



# Critical Look at Learning Strategies

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Received: 📅 August 24, 2020

Published: 📅 September 10, 2020

## Abstract

Nunan [1] defines strategies as “the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language. Underlying every learning task is at least one strategy.” Richards and Schmidt [2] define strategy as “procedures used in learning, thinking, etc., which serves as a way of reaching a goal. In language learning, learning strategies are those conscious or unconscious processes which language learners make use of in learning and using a language.” The definitions provided for learning strategies by scholars all have one point in common and that is facilitating learning for learners. Nevertheless, they are in disagreement about issues like whether such strategies are conscious and so describable and then teachable, and also what variables are involved in strategy use by language learners have resulted in various contentions on the part of researchers.

## Introduction

Oxford [3] considers the following as types of learning strategies:

**A. Cognitive strategies:** involve the identification, retention and retrieval of language elements. Cognitive strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g. through reasoning, analysis, note taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally.

**B. Metacognitive strategies:** involve planning, monitoring, and evaluation of language learning activities. Metacognitive strategies are employed for managing the learning process overall. Examples are identifying one’s own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study place and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy.

**C. Affective strategies:** involve regulation of emotions, attitudes, and motivation. Examples are identifying one’s mood

and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk.

**D. Social strategies:** Actions learners take to interact with users of the language. Social strategies help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language. Examples are asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms.

**E. Memory related strategies:** help learners link one L2 item or concept with another, but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g. acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g. rhyming), images (e.g. a mental picture of the word itself for the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g. the keyword method), body movement (e.g. TPR), or location (e.g. on a page or blackboard).

**F. Mnemonic strategies [4]:** Mnemonic strategies help learners like a new item with something known. These devices are

useful for memorizing information in an orderly (e.g., acronyms) in various ways. In another paper Oxford categorizes mnemonic strategy under the heading of memory related strategies. Mnemonic strategies are often the first step in learning vocabulary items or grammar rules.

**G. Compensatory strategies:** involves helping the learner make up for missing knowledge. Examples are guessing from context in listening and reading, using synonyms and talking around the missing word to aid speaking and writing and using gestures or pause words.

As a complement to learning strategies Brown [5] considers communicative strategies as more involved in production rather than comprehension.

“While learning strategies deal with the receptive domain of intake, memory, storage and recall, communication strategies pertain to the employment of verbal or nonverbal mechanisms for the productive communication of information. In the arena of linguistic interaction, it is sometimes difficult of course, to distinguish between the two, as Tarone aptly noted, since comprehension and production can occur almost simultaneously” [5,6].

Hedge [7] holds that communicative strategy is employed “when learners use gestures, mime, synonyms, paraphrases, and cognate words from their first language to make themselves understood and to maintain a conversation”.

Doenyei proposes a classification for communicative strategies, i.e., avoidance and compensatory strategies. Avoidance strategies include message abandonment and topic avoidance. Examples of compensatory strategies are circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word coinage, prefabricated patterns, nonlinguistic signals, literal translation, foreignizing, code-switching, appeal for help and time gaining strategies.

Considering conscious use of strategies Chamot [8] writes: “Learning strategies are procedures that facilitate a learning task. Strategies are most often conscious and goal-driven, especially in the beginning stages of tackling an unfamiliar language task” [8]. However, he believes that through repeated use of such strategies, they become automatic and demand less conscious attention. If strategies are conscious efforts, it must be possible for learners to describe what they do when they use strategies. “Learning strategies are identified through various self-report procedures. Although self-report is always subject to error, no better way has yet been devised for identifying learners’ mental processes and techniques for completing a learning task.” [8, 9]. As an example, Carson and Longhini [10] examined the diaries of participants in their study to know about strategies they used in their learning. On the other hand, description by learners is more reliable because as Oxford [11] puts it, observing students using strategies is difficult

due to the fact that strategies are inner and hidden. As a result, interviews, diaries, surveys and questionnaires are considered good sources to find about strategy use. Anderson [12] also considers strategy use as a conscious effort by learners. “The metacognitive ability to select and use particular strategies in a given context for a specific purpose means that the learner can think and make conscious decisions about the learning process” [9,12] and he also advocates teaching strategies to learners and even helping them to consciously monitor and evaluate their own use of strategies to see to it that they are on the right track. When a learner is in control of his cognitive abilities and consciously monitors and evaluates and describes his/ her thinking and ways of doing things, he/she is a metacognitively active learner. Anderson [12] proposes five metacognitive processes in strategy use:

**a) Preparing and planning for learning:** Preparation and planning are important metacognitive skills that can improve student learning. By engaging in preparation and planning in relation to a learning goal, students are thinking about what they need or want to accomplish and how they intend to go about accomplishing it. Teachers can promote this reflection by being explicit about the particular learning goals they have set for the class and guiding the students in setting their own learning goals. The more clearly articulated the goal, the easier it will be for the learners to measure their progress. The teacher might set a goal for the students of mastering the vocabulary from a particular chapter in the textbook. A student might set a goal for himself of being able to answer the comprehension questions at the end of the chapter.

**b) Selecting and using learner strategies:** To be effective, metacognitive instruction should explicitly teach students a variety of learning strategies and also when to use them. For example, second language readers have a variety of strategies from which to choose when they encounter vocabulary that they do not know and that they have determined they need to know to understand the main idea of a text. One possible strategy is word analysis: for example, dividing the word into its prefix and stem. Another possible strategy is the use of context clues to help guess the meaning of a word. But students must receive explicit instruction in how to use these strategies, and they need to know that no single strategy will work in every instance. Teachers need to show them how to choose the strategy that has the best chance of success in a given situation.

**c) Monitoring strategy use:** By monitoring their use of learning strategies, students are better able to keep themselves on track to meet their learning goals. Once they have selected and begun to implement specific strategies, they need to ask themselves periodically whether or not they are still using those strategies as intended.

**d) Orchestrating various strategies:** Knowing how to orchestrate the use of more than one strategy is an important

metacognitive skill. The ability to coordinate, organize, and make associations among the various strategies available is a major distinction between strong and weak second language learners. Teachers can assist students by making them aware of multiple strategies available to them— for example, by teaching them how to use both word analysis and context clues to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. The teacher also needs to show students how to recognize when one strategy isn't working and how to move on to another [13].

**e) Evaluating strategy use and learning:** Second language learners are actively involved in metacognition when they attempt to evaluate whether what they are doing is effective. Teachers can help students evaluate their strategy use by asking them to respond thoughtfully to the following questions: (1) What am I trying to accomplish? (2) What strategies am I using? (3) How well am I using them? (4) What else could I do? Responding to these four questions integrates all of the previous aspects of metacognition, allowing the second language learner to reflect through the cycle of learning.

What has muddled the issue so far has been a lack of distinction between the meanings of learning strategy and learning styles. When learning strategies are conscious efforts employed by learners, learning styles are less conscious and are more of an inner nature. "Learning style refers to an individual's natural, habitual and preferred ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills" [10]. About learning styles Oxford writes: "Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others" [3]. Keefe defines learning styles as cognitive, affective and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment or according to Skehan a general predisposition, voluntary or not, toward processing information in a particular way." However, Oxford considers strategies as conscious efforts by learners to choose from in order to match them to their learning styles. "Learning strategies are defined as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques- such as seeking out conversation patterns, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language tasks- used by students to enhance their own learning". Although there is a distinction between the two concepts, they believe that both can be put into conscious attempts on the way to learning.

## Good language learner

According to Oxford [4] what distinguishes more or less effective language learners is not the frequency of strategy use rather, "more successful learners typically understand which strategies fit the particular language tasks they are attempting. Moreover, more effective learners are better at combining strategies as needed" .

Rubin considers good language learners as those who:

- a) find their own way, taking charge of their learning.
- b) organize information about language.
- c) are creative, developing a feel for the language by experience with its grammar and words.
- d) make their own opportunities for practice in using language inside and outside the classroom.
- e) Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
- f) Use mnemonic and other memory strategies to recall what has been learned.
- g) Make errors work for them and not against them.
- h) Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
- i) Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
- j) Learn to make intelligent guesses.
- k) Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform beyond their competence.
- l) Learn certain tricks that help to keep conversations going.
- m) Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
- n) Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.

Accepting the fact that learning strategies are teachable does not necessitate teaching such strategies. Researchers have proved through their experimentations that learners as users of strategies are more proficient compared to their non-user counterparts. Given this fact, it can be an admissible justification for teaching strategies. Yilmaz [14] found that there exists a direct relationship between proficiency and strategy use. Hong-Nam and Leavell [15] also gained similar results in regard to the relationship between language use strategy and language proficiency.

According to Brown [5], in order to bring learning and communication strategies into classroom McDonough (1999) and Cohen (1998) propose strategies-based instruction (SBI). However according to MacIntyre and Noel for SBI to be beneficial, learners need to a) understand the strategy itself, b) perceive it to be effective, c) do not consider its implementation to be overly difficult.

According to Brown [5] there are different models of SBI in the world:

**a) As part of a standard communicative methodology:** teachers help students to become aware of their own style preferences and the strategies that are derived from those styles. Through checklists, tests, and interviews, teachers can become aware of students' tendencies and then offer advice on beneficial in-class and extra-class strategies.

**b) Teachers can embed strategy awareness and practice into their pedagogy:** As they utilize such techniques as communicative games, rapid reading, fluency exercises, and error analysis, teachers can help students both consciously and subconsciously to practice successful strategies.

**c) Certain compensatory techniques are sometimes practiced to help students overcome certain weaknesses:** Omaggio (1981) provided diagnostic instruments and procedures for determining students' preferences, then outlined exercises that help students to overcome certain blocks or to develop successful strategies here they are weak.

**d) Textbooks:** include strategy instruction as part of a content-centered approach.

It seems more rational, however, to consider use or non-use of strategies as relative concepts, because all learners have their own strategies but as Chamot [8] claims, they adhere to different strategies. To teach learning strategies also, does not result in the same outcomes and depending on different variables, learners are more or less capable of receiving and using such strategies. Yilmaz [15] introduces three variables effective in learning strategy use: gender, language proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs in ELT classroom. His findings about gender differences prove his former studies that females are more susceptible in strategy use than males. Yilmaz [16] also found that learners' belief about learning has an effect on their strategy use. Chamot [8] also introduces other variables like: the learner's goals, the context of the learning situation, and the cultural values of the learner's society as relevant to strategies used by learners. The issues pertinent to teaching learning strategies are whether students' native or foreign language must be used as the language of instruction and whether there needs to be a separate course for strategy teaching apart from language course and also whether they must be taught explicitly or implicitly [17].

## Final Remarks

It can be concluded that learning strategies are teachable and useful tools in helping learners to gain autonomy, but it must be accompanied by a look into diversities between learners and making a relationship between their learning styles and strategies to be taught. There are different types of strategies among which cognitive, metacognitive affective, social and communicative strategies are more accepted and elaborated upon. Good language

learners are marked not by their highly frequent use of strategies, rather by being able to employ the right strategies in particular situations. Some important variables in learning strategy use are gender, language proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs in ELT classroom, learners' belief about learning has an effect on their strategy use, the learner's goals, the context of the learning situation, and the cultural values of the learner's society to be considered by language teachers.

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DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2020.02.000147](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2020.02.000147)



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