Strategy Choice in Foreign Language Learning – Some Theoretical Guidelines

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Abstract:

The present paper investigates variables affecting strategic learning of foreign languages. The theoretical approach starts from analyzing strategy classifications and evolves into highlighting the several factors that determine strategy use when learning foreign languages. Further on we investigate individual differences between learners, the learners' personal experiences, situational and social factors, as well as affective factors and strategic competence. Having started from the theoretical premise that strategic learning is the superior approach to foreign language learning, the paper concludes that a successful learning experience is highly dependent on the language instructors' understanding of the multitude of variables at play when it comes to learner strategy choice.

Keywords: Strategic learning, Foreign language learning, Individual differences

Introduction

Decades of research have shown the importance of adopting a strategic approach when it comes to language learning. Back in the 90s, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) gave some of the most complex classifications of learning strategies, after repeatedly modifying previous categorizations made by the same authors. Their version encompasses all the strategies they discussed throughout this revision process, with cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social/ affective strategies as the main categories.

The aim of this paper is to focus on the factors that impact individual differences which make learners unique when it comes to strategy choice, as our stance is that learning journeys are deeply individual and there is no one set of prescribed strategies that can guarantee success.

Strategy classification

Oxford (1990) classifies learning strategies into direct and indirect strategies, with direct strategies requiring direct mental

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processing of the language, while indirect strategies indirectly support language learning through focusing, planning, anxiety control, cooperation, empathy, etc.

Direct strategies

- Memory strategies
- Cognitive strategies
- Compensation strategies

Indirect strategies

- Metacognitive strategies
- Affective strategies
- Social strategies

Factors that influence strategy choice

Ellis (1994) distinguishes three types of factors: individual differences between learners, the learners' personal experiences, and situational and social factors. To these we added affective factors and factors related to strategic competence, which are also important in strategy choice.

Individual differences include the learner's beliefs regarding foreign language learning, age, talent, learning style, personality and motivation. To these we added linguistic competence and cognitive style.

As for the learner's beliefs regarding language learning, Ellis (1994) noticed that students who cared more about the importance of *learning* a foreign language tend to choose cognitive strategies, while learners for whom *using* the foreign language was more important preferred communicative strategies.

Age is a decisive factor in choosing learning strategies. If young children mainly use strategies that are specific to the tasks they focus upon, which are often simple, teenagers and adults use more generalized and complex strategies. Young children learn new lexical items mainly by rote learning, whereas adults apply more complex strategies. Considering that there are several learning strategies that can be applied to vocabulary and grammar, and also that adults tend to have higher strategic competences, it follows that they tend to make more rapid progress in these areas than children. As for pronunciation, there are fewer and less complex learning strategies; adults manage less well than children in this respect.

Talent is less important than age when choosing strategies. Learners with decontextualized linguistic aptitudes are more capable of speaking about the strategies that they employ.

Learning style seems to be more relevant for strategy choice, as it is a reflection of the learner's personality in the specific learning situation. Willing (1987) describes four learning styles:

- The concrete style is characterized by direct ways of processing information, oriented towards other learners, spontaneity, imagination, emotion, the rejection of mechanical learning;
- The analytical style is characterized by focusing on specific problems, deductive and hypothesis-based reasoning, independence, preference towards didactical and logical presentation;
- The communicative style is characterized by a relative independence, adaptability and flexibility, a preference towards a communicative approach towards learning and a propensity for decision making.
- The authority-oriented style is characterized by a need to rely on others, the need to receive instructions and explanations from the teacher, a preference for well-structured learning environments, gradual progress, a dislike for learning through discovery.

Felder and Henriques (1995) suggest another classification of learning styles, according to the following categories:

- the preferential type of information that learners perceive: sensorial or intuitive;
- the manner in which the information is perceived: verbal or visual;
- the way in which information is processed: active (by getting involved in discussions and other activities) or reflexive (by introspection);
- the manner in which progress is made: sequential or global;
- the way in which information is organized: inductive or deductive.

In a slightly different manner from Felder and Henriques (1995), Oxford (2003) identifies five coordinates that determine learning style. The researcher argues that each style has advantages for learning and that each learner has their own comfort zone that corresponds to their own learning style. Through practice, this comfort zone can be extended.

- the use of senses for study and work: some students have a preference for visual stimuli, while others for auditive ones;
- interaction with other learners: extroverts show a preference for tasks that involve discussion, debate, role play etc., while introverts go for independent learning tasks or cooperation with a person that they know well;
- opportunity use: here the ends of the continuum are the intuitive end – future focused, speculative, abstract thinking, avoiding to follow step by step instructions, and concrete/ sequential – focused on the present, preferring to approach tasks gradually and with a tendency towards self-monitoring;

- task approach: a closed approach involves the ability to meet deadlines, careful focusing on the task, planning, a tendency to structure information; an open approach, on the other hand, involves the discovery of new information in an unstructured manner, the acceptance of disorder and chaos, a preference towards tasks that do not require compliance with rules;
- approaching ideas: a global approach implies a preoccupation for main ideas, guessing the meaning of words from context, predictions about the future stages in activities or texts, communication despite not knowing all words or concepts; an analytical approach requires attention to detail, logical analysis, and strict compliance with rules.

Cognitive style is another relevant factor not only for strategy choice, but for learning itself. Cognitive style has been defined as the constant way of approaching information structuring and organization (Riding, Sadler-Smith, 1997). The difference between cognitive style and learning style is that cognitive style is more stable and general, and it influences learning style. Thus, cognitive style determines learning performance. The latter is also influenced by the task being approached.

There are several complex classifications of cognitive style which include up to 22 categories (Riding, Sadler-Smith, 1997). For the purposes of this paper we will choose a simpler classification, that of Riding and Sadler-Smith (1997) who take into consideration two dimensions of cognitive style: the holistic- analytical and the verbal imagistic dimension. The former can be applied to the manner in which the learner organizes and structures information: while holistic types tend to focus on the big picture, the analytical types usually divide input into components in order to analyze it more easily. The verbal imagistic dimension covers the preferred way of representing information in memory.

Thus, there are four possible combinations between cognitive styles: holistic verbal, holistic imagistic, analytical verbal, analytical imagistic. One must bear in mind that neither of these extremes is ideal, as any extreme would lead to extreme preferences regarding the way in which the information to be processed is organized and presented.

Allinson and Hayes (1996) argued that taking individual differences into account as far as the cognitive style is concerned has a positive effect on learning performance.

Motivation is another of the most important factors in choosing learning strategies, and in learning in general. That is why preparation and instruction as far as strategy use is concerned must involve motivating learners. According to Chamot et al. (1999), the relevant elements of motivation as far as learning strategy use is concerned are the following:

- The importance of the task: learners are motivated by tasks that they consider to be relevant because they find them interesting and applicable to their own lives. The use of authentic materials, with content that has been adapted to the learners' interests, can contribute to increasing their motivation.
- The learners' expectations: learners have certain expectations related to their learning performance in general, which influence their performance in specific tasks. From this point of view, the opportunity of being successful in learning tasks by being exposed to tasks that have a difficulty level that is high enough to represent a challenge my lead to an increase in motivation. The access to strategies that ease the task is also a motivating factor.
- Being aware of one's own effectiveness: learners with a low self-image regarding their learning effectiveness can be encouraged to develop their strategic competence in order to raise their learning performance. There is a correlation between using learning strategies and learners' effectiveness (Chamot et al., 1999).
- Success attribution: learners that attribute their success to the effort made or to the learning strategies used are more motivated. Learners with low performance levels can be encouraged to attribute their failures to using strategies incorrectly or to not using them at all, as opposed to their own failure to learn.

The level of language proficiency is another factor that influences strategy choice. The strategies that are used are, to a certain degree, a reflection of the learners' level of language proficiency. Metacognitive strategies, for example, are mainly used by learners from levels B1 to C2. If we are to correlate the level of language proficiency with success rates, then we can assert that learners who have more frequent positive experiences regarding language use and language learning, have a tendency to use learning strategies more frequently. Thus, the level of language proficiency can be seen as both cause and effect of strategy use.

Situational and social factors

The native language and the environment in which learning occurs are some examples of situational factors that affect language learning. However, for the relevance of this work, the task is key to strategy choice. Most strategies can be applied to learning new lexical items, with fewer to listening and speaking. Chamot et al. (1999) demonstrate that the type of task affects both the cognitive and the metacognitive strategies that learners apply. For learning vocabulary, the cognitive strategies that are mostly used are resource use and elaboration, while the most frequent metacognitive strategies are monitoring and self-evaluation. For listening comprehension tasks, the most often used

cognitive strategies are note-taking, elaboration, inference generation, summarizing and the most frequent metacognitive strategies are selective attention and problem identification.

The social factors referred to in research are belonging to a socio-economic group, gender, and race. Out of these, gender appears to have the most relevant influence on strategy choice. Women use communicative strategies more often than men, shows Ehrman (1990).

Affective factors also represent a cause of the learners' preference for certain strategies. For example, it has been proved that the use of certain metacognitive strategies is directly related to a decrease in anxiety and stress when approaching tasks, which leads to better performance in foreign language tests (Phakiti, 2003).

Strategic competence is a key factor that refers to the learners' ability to use learning strategies. Initially this only included compensation strategies as part of the communicative strategy category (Canale, Swain, 1980). Later on, Bachman and Palmer (1996) defined strategic competence as a set of components or metacognitive strategies that can be viewed as higher level metacognitive strategies which confer language learning and use a cognitive management function. These cognitive strategies include three components: setting objectives, evaluation, and planning. Strategic competence can be developed through formal training. The teaching/ learning process is increasingly learner-centered, which leads to more autonomy and responsibility on the part of the learner. During strategic training, learners are taught how to study and how to use the foreign language.

McLaughlin and Heredia (1996) argue that the most relevant source of individual differences between learners as far as learning is concerned, is the availability of declarative knowledge about the foreign language and the effectiveness and capacity of the working memory. Working memory is responsible for the degree to which learners can restructure their linguistic representations. If learners manage to apply strategies that improve working memory, they will manage to learn the foreign language much faster. The selection and use of appropriate strategies requires metacognitive skills. Thus, training regarding the effective cognitive strategies that can be applied so as to make language learning more effective must also include metacognitive instruction. It is not enough for learners to be trained in the use of certain cognitive strategies. They must understand the strategies that they employ in order to self-monitor their strategic competence with a view to improving it.

The concept of expertise in cognitive psychology has been first described by Anderson (1985) and can be applied to the field of strategic

competence. One of the most significant differences between experts and beginners in learning foreign languages is the fact that experts use strategies strategically (Ertmer, Newby, 1996). Apart from the quantitative differences between experts and beginners regarding the information that they have, there are qualitative differences that mainly have to do with the ability to implement regulation strategies of one's own cognitive mechanisms. These qualitative differences set experts apart from beginners in several ways: experts have more organized and integrated knowledge; they have strategies and effective methods to assimilate information and to use and apply it; they can regulate learning, are aware of themselves as being involved in a learning process; they reflect on their own learning, are more sensitive to what the task implies; they plan their actions more flexibly and, when they fail, they can regroup their efforts in order to be successful (Weinstein, Van Mater Stone, 1993). Additionally, Bransford and Vye (1989) mention the capacity to assess task difficulty, to monitor the learning process and to predict the outcome of the learning process. These are simply different labels for the main metacognitive strategies: planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation.

Conclusion

Strategy use appears as a deeply complex issue, determined by a multitude of factors. It is not solely age or motivation that impact strategic language learning. Affective, social, and situational factors are equally important. Provided that language instructors understand the multitude of variables at play, language learners can benefit from guidance into strategy use with the ultimate goal of maximizing their learning experience.

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