Enhancing Second Language Acquisition through Learning Strategies

R.M. Dhanapala

Abstract : This paper attempts to clarify the effect of using learning strategies in the second language acquisition. The shift of emphasis placed in second language learning from teacher and teaching to learner and the learning has resulted in the identification and the use of learning strategies to enhance language learning. The paper outlines the background of learning strategies and discusses how strategies are classified paying special emphasis on second language learning. The use of learning strategies in the leaner–centered context is investigated paying special attention to instructional models of language learning strategies.

Keywords: Learning strategies (LS), Second language (L2), Strategy instruction, English language teaching (ELT), Metacognitive, Cognitive, Social and Affective.

Introduction

Learning a second language has been a daunting task for learners despite the developments of teaching methodology, theories and concepts, and curriculum and learning materials. The "unsatisfactory" language performance of L2 learners has always been a topic for discussion by the teachers, educators and the researchers in the field of English language teaching. As a result, researchers were motivated to diagnose the causes of this problem and recommend remedies. An analysis of the history of the ELT field reveals that until 1970s, the majority of research into L2 learning and teaching focused on the evaluation of competing teaching methodology and instructional materials. However, since the early 1970s, great emphasis has been placed on the investigation of social, psychological, and affective factors that enhance or affect L2 success and achievement. Researchers have identified that motivation, attitudes, personality, learning styles, and learning strategies are major variables that would affect learning and they correlate with

success in L2 learning (Oxford & Cohen, 1992; Dornyei, 1990). This paper provides the background of language learning strategies, definitions and taxonomies of language learning strategies, and stresses how second language learning is enhanced by language learning strategies, classification of strategies, and instructional models of language learning strategies and strategy assessment procedures.

Background of language learning strategies

Over the past two decades, there has been a major shift in the field of second language learning and teaching with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching. Cohen (1998, p.97) defined that "one potentially beneficial shift in teacher roles is from that of being exclusively the manager, controller and instructor to that of being a change agent- a facilitator of learning, whose role is to help their students to become more independent and more responsible for their own learning." The researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning, with the new shift of interest, concentrated how learners process new information and the kind of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information. The studies in the second language learning have identified that the use of learning strategies- the techniques or procedures that facilitate a learning task by the learners, can exert a potential effect on achievement and performance in second/foreign language learning. Learning strategies in second language acquisition emerged from a concern for identifying the characteristics of good language learners and the research efforts concentrating on the "good language learner" (Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1978) identified that strategies reported by students or observed in learning situations appeared to contribute to learning.

In 1966, Aaron Carton published his study entitled The Method of Inference in Foreign Language Study, which was the first attempt on learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that, once identified; such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. Rubin (1975) classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning and suggested that a model of "the good language learner" could be identified by looking at special strategies used by students who were successful in their second language learning.

Rubin's (1975,p.42-47) seminal research made a considerable contribution to initial understandings of effective language learners. Rubin identified the following seven distinguishable qualities of good language learners by observing students and teachers in language classes.

The good language learner:

- 1. is a willing and accurate guesser.
- 2. has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication.
- 3. is often not inhibited. He is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results.
- 4. is prepared to attend to form...and is constantly looking for patterns in the language.
- 5. practices.
- 6. monitors his own and the speech of others.
- 7. attends to meaning

(Rubin, 1975, pp. 45-47):

Stern (1975) also identified strategies of good language learners. Based on his experience as a teacher and learner and his review of extant studies, he presented a similar list of language-learning strategies used among successful language learners. Based on stages of language learning and problems faced by the learner when learning a language, Stern presented 10 learning strategies of good language learners:

- 1. A personal learning style or positive learning strategies.
- 2. An active approach to the learning task.
- 3. A tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and empathy with its speakers.
- 4. Technical know-how about how to tackle a language.
- 5. Strategies of experimentation and planning with the object of developing the new language into an ordered system, and revising this system progressively.
- 6. Constantly searching for meaning.
- 7. Willingness to practice.
- 8. Willingness to use the language in real communication.
- 9. Self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use.

10. Developing the target language more and more as a separate reference system and learning to think in it. (Stern, 1975, pp. 311-316)

O'Malley & Chamot (1990), report that learning strategies are important in second language acquisition for two major reasons. First is that researchers could gain ample insights into the cognitive, social and affective processes that are used by second language learners during the language learning process. The second reason supported for the value of learning strategies is to teach the less successful language learners to use strategies that "good language learners" use.

Definitions of learning strategies

An analysis of definitions given by the researchers in the field of language teaching would enlighten us with a comprehensive insight into learning strategies. According to Tarone (1983, p.67), learning strategies are the attempts to develop "linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language- to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence." Weinstein et al. (1988, p. 291) outlined LS in more detail: "learning strategies are considered to be any behaviours or thoughts that facilitate encoding in such a way that knowledge integration and retrieval are enhanced. More specifically, these thoughts and behaviours constitute organized plans of action designed to achieve a goal. Examples of learning strategies include actively rehearsing, summarizing, paraphrasing, imaging, elaborating, and outlining." In their broad definition, Weinstein and Mayer (1986,p. 315) viewed learning strategies as "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning." They further elaborated that learning strategies are intended to influence the learner's encoding process. However, Mayer (1988,p. 11) later defined learning strategies more specifically as "behaviours of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information." Rubin (1987, p. 22) defined learning strategies as those that contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly. According to Vandergrift (1999), "strategies are conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses". Chamot (1995, p.1) defined that learner strategies are "steps, plans, insights and reflections that learners employ to learn more effectively". In her definition Oxford (1990,p.8)

viewed that "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more transferable to new situations". Oxford (1992/1993, p. 18) later had a more specific definition that included "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills."

Learning strategies in L2

L2 researchers have made observations about the differences in learning among L2 learners. These differences motivated second language acquisition (SLA) researchers to explore the sources of these differences with the objective of providing instructions that facilitate learning. Hence, they identified the characteristics of the "good language learner". Researchers in ELT such as Chamot (1987), Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Stevick (1989) were able to identify learning strategies that successful language learners employ to enhance learning the second language. Rubin (1975) viewed that the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser, has a strong motivation to communicate, is often not inhibited, inspired to attend to form, practices and monitors his/her own speech and the speech of others, and attends to meaning. The findings of the above researchers were made to believe and hypothesize that if less successful learners are taught how to use these types of strategies, they would turn out to be more effective and independent in their learning situations.

Classification of strategies

The description of the strategies used by successful language learners provided a stimulus for further research into the establishment of taxonomies of language learning strategies. This resulted researchers, such as O'Malley et al. (1985, p.582-584) divide language learning strategies into three main subcategories: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies and Socio-affective Strategies. Metacognitive is a term to express executive function, 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 are mental strategies the learners use to make sense of learning and are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferencing are among the most important cognitive strategies. As to the socio-affective strategies, it can be stated that they are related with social-mediating activity and transacting with others. Cooperation and question for clarification are the main socio-affective strategies.

Oxford (1990), on the other hand classified language learning strategies into two main classes; direct and indirect. They are further subdivided into six groups. In Oxford's (1990) view, metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies that learners use to make sense of their learning, memory strategies are used for storing information, and compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge gaps. The taxonomy of language learning strategies of Oxford (1990, p. 17) is shown as in the following.

A) DIRECT STRATEGIES

- (1) Memory
- (a) Creating mental linkages
- (b) Applying images and sounds
- (c) Reviewing well
- (d) Employing action
- (2) Cognitive
- (a) Practicing

- (b) Receiving and sending messages strategies
- (c) Analyzing and reasoning
- (d) Creating structure for input and output
- (3) Compensation strategies
- (a) Guessing intelligently
- (b) Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

B) INDIRECT STRATEGIES

- (1) Metacognitive strategies
- (a) Centering your learning
- (b) Arranging and planning your learning
- (c) Evaluating your learning
- (2) Affective strategies
- (a) Lowering your anxiety
- (b) Encouraging yourself
- (c) Taking your emotional temperature
- (3) Social strategies
- (a) Asking questions
- (b) Cooperating with others
- (c) empathizing with others

Oxford (1990, p. 17)

Wenden and Rubin (1987), who pioneered much of the work in the field of strategies, classified learning strategies based on the distinction of strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. According to the classification of Wenden and Rubin (1987), there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute directly or indirectly to

learning. They are namely: learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. In

the case of learning strategies, they are of two main types: cognitive learning strategies and

metacognitive learning strategies. Both of these strategies contribute directly to the development

of language system constructed by the learner. Cognitive learning strategies refer to steps or

operations used in learning or problem-solving situations that require direct analysis,

transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Wenden and Rubin (1975) identified six main

cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning. They are:

clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice

memorization, and monitoring. In the case of metacognitive process, such strategies are used to

oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning involving various processes such as planning,

prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

The communication strategies are the ones which 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. These strategies are used by speakers when faced with

some difficulty in their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a

co-speaker.

The social strategies are those activities learners engage in and they provide learners with

opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge. Although these strategies provide

exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning as such strategies do not

involve obtaining, storing, retrieving and using of language.

Stern, in 1992, classified language learning strategies into five main categories as in the

following.

Management and planning strategies

Cognitive strategies

Communicative-Experimental strategies

Interpersonal strategies

Affective strategies

(Stern, 1990: 262-266)

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According to Stern (1990, p.262-266), management and planning strategies are related with the learner's intention to direct his own learning in which a learner can take charge of the development of his/her own programme of study. The function of the teacher is identified as an advisor and resource person. In these strategies, the learner must; decide what commitment to make to language learning, set himself/herself with reasonable goals, decide on an appropriate methodology, select appropriate resources and monitor progress, and evaluate his/her achievement in the light of previously determined goals and expectations.

Stern enunciates that cognitive strategies are steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Communicative –Experimental strategies are used by the learners to avoid interrupting the flow of communication in order to keep the conversation going and they include techniques such as circumlocution, paraphrase, or asking for repetition and explanation. In the case of interpersonal strategies, learners should monitor their own development and evaluate own performance. Cooperating with native speakers and become acquainted with the target culture is a necessity. The final strategy proposed by Stern is affective strategies. These strategies are mostly related to emotional difficulties and potential frustrations in learning situations. This is mostly due to the nature of L2 situations. Affective strategies are the ones good language learners use in order to create associations of positive affect towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as towards the learning activities involved.

To sum up, among the body of language learning strategies and an accompanying classification schemes grounded in cognitive theory, learning strategies have been differentiated and categorized into three main types: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-effective strategies. These three types of learning strategies form the bases for research in language learning strategies in second language acquisition. In the case of metacognitive strategies, they help to oversee, regulate, or direct the language learning process and thus include planning, monitoring and evaluating. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learnt or apply a specific technique to the learning task, while socio-affective strategies help learners to cooperate with classmates, question the teacher for clarification, or apply specific techniques to lower their anxiety level. As

Anderson (1985) points out, studies have revealed that effective strategies are contingent on L2 proficiency, the classification scheme, research methods, and other variables. Further, macro metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective categories seem to have the potential to yield a robust and consistent classification scheme because this classification has been empirically tested and is based on cognitive theories.

Instructional models of language learning strategies

There is a consensus among researchers in the ELT/ESL that language learning strategies are teachable and that learner can benefit from strategies being taught (Oxford, 1990; Larsen-Freeman, 1991). In line with the above thought, many researchers have worked to demonstrate the pedagogical applications of the findings from studies pertaining to language learning strategies.

An instructional model for strategy training which is discussed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) is 'the strategy teaching model' developed by Jones et al. (1987). This model is based on six assumptions:

- 1. Learning is goal oriented. Expert learners have two major goals during the learning process: to understand the meaning of the task and to regulate their own learning.
- 2. In learning, new information is linked to prior knowledge. Prior knowledge is stored in memory in the form of knowledge frameworks or schemata, and new information is understood and stored by calling up the appropriate schema and integrating the new information with it. Knowing how and when to access prior knowledge is a characteristic of effective learners.
- 3. Learning requires knowledge organization. Knowledge is organized in recognizable frameworks such as story, grammars, problem/solution structures, comparison/contrast patterns, and description sequences, among others. Skilled learners recognize these organizational structures and use them to assist learning and recall.

- 4. Learning is strategic. Good learners are aware of the learning process and of themselves as learners, and seek to control their own learning the use of appropriate learning strategies. Strategies can be taught, but many do not transfer to new tasks. Although each content area may require a particular set of strategies and skills, a number of core skills underlie all subject areas. Examples of these core skills are using prior knowledge, making a representation of the information, self monitoring, and summarizing.
- 5. Learning occurs in recursive phases. All types of learning are initiated with a planning phase, followed by online processing, and ending with consolidation and extension of the new information. In the planning phase, the problem is identified, goals are set, and prior knowledge is activated. During on-line processing new information is integrated, assimilated, and used to clarify or modify existing ideas. During consolidation and extension the learner summarizes and organizes the new information, assesses achievement of the goal established in the first phase, and extends learning by applying it to new situations. During each phase the learner may return to a previous phase to rework one or more of its aspects.
- 6. Learning is influenced by development. Differences between older and younger students and between more and less proficient learners are due in large part to differences in prior knowledge and learning strategy use. These differences may be present when children begin school or may develop over time, but in either case they tend to persist unless intervention is undertaken. (Jones, Palincsar, Ogle & Carr, 1987 cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.187-188).

In this model the specific sequence which is suggested for instruction is: assessing students' current strategy use, explaining the new strategy, modeling the strategy and providing scaffolding when students practice using strategies for the first time.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) elaborate on three stages that teachers go through for instruction. In the preparation stage the teacher activates students' prior knowledge of the lesson topic by way of questioning, evaluating the relevance of the prior knowledge, and refining that knowledge. During this stage students can also preview the new information to be learned,

develop new vocabulary, and identify concepts or beliefs that may be changed or replaced after instruction. In the presentation stage of the lesson, students interact with the new information presented by the teacher or text through selecting, comparing, organizing, and integrating activities. Reciprocal teaching, in which students and teacher cooperate to understand a text by taking turns to apply a sequence of comprehension strategies. The application and integration stage of the strategic lesson serves the dual purposes of evaluating and consolidating the learning task. To evaluate their learning, students refer back to their original goals that were established during the preparation phase. In doing so they consolidate the new information by using it to restructure their prior knowledge, identified in the preparation stage (p.189).

Another well-known model which is proposed for strategy training is 'cognitive academic language learning approach' (Chamot, 1987). This model is based on the cognitive theory in which language is viewed as a complex skill. Learners should pass through certain stages to move from declarative to procedural knowledge. Learning in this view is seen as movement from controlled to automatic processing via practice. Anderson's 1983, 1985, (Cited in O'malley and Chamot, 1990, p.162) ACT (active control of thought) model is a processing model from cognitive psychology which suggests that acquiring a language (movement from declarative to procedural knowledge) takes place in three stages: the cognitive, the associative, and the autonomous stages. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) argue that this approach "provides useful insights into the academic language needs of low English proficient (LEP) students, which CALLA (cognitive academic language learning approach) is intended to meet" (p.192). The CALLA includes three components: topics from the major content subjects, development of academic language skills, and direct instruction in learning strategies for both content and language.

The strategy instruction model proposed by Oxford (1990) includes eight steps. The first five steps involve planning and preparation while the last three steps embark on conducting, evaluating, and revising the training programme. The steps proposed by Oxford are:

- 1. Determine the learners' needs and the time available.
- 2. Select strategies well.

- 3. Consider integration of strategy training.
- 4. Consider motivational issues.
- 5. Prepare materials and activities.
- 6. Conduct "completely informed training".
- 7. Evaluate the strategy training and
- 8. Revise the strategy training.

Along with the above listening strategy instruction models, researchers tend to incorporate major types of listening strategies such as metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies into research either collectively or individually.

Strategy assessment procedures

There are different assessment tools available for teachers that cover the strategies used by foreign/second language students. These tools include observations, interviews, surveys, self-reports, learner journals, dialogue journals, think-aloud techniques, and other measures. Each one of these assessment tools has their advantages and disadvantages, as analyzed by Oxford (1990) and Cohen and Scott (1996).

Some strategy assessment tools are:

- 1. **Think-aloud** Hosenfeld (1976) introduced the 'think aloud' introspective process to determine what strategies learners use while performing language tasks. Sarig (1987) classified the data from the think-aloud reports into four general types of behaviours or responses: (1) technical aid, (2) clarification and simplification, (3) coherence detection, and (4) monitoring moves.
- 2. **Strategy checklists** can be designed to elicit data on self-reported frequency of strategy use at three points in time: before, during and after the task (Cohen and Weaver, 1998).
- 3. **Diaries** can be structured or unstructured, can be written for self or for sharing, can focus on affective side as well as on strategies, can be directed by the teacher or not (Oxford, 1992).

Oxford (1996) compares a number of strategy assessment methods, as in table (1) below and from the table shown, teachers have to:

- weave strategy teaching/training into their regular classes,
- consider their selection of strategies to use in their teaching,
- use more than one assessment tool,
- consider differences in learners' motivation, learning styles, and other factors that affect learning strategy choice and use, and
- conceptualize LLS in a way that includes the social and affective aspects of learning.

| Type of assessment | Appropriate uses | Limitations of use | | |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| Strategy questionnaires | Identify 'typical' strategies used by an individual; can be aggregated into group results; wide array of strategies can be measured by questionnaires. | Not useful for identifying specific strategies on a given language task at a given time. | | |
| Observations | Identify strategies that are readily observable for specific tasks. | Not useful for unobservable strategies (e.g. reasoning, analysing, mental self-talk) or for identifying 'typical' strategies. | | |
| Interviews | Identify strategies used on specific tasks over a given time period or more 'typically' used strategies; usually more oriented toward task-specific rather than 'typical' strategies of an individual; depends on how interview questions are asked. | Usually less useful for identifying 'typical' strategies because of how interviews are conducted, but could be used for either task-specific or 'typical' strategies. | | |
| Dialogue journals, diaries | Identify strategies used on specific tasks over a given time period. | Less useful for identifying 'typical' strategies used more generally. | | |
| Recollective narratives (language learning histories) | Identify 'typical' strategies used in specific settings in the past. | Not intended for current strategies; depends on memory of learner. | | |
| Think-aloud protocols | Identify in-depth the strategies used in a given, ongoing task. | Not useful for identifying 'typical' strategies used more generally. | | |
| Strategy checklists | Identify strategies used on a just- completed task. | Not useful for identifying 'typical' strategies used more generally. | | |

Table 1. Comparison of strategy assessment types (Oxford, 1996: 35-36)

Conclusion

Since language learning strategies have been paid less attention in the Sri Lankan ELT research and teaching, this paper has provided a brief overview of language learning strategies examining their background and summarizing literature paying special attention to important areas related to language learning strategies. As Cohen (1998, p. 69) has pointed out learners have to explore 'how', 'when', and 'why' to use language learning strategies and for that teachers need to equip students with necessary knowledge of language learning strategies. Hence, the paper has identified the area of strategy training models and strategy assessment procedures as the ultimate goal of the paper is to train students to use possible learning strategies in the English language classroom and elsewhere to facilitate learning.

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