precise definition of 'learning strategy' has not yet been developed.

The above list of the characteristic properties of language learning strategies provides a basis for reflection upon the concept. It also helps to select the features that may serve as the defining criteria for a more accurate definition of a learning strategy. From the above discussion it appears that the degree of consciousness involved is the single most important defining factor. The presence or absence of conscious choice in using strategies is what, for the majority of specialists, determines whether a given behaviour qualifies as strategic. The other properties of learning strategies, though still contentious, do not play that vital role in defining the concept. Their value, however, lies in their potential to describe many aspects of the complex nature of learning strategies.

Magdalena Mitura

'Learning To Learn' in Primary Classroom: Helping Young Learners Towards Greater Autonomy'

Raising students' awareness of the language and the learning process by developing their reflective skills through explicit classroom training has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate and significant component of the foreign language teaching programme. The findings of research into the children's application of strategies in problem-solving tasks seem to indicate that providing even quite young learners with opportunities for insight into their mental processes when approaching a task and involving them in an overt discussion of those processes led to the improvement of children's performance on similar tasks on future occasions. Conscious reflection on one's own progress, the nature of the task at hand and ways of approaching it, the emotions stirred by activities, materials and interaction patterns seems to promote motivation, foster responsibility and enhance learning effectiveness.

In spite of the apparent long-term benefits of language awareness and strategy training, certain reservations seem to emerge on the grounds that young learners have not yet attained maturity essential for critical self-monitoring and their analytical faculties have not developed in the degree that would allow for profound reflection upon the subject under study. Another objection is that 'learning to learn' assignments will confront young learners, already presented with a laborious task of making sense of a new language and struggling to express themselves through this medium, with additional cognitive demands increasing their workload. By discussing some classroom procedures this paper addresses the question of how to incorporate