

Language Learning Strategy Research, a Review

Shohreh Raftari

English Department, Islamic Azad University, Kerman Branch, Kerman, Iran

E-mail: raftari_2004@yahoo.com

Marjan Vosoughi

English Department, Islamic Azad University, Sabzevar Branch, Sabzevar, Iran

E-mail: vosoughee@iaus.ac.ir

Rana Hameed Al Bahrani

Linguistics, School of Languages, Literacies and Translation (SOLLAT)

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia

E-mail: missranah@yahoo.co.uk

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Abstract

In the recent decades, many scholars have concentrated on learning strategies as effective ways to acquiring knowledge. Focus, in a considerable number of the studies in this field, has been on second/foreign language learning strategies. The present paper aims to have a profound, comparative look at the start, development and the current position of L2/FL learning strategy field of study. The article starts with introducing some leading researchers in the field and their main achievements and goes on with classifying the studies conducted in the area of language learning strategies into six categories. The six categories are elaborated through random exemplary studies. Finally, the review is concluded with summarizing the researchers' accomplishments along the years the topic has been in vogue and puts further questions forth which should be answered through rigorous additional research.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Strategy instruction, Second language (L2), Foreign language (FL)

1. Introduction

Chamot (2004) defines learning strategies as any learner's conscious thoughts and actions that help her in achieving her educational goals.

The concept of 'learning strategy' is by now familiar to most language teaching professionals; however, the major stimulus in investigating what learners do to help themselves learn came in the mid-1970s, with the well-known 'Good Language Learner Studies' (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Oxford, 1986; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) in which the assumption of the researchers was that, an identification of what good language learners do would enable us to help less successful learners learn more efficiently; consequently, significant research since then has continued, and there is now a rich literature in every aspect, offering detailed analyses and categorizations of strategies and frameworks for practical applications [see (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985); (Oxford, 1990); (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); (Wenden, 1991); (Oxford, Young Cho, Leung, & Kim, 2004)].

In the present article, the authors' objective is to briefly familiarize the target reader with the various subcategories of language learning strategy research; however, before discussing the randomly selected studies in the field of learning strategies, it is pertinent to also have a brief look at the prominent figures in the field together with their main achievements.

Joan Rubin, Rebecca L. Oxford, Anna Uhl Chamot and Joan Michael O'Malley are four of the most famous active researchers in the field of learning strategies who have accomplished great achievements in their works, and this research area had nothing to say without these people's efforts.

In the following section, these researchers and their achievements are briefly discussed.

1.1 Joan Rubin

The history of learning strategy originates from Rubin's works. For example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Cohen (1990) believe that it was from Rubin's (1975) pioneering works that different classifications and taxonomies related to learning strategies came into vogue. In her paper, Rubin (1975) compared the characteristics of the successful and unsuccessful second or foreign language learners as well as the strategies used by them in achieving their goal or fluent communication in the target language.

In another study, Rubin (1981) identified the strategies that contribute to achieving the L2/FL proficiency with great success either directly via using the inductive inferencing, practicing and memorizing or indirectly by creating practice opportunities or using production tricks.

Based on her studies, she has also co-authored a book, entitled 'How to be a Successful Learner' (Rubin & Thompson, 1994) that sheds light on the same area of her interest, i.e., language learning strategies.

1.2 Rebecca L. Oxford

Oxford is the other pertinent personality who has considerably contributed to the study of language learning strategies. Her greatest achievements in this field are her two L1 and L2/FL versions of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning [SILL] (Oxford, 1986). From their formation to date, these two inventories represent the most popular and widely used strategy use data collection instruments in the world.

In SILL, a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each statement or strategy has been described. These scales include: always/almost always true of me, generally true of me, somewhat true of me, generally not true of me and never/almost never true of me. The responses are based on 'Learning and Study Strategy Inventory' described by Weinstein et al. (1987), which is widely used and very well accepted.

In 1989, through factor analysis, SILL was sub-scaled into 6 groups of strategies:

1. Memory strategies, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming and structured reviewing [9 items];
2. Cognitive strategies, such as reasoning, analysing, summarizing (which are all reflective of deep processing) as well as general practicing [14 items];
3. Compensation strategies, such as guessing the meanings from the context via reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known [six items];
4. Metacognitive strategies, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress and monitoring errors [nine items];
5. Affective/emotional/motivation-related strategies, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-reward [six items]; and finally,
6. Social strategies, such as asking questions, cooperating with the native speakers of the language and becoming culturally aware of the language functions [six items].

Any SILL package is made up of: a short set of directions to the student with a sample item, the instrument itself [either the 50/80 item inventory], a scoring worksheet on which the student records her answers and calculates her average for each strategy subscale and their overall average, a summary profile that shows the student's result and provides examples for her self-interpretation and a strategy graph that allows each learner to graph results from the SILL. A background questionnaire is also available to document age, gender, language experience, motivation and other information (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

1.3 Anna Uhl Chamot and Joan Michael O'Malley

Chamot & O'Malley are the other pioneers whose works in the field of learning strategies started with co-authoring some articles (J. Michael O'Malley, Anna Uhl Chamot, Gloria Stewner-Manzanares, R. P. Russo, & Kupper, 1985; O'Malley et al., 1985). The most important known achievement that brought these two into vogue was the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach [CALLA] (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987), which is being updated every now and then to cope with the encountered changes and conditions of learning (Chamot, 2005).

CALLA represents one of the first models of strategy instruction whose focus is on the integration of three aspects of learning: the content area instruction, academic language development and the explicit instruction of learning strategies. CALLA is particularly targeted toward the students who have at least an advanced-beginning or intermediate level of English proficiency. This model is very simply presented through five basic steps, i.e., preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion. In the preparation phase, the teachers provide advance organizers about the lesson whereas the students identify what they already know about a topic, using elaboration as a strategy. In the presentation phase, teachers provide new information to students, using techniques which make their input comprehensible. Teachers can use advance organizers and encourage the use of selective attention, self-monitoring, inferencing, summarizing, and transfer. In the practice phase, students are engaged in activities in which they can apply learning strategies, often in cooperative small-group sessions. During this phase, the teacher should encourage the use of strategies, such as grouping, imagery, organizational planning, deduction, inferencing, and questioning for clarification. In the evaluation phase, students are supposed to reflect on their individual learning and plan to remedy any deficiencies they may have identified. Finally, in the follow-up expansion phase, students are provided with opportunities to relate and apply the new information to their own lives, call on the expertise of their parents and other family members and compare what they have learned in school with their own cultural experiences (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987).

2. English as a second or foreign language learning strategy research

Many pieces of research in the field of language learning strategies have been conducted in different countries all around the world. These studies' focus of interest can be classified into six categories:

- a. 'the strategies used by successful or unsuccessful language learners' [(Rubin, 1975), (Vann & Abraham, 1990), (Rubin & Thompson, 1994), (Ting, 2006)];
- b. 'students' use of language learning strategies and their learning achievements' [(Ehrman & Oxford, 1995), (Green & Oxford, 1995), (Griffiths, 2003), (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006)];

- c. 'students' strategic performance in different language skill areas' [(Huang & Van Naerssen, 1987), (Olivares-Cuhat, 2002), (Ambrosi-Randic & Kostic-Bobanovic, 2008)];
- d. 'the factors (such as gender, age, motivation, etc.) that affect the learners' use of different learning strategies' [(Oxford, Nyikos, & Ehrman, 1988), (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), (Takeuchi, 2003), (Yang, 2007), (Teh, Embi, Yusoff, & Mahamod, 2009), (Liyanage, Grimbeek, & Bryer, 2010), (Radwan, 2011), (Su & Duo, 2012)];
- e. 'strategy instruction outcomes' [(Bialystok, 1981), (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), (Dadour & Robbins, 1996), (Jurkovič, 2010)]; and finally,
- f. 'subjects' preferences in the use of language learning strategies' [(Wharton, 2000), (Griffiths, 2003)].

In the following section, examples supporting the aforementioned classification of studies in the field of language learning strategies are presented. The studies which are discussed are chosen either randomly or according to their importance and their being cited in many other studies in the field and are only selected as a mere sample representative of studies conducted in this research area according to the present authors' classification.

a. Successful and unsuccessful learners' language learning strategies

Rubin (1975) spent time observing the successful second language learners and made a list of their characteristics as follows: they are a) willing and able to guess accurately; b) strongly motivated to communicate and learn from others; c) tolerant of mistakes and learn from their mistakes; d) actively deriving the form from the displayed patterns; e) actively practicing and monitoring their own or the others' speech; and finally f) focused on meaning. Therefore, Rubin (1975) suggested that language teachers could help less successful learners to promote their language proficiency by paying more attention to the productive aspects of language learning strategies which are attended to by the successful learners.

Also, Vann and Abraham (1990) came across the learning strategies used by two unsuccessful Saudi Arabian female EFL learners through analyzing their think-aloud protocols and the products of some other tasks [an interview, a verbal exercise, a cloze passage and a composition]. The results showed that although they frequently used some good strategies; their application of them was improper and out of order with respect to the meta-cognitive aspects of those learning strategies. They also suggested that the instruction of learning strategies can be useful if learners are apparently convinced of their significance and are taught to evaluate any possible uses.

In addition, Rubin and Thompson (1994) in the book entitled, 'How to Be a More Successful Language Learner', elaborate on the strategies they have identified as useful [mostly used by the successful language learners] in the course of their studies and teaching experiences. The first point on which they emphasize is that "there is no stereotype of 'the good language

learner" [p.1]. They add that the only things that help a person to be a successful EFL learner are some possible combinations of traits that can be used by anyone to enhance her foreign language learning. They further suggest that studying everyday but in short bits is more useful than spending a lot of time every now and then. They also state that for a language learner to be successful, she should set clearly the objectives of each of the skills followed. In another chapter, they highlight the personal characteristics and the type of study settings whether formal or informal which suit each person. Furthermore, they maintain that language is a social phenomenon which cannot be successfully achieved without taking into account the social intercourse. In addition, they discuss language learning strategies in general and the successful language learning strategies in particular. The latter involve the following: keeping diaries, talking to classmates, getting advice from the teacher and constantly assessing what is happening in the language learning process. Additionally, they devote some chapters of their book to different language skills and present an introduction into the strategies that enhance the learning process of any second/foreign language.

And finally, Ting (2006), using questionnaires and interviews, examined the use of ESL learning strategies among suburban Malay students. The results indicated that all the learners are moderate strategy users; the most frequently used strategies are the metacognitive ones and the least frequent strategies are the social strategies. The study further showed that the more proficient students use more strategies on the whole, except for the memory strategies which are more frequently used by unsuccessful learners.

b. Language learning strategy use and language learning achievement

Ehrman and Oxford (1995) pinpoint that only the cognitive strategies have a significant relationship with language proficiency in the SILL category. Other strategies such as memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, however, have no significant relationship with proficiency. On the other hand, only the use of the cognitive strategies has a significant impact on ESL/EFL learners' proficiency outcomes.

What's more, Green and Oxford (1995) using SILL studied the correlation between the learning strategy use, language proficiency and gender of 374 students of three different course levels at the University of Puerto Rico. Following the results of similar studies in the field, their findings also indicated that among more successful learners in comparison to the unsuccessful ones and women in comparison to men, the use of learning strategies is more popular. However, the results also clarified that all the participants at different proficiency levels, regardless of their gender, used the learning strategies with variations existing in only use of some specific strategies which caused the differences. Furthermore, the strategies reported as used more often by the more successful students emphasized active, naturalistic practice and were used in combination with a variety of strategies which were used frequently or moderately frequently by learners at all levels.

Also, Griffiths' (2003) study using SILL among the students at a private high school in New Zealand revealed that the higher level students made highly frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies and when compared with the strategies favored by lower level students, the strategies typical of higher level students appeared to be both more sophisticated [involving manipulation rather than memorization] and more interactive, suggesting that the

differences in strategy use by higher and lower level students may have a qualitative as well as a quantitative dimension.

Furthermore, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006), using SILL in a study of the language strategy use of EFL students of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, explored curvilinear relationship between strategy use and English proficiency of the participants, revealing that students in the intermediate level reported more use of learning strategies than beginning and advanced levels. Also, more strategic language learners advanced along the proficiency continuum faster than less strategic ones. Moreover, the students preferred to use metacognitive strategies most, whereas they showed the least use of affective and memory strategies. And finally, females tended to use affective and social strategies more frequently than males.

c. Strategic performance in different language skill areas

Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) compared sixty graduating English major Chinese students in accordance with their use of leaning strategies and their oral communication proficiency. To collect their data they gave an oral test, a learning strategies questionnaire as well as interviewing the ten highest and nine lowest scorers for more investigation. The final results supported the critical role of functional practice in language learning while reading practice also stood as the most significant predictor of oral proficiency in comparison to speaking and listening practice.

Additionally, Olivares-Cuhat (2002) looked at the language learning strategies of students in a university advanced Spanish writing class and compared achievement on a writing sample between those students speaking Spanish as their first language and those learning Spanish as a foreign language. As expected, students with a Spanish language background were graded higher on their writing samples than the other students; however, they also showed a greater preference for affective and memory strategies.

Also, Ambrosi-Randic and Kostic-Bobanovic (2008) reported on an investigation of the differences in the use of language speaking strategies between successful and less successful speakers in different EFL education levels comparing Croatian primary and secondary school students. The final results of their study indicated that successful learners reported significantly more use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies; whereas, less successful learners reported significantly more use of compensation strategies.

d. Factors affecting the learners' use of learning strategies

Oxford et al. (1988), after emphasizing the importance of the sex factor as an indispensable variable which must not be disregarded in the studies in this field, in a summative study synthesized the four researches on language learning strategies to date, one of whose variables was sex. In all the four studies, female participants outscored the males in the use of strategies; however, they insisted on the repetition of such studies in different cultures and societies which may come up with different results.

In addition, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) using SILL and a background questionnaire, studied the strategy use and the variables that affected the strategy use of 1200 university students

studying five different foreign languages and found that; although, different backgrounds affected the use of language learning strategies, on the whole the university students were active strategy users. Moreover, students' self-rating of motivation was the only most powerful influential variable that affected the choice of language learning strategies, followed by sex of the learners and all the other variables [self-perception of proficiency level in speaking, reading and listening skills, years of study, elective vs. required status of the language course and major] and some interactions among the studied variables were in significant correlation with the reported use of strategies by the subjects of the study.

Furthermore, Takeuchi (2003) after analyzing 67 books and in fact personal language learning experiences of 160 good language learners, concluded that first, there are some strategies uniquely preferred in the Japanese FL context, second, learners in the FL context must devote time and energy to memorizing a certain number of basic sentences, also must be sensitive to foreign sounds/prosody and imitate them as perfectly as possible, third, the use of some strategies is common not only to the learners in the FL context, but also to those in the L2 context, and finally, the use of some strategies seems to be closely connected to a certain stage of learning.

Also, in a study of language learning strategies' use of Taiwanese high school and college students of different ethnicities and proficiencies in EFL by Yang (2007), the results clarified that first, ethnicity did play a significant role in the selection of language learning strategies, and second, more proficient students reported using strategies more often than less proficient students. Once more here the instrument used was SILL.

What's more, Teh et al. (2009), using an adapted version of SILL, studies the correlation between the use of learning strategies and the gender of 457 students at thirteen secondary schools in Terengganu, Malaysia. The results showed significant differences, favoring female students, in the use of reading strategies with some strategies [affective and metaphysic] to be specifically more popular among girls.

Additionally, Liyanage et al. (2010) compared four ethnic groups, every two of the same religion, in accordance with their use of learning strategies in their process of ESL learning. The study instrument was questionnaire. The results revealed that the choice of learning strategies across the four groups appeared to be associated with religious rather than ethnic identity. They finally concluded that the religious identity of the learners was more important in determining the selection of learning strategies than ethnic identity.

In another study, Radwan (2011), using SILL, investigated the correlation between the use of language learning strategies by 128 students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University [SQU] in Oman and their gender and English proficiency [measured according to three criteria i.e. grade point average [GPA] in English courses, study duration in the English department and the students' perceived proficiency self-rating]. Results showed that:

- the students used metacognitive strategies significantly more than any other category of strategies, with memory strategies ranking last on students' preference scale,

- male students used more social strategies than female students,
- more proficient students used more cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies than less proficient students,
- a curvilinear relationship was revealed between strategy use and study duration; where, freshmen used more strategies followed by juniors, then seniors and sophomores,
- a sharp contrast existed between learners who were self-efficacious and those who were not, favoring the first group in basically every strategy category; and finally,
- the use of cognitive strategies was the only predictor that distinguished between students with high GPAs and those with low GPAs.

And finally, Su and Duo (2012), attempted to discover the correlation between the Taiwanese high school students' self-efficacy and their use of learning strategies in EFL learning, using SILL and the modified Morgan-Jinks (1999) Student Efficacy Scale [MJSES]. The results of their study revealed that significant positive correlation existed between language learning strategy use and self-efficacy beliefs of the participants.

e. Strategy instruction outcomes

Bialystok (1981) examined the influences of using learning strategies on ESL learners' performance and found that using all four strategies in his model of second language learning -i.e., formal practicing, monitoring, functional practicing and inferring- affected the language learners' achievements positively, and the only strategy that affected language learners' proficiency in all tasks was functional practicing.

Also, O'Malley and Chamot (1990), in an experimental study, instructed the high school ESL students for two weeks to apply learning strategies to three different types of tasks [i.e., vocabulary, listening comprehension, and speaking], and their performance was compared to that of students in a non-strategies control group. The participants, who were 75 in number, were post tested through attending discussed skills exams but did not report on their use of strategies. Comparing pre and post test results of both groups [experimental, control] they concluded that:

1. Vocabulary learning strategies were effective only for students who had not already developed alternative effective strategies.
2. Listening comprehension improved for students instructed in learning strategies on texts that were accessible, not on those that were too difficult and/or for which students lacked relevant prior knowledge.
3. Oral reports given by strategy-instructed students were judged to be significantly more comprehensible and organized than those of control group students.
4. Explicit learning strategy instruction embedded within the language syllabus appeared to be effective.

In addition, Dadour and Robbins (1996) investigated the effects of explicit strategy instruction on Egyptian students' enhancement of speaking abilities in EFL learning. The results indicated that the strategy instruction course had a significant impact on the experimental group in the areas of speaking skill and strategy use frequency. The researchers concluded that "a well-structured strategy instruction course that allowed creativity on the part of both teacher and students could have a strongly positive effect on oral communication and the use of all sorts of strategies" [p. 162].

In a later study, Jurkovič (2010) explored the effect of explicit language learning strategy instruction on the development of EFL proficiency within a higher education setting in mixed language ability groups attending classes of EFL for students of traffic technology and transport logistics. The sample consisted of seventy-seven full-time first year students, twenty-nine females and forty-eight males who aged between 18 and 24. The research results indicated that explicit language learning strategy instruction in groups of heterogeneous students, in terms of initial language ability, did not have any statistically significant effect on the development of language knowledge. Accordingly, she concluded that under certain circumstances [limited course time and heterogeneous language competence levels within the instructed groups] the organization of strategy training in the form of a separate module for implicit training in the use of language learning strategies seemed to be more appropriate.

f. Subjects' preferences in the use of language learning strategies

Wharton (2000), using SILL, conducted a study with ethnically Chinese, bilingual Singaporean university students who studied a foreign language [French or Japanese]. He found that students preferred social strategies and were reluctant to use affective strategies.

Also, Griffiths' (2003) study, using SILL, among the students at a private high school in New Zealand revealed that the higher level students made highly frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies, and when compared with the strategies favored by lower level students, the strategies typical of higher level students appeared to be both more sophisticated [involving manipulation rather than memorization] and more interactive. These findings suggested that the differences in strategy use by higher and lower level students may have a qualitative as well as a quantitative dimension.

3. Conclusion

According to the studies reviewed here, it is clear that, there exist significant relationships between the use of language learning strategies and language proficiency. What's more, although, very few studies contradict this view, language learners who use language learning strategies more than others achieve greater language proficiency and research into L2/FL learning has demonstrated that good language learners use strategies more frequently and appropriately to enhance their target language learning. Also, ethnicity, gender, religion, self-efficacy, motivation and cultural background are some of the influential factors in the learners' use of language learning strategies.

Even though, such studies have provided a considerable body of science in the field of language learning strategies, the empirical base of a majority of these studies consists of

either Westerners studying second or foreign language learning in their own countries or groups of mixed nationalities studying English as a foreign or second language in different countries and yet using western tools to test strategies. In addition, the notion of ‘cultural and educational influence’ is generally absent from such studies and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) rightly stress the need for additional research into how cultural and educational backgrounds affect use of learning strategies.

Furthermore, according to what is discussed here, it can be concluded that:

- Research in the field of learning strategies started by trying to extract the different strategies used by learners of different proficiencies and according to these findings devices to collect data in this regard were developed [e.g. SILL (Oxford, 1986)].
- At the beginning, learning strategies were studied as a whole and later the researchers started studying learning strategies under different language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Most studies support the usefulness of strategy instruction on condition that certain criteria are met.
- Most studies show the priority of female language learners in the amount and types of language learning strategies with trivial differences.
- Parallel to some scholars' (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) hypotheses, most of the studies in different cultural settings indicate varieties in the use of learning strategies pointing to the possible significant role of the learners' socio-cultural background.
- Few experimental studies refer to strategy instruction models they have utilized, and it is as if they only focus on the teaching of strategies without following any special predetermined procedures.
- Positive attitude, motivation and self-efficacy enhance the effective and frequent use of learning strategies.
- At present, the focus of this field of study is mostly on the factors affecting the use of the strategies to enhance the four language skills, specially ethnicity, culture and social setting that motivate the researchers of different nationalities to conduct studies to extract the strategies of learners with specific socio-cultural backgrounds.
- Although a lot of research has been conducted in this area, because of many studies being replications, there still exist questions whose answers cannot be

firmly proposed. Some of such questions that may come to any mind and for which may not find a direct answer are:

- Is language learning strategy instruction a must?
- At what age should strategy instruction start?
- How many strategies should be taught in a day, in a week or in an educational term?
- Should there exist differences in the strategy instruction to female and male learners? etc.

Most of such questions must be answered through further rigorous and longitudinal experimental studies.

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