8 Strategies in Second Language Learning: Insights from Research

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How many times does a teacher exclaim, ‘Why, we already covered that in class!’ or ‘But you learned that last Friday!’? Indeed, the teacher may in fact teach a number of things that are not learned by the students, or at least not learned in the way that the teacher envisioned. The teacher may have a certain agenda and the student an entirely different one. In other words, the content of instruction or teaching methods may be inappropriate for certain learners, depending on their level of language development and their individual learning styles. In the last few years it has become increasingly evident that teachers need to look more to the learners themselves to gain insights as to the language learning process — for example, to find out more about what is learned from what is actually taught, and how it is learned.

If we accept the claim that much of the mastery that a learner gains in a second language accrues through an unconscious process of acquisition (Krashen, 1982), and is not the result of conscious learning, then we need not worry so much about what kind of conscious learning the learner indulges in. If, however, we view conscious learning as having a significant role to play, then the insights we can gain from successful second language learners have value in enhancing the learning of the less successful learners. This chapter takes the view that there is a substantial contribution that conscious language learning on the part of the student can make in the development of second language skills. The teacher is considered to have an important role in this endeavour as facilitator of learning.

In the last decade, the interest in improving conscious second language learning has increased so dramatically that there is now an
recognise vocabulary to be a key to success in language learning, they let new words slip through their grasp through lack of an effective means to hold on to these words. They also may become frustrated with attempts to read if, in fact, they do not know how to go about it successfully. Finally, when asked to write, they may do so with greater effort than necessary and with poorer results.

We might expect that learners who are good readers or writers in their native language would likewise be successful at these skills in a second language. To some extent this is the case, but not exclusively. The fact is that second language learners, particularly those with less proficiency in the second language, seem to forget the successful strategies they employ in their first language when faced with second language tasks. If they become more mindful of what they are doing and of how this may contribute to their success, their results as learners may be more satisfactory.

As indicated in the last premiss stated above, consciousness-raising calls for a shift in attitude about the role of the language learner. Some learners may be used to assuming the attitude of the passive consumer: 'Here I am, teacher. Come, do it to me. Teach me what you can about this language. If I don’t learn, it’s your fault.' In an approach where the learner becomes aware of the learning process wherever possible, this learner also assumes a generally more active role in achieving success. Success is then no longer an accident, but the product of careful planning and execution of a series of strategies (i.e. conscious activities aimed at producing learning) that work for that learner.

In some cases, success may even result in cases where the particular teacher or teaching method is not naturally supportive of the ways that the given learners best achieve their goals. For example, learners who thrive on learning languages through meaningful communication may find themselves in a grammar-based approach with little opportunity for genuine communication. The challenge for them is then to supplement the classroom lessons with communication outside of class with native speakers or advanced learners, or find ways of encouraging the teacher to introduce more communicative activities into the classroom. Learners could also create utterances that they really want to say from the homework exercises, and check with the teacher as to the appropriateness of those utterances.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss some of the strategies that good language learners use. Clearly, there is no one best way to be a successful learner. Rather, each successful learner has a
distinct set of strategies, but usually there is substantial overlap from one good learner to another. The insights to be discussed below are derived from research with language learners. Such research has entailed more than simply sitting in a classroom and watching learners perform. As a result of hours of such classroom observation, it has become clear that such an approach is not very revealing of learner strategies because many learners do not say revealing things in class, if they speak up at all.

Consequently, other approaches have been employed, such as having learners think aloud as they perform certain tasks, like reading a passage or writing an essay. Learners have also been asked to observe what they are doing and to report their observations, either introspectively (as soon as these events took place) or retrospectively (after the events were over). The think-aloud approach is intended to get learners to provide unanalysed, unedited insights into what they are doing. The self-observation method (introspection and retrospection) has the intention of involving the learner more in the analysis process (see, for example, Hosenfeld, 1977; 1979; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; Cohen & Hosenfeld, 1981; Cohen, 1984; 1987c). In all cases, the purpose has been to identify and describe the kinds of strategies that learners use to accomplish language learning tasks.

Whereas there has been some scepticism concerning the role that learners themselves can play in describing their strategies, it is becoming clear that learners have something to say and that this something can contribute to the design of a course of instruction (see Seliger (1983a) for a sceptical view and Cohen (1984) for a reply). Some of the unobservable learner behaviours in the classroom that have been and can be explored include the following:

(1) How actively do learners participate in class, particularly when 'it is not their turn'? Do the learners view these instances as an opportunity to tune out or as an opportunity to tune in to what is happening with a fellow student in class? Do learners only attend to what the teacher says, or do they rarely attend to what the teacher says?

(2) How do learners deal with teacher feedback regarding their oral or written language? If they are corrected, what do they do with the corrections? If they pay attention to these corrections, in what ways do they process them?

(3) How do learners handle new vocabulary? Do they screen out words according to certain procedures? Do they keep lists and if so, what kinds?

(4) How do students take notes? What do they write down and why? How do they use those notes later if at all?

(5) How much similarity is there between what the teacher thinks is easy/difficult in the lesson and what the learner thinks is easy/difficult?

Let us now look at some of the strategies that learners have been observed using while attending in class, speaking, learning vocabulary, reading, and writing. These data are considered to be simply illustrative of the types of data available about what learners do and do not do in and out of the classroom.

Attending in the Classroom

An important reason for a learner to be in a language classroom is that the teacher and the other students are likely to provide language input that is comprehensible (Krashen, 1982). Nevertheless, in order for the input to have maximum impact, the learners must be open to it. In reality, learners may find themselves exhibiting patterns of selective and only partial attention. For example, it is possible to attend only partially to well-practiced routines — those that are more automatic, such as certain types of drills or reading aloud. The teacher may consequently get the false impression that the learner is engaged more fully than is actually the case. And in order to look good, students may purposely give the teacher the impression that they are engaged more fully than they really are. This may be done through continual nods of the head or eye contact. It may be done through asking questions now and again — possibly even questions that the learner actually knows the answer to (as Bailey (1980) reports doing). It may be done through counting ahead to find the line(s) that the learner will most likely be asked to read, so as to appear on top of the material when the time comes (Hosenfeld, 1976). Since it is easy to tune out in the classroom, it would appear beneficial for learners to employ attention-enhancing strategies. One such attention strategy during whole-class frontal lessons would be for learners to respond silently to tasks asked of other students in the class — not just to wait until it is their turn. Active listening and attending would also involve a continual search for the meaning in utterances. Good learners use a number of strategies in their search for meaning. For example, they make use of:

(1) the knowledge that they have of the world;
(2) their knowledge of the given topic;
clear up as the learner has more exposures to the variety of forms in the target language and to exceptions to rules.

Part of successful speaking among learners is being able to make choices about what forms to use and how to use them, while not having these considerations may be at the expense of communication. In other words, at times it may be necessary to compromise principles regarding the form of the message in order to convey the desired message. This actually leads us to the issue of communication strategies. In other words, successful second-language speakers use a variety of communication strategies to keep conversation going (see Færch & Kasper, 1983b). Some might also avoid certain topics that they do not yet feel they have the vocabulary to discuss. Or, if they do not know how to say something one way, they may use a paraphrase rather than remaining silent. In addition, they may utilise their interlocutor to provide assistance each time their knowledge falters (for more on communication strategies, see Tarone, Cohen & Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1981; Poulin, 1987; Kellerman, this volume).

These appeals for assistance may not, in fact, be strategies for learning, but rather solely plays for communicating. In other words, a listener may be prompted to provide the learner with a word or two along the way, and the learner may make no effort to learn that word. The appeal is simply to make sure that the listener was following and to keep the conversation going. This in turn provides the learner with more input from which to benefit in the learning process. Learners who encourage input have been referred to as ‘high input generators’ (Seliger, 1983b). There are times, of course, when the speaker may well make an effort to learn a word that is supplied — when there is time for processing the word, interest, a focus on new forms, and adequate knowledge so as to know what to do with the form. A frontal lesson may provide more time for processing a word than a small-group session or one-on-one in that the learner is likely to be engaged in conversation for a shorter period of time, allowing for more time for processing the input that has been generated. The issue of processing words brings us to our next topic which is what learners do with new vocabulary.

Vocabulary Learning

The learning of vocabulary in a second language is an area in which strategies can be most useful. The number of unknown words always seems to outweigh the number of known words, and for learners without
good rote memories, the task can seem at times insurmountable. It would appear that under any circumstances, learners do some screening out of vocabulary upon contact with the words (Cohen & Aphek, 1979). In explaining this process of elimination Levenston (1979) draws on empirical evidence to suggest that learners may prefer to deal with new words that are:

1. easy to pronounce;
2. morphologically regular (i.e. without irregular inflections);
3. syntactically clear;
4. equivalent in meaning to words in the native language (or in some other language that the learner knows);
5. occurring frequently in speech or writing;
6. generalisable to various contexts;
7. semantically simple (not having multiple meanings, particularly when such meanings seem unreasonable).

Once it is determined what words will be learned, the question arises as to how the particular learner can best learn these. In the best of situations, the teacher will make the best possible use of background experience and teaching materials in order to provide the learner with a rich exposure to vocabulary. The approach to vocabulary learning that favours natural acquisition or automatic learning would suggest that the learner need not make any special effort to learn vocabulary. The contention is that with meaningful exposure to words, these words will naturally become a part of the learner's language. Yet for those without much exposure to the language or those who need vocabulary quickly, it would seem that strategies are in order. In fact, language learners rely heavily on associations between the words that are being learned and something else. Often such associations are not systematic. It has been shown that systematic approaches to associating the words to be learned to some cognitive mediator yields beneficial results (Bellezza, 1981; Levin, 1981; Paivio & Desrochers, 1981; Pressley, Levin & Delaney, 1982; Cohen, 1987b).

Learner responses to a questionnaire (Cohen & Aphek, 1979) indicated that at least the following types of associations were being used in second language learning:

1. noting the structure of part of the word (e.g. the root or an affix) or all of it;
2. linking the word to the sound of a word in the native language, to the sound of a word in the language being learned, or to the sound of a word in another language;
3. attending to the meaning of a part or several parts of the word;
4. creating a mental image of the word;
5. linking the word to the situation in which it appears;
6. placing the word in the topic group in which it belongs;
7. associating some physical sensation to the word;
8. visualising the word in isolation or in a written context.

Learners often use combinations of these types of associations. Perhaps the best known form of association is that of the keyword mnemonic. In this case, there is an acoustic link — i.e. a native language word or phrase that is similar in sound to part or all of the second language word — and an imagery link — an image of the keyword ‘interacting’ with the native language word or phrase (Atkinson, 1975). The keyword technique thus involves combining associational types 1 and 7. From the above list. For example, in order to learn the Spanish word *pato* ‘duck’, English-speaking learners are shown a picture of a duck with a pot on its head — or the learners picture it themselves. When they are asked the meaning of *pato*, this evokes the keyword ‘pot’, which in turn re-evokes the image of the duck wearing the pot (Levin, 1981).

If the word being learned is abstract, then it may be necessary to use a two-stage recall procedure. For example, in order to learn the Hebrew word for ‘resentment’, *tina*, an English-speaking learner could select as the keyword ‘teenager’ and envision a teenager washing the dishes resentfully. Then when given the word *tina*, the learner has to make the acoustic link to ‘teenager’ and then is to call up the image of the resentful teenager washing dishes.

Many adult learners feel that vocabulary is the key to success. Yet many of these same learners do not make use of systematic strategies for learning, storing, and retrieving words. Ironically, some learners even comment that they have so many words to learn that they do not have time to play around with mnemonic tricks for learning these words. The truth is, however, that use of mnemonics can enable the learner to memorise necessary routines (such as sets of vocabulary) more effectively so that the mind can be freed to spend time on tasks requiring understanding and reasoning (Levin, 1981).

Unlike adults, younger learners may not be so consciously aware of the vocabulary needs that they may have. This may, for the most part, be to their advantage in that they simply acquire a good deal of vocabulary, especially concrete language. All the same, there may be words that keep slipping away from them because they are not using some sort of mnemonic aid. Thus, there may be some payoff to heightening the
awareness of memory techniques among younger learners as well.

Let us now move on to two other skill areas for which successful strategies have been seen to play a dramatic role, namely in reading and in writing a second language.

Reading

In the field of second language reading, we have discovered that potentially good readers may not realise their potential simply because they neglect to utilise productive reading strategies. Hosenfeld (1979), for example, described the case of a ninth-grade English-speaking student of French who demonstrated poor reading skills until she became aware of strategies that she could benefit from using. This non-native reader studied a list of strategies that good readers have been found to use, and she selected from that list those strategies that she did not use but that she suspected would improve her reading. She tried them out in her own reading and the improvement was dramatic.

The following are some of the strategies that good second language readers are likely to use to a lesser or greater extent as they read:

1. clarify their purpose for reading the material at hand;
2. look for how the reading material is organised;
3. distinguish important points from trivia;
4. jump around in order to get a good sense of where the piece is going;
5. read for meaning — using as fully as possible their world knowledge, their knowledge of the particular subject matter, and their knowledge of linguistics;
6. read in broad phrases (not word-for-word);
7. rely on contextual clues (preceding and following context), vocabulary analysis, and grammar to interpret unknown words, rather than referring all the time to the dictionary or a glossary;
8. keep the previous material in mind while moving on to new material, and make ongoing summaries of what was read;
9. make predictions regarding what the next portion of text will be about;
10. look for markers of cohesion (i.e. connectives, pronominal reference, lexical repetition or substitution, and the like).

If good readers become aware that they have failed to comprehend something, then they usually take corrective action. How this is done depends on the individual reader. Some readers may at this point look more carefully at certain vocabulary words — perhaps ones that they skipped over during the first reading. Other readers may scrutinise one or more syntactic structures involved. Others may review the basic organisation of the piece again. Some may do all of these, plus other things as well. Again, as with other skill areas, what the learners do in the way of monitoring their comprehension is less important than the very fact that they are engaged in comprehension monitoring (see Brown (1980) for more on comprehension monitoring).

Writing

Let us now briefly look at effective strategies that language learners use in the process of writing. Second language researchers have begun to look at this process both through students' reporting about their composing and through concurrent videotaping of the writing itself (Zamel, 1983; Jones, 1984; Raimes, 1987). The picture that emerges is similar to that of reading in that the product is unquestionably influenced by the strategies used in producing it. The better second language writers seem to have better control over these strategies.

Perhaps the most basic of these strategies is to know how to juggle successfully high-, middle-, and low-level goals, and how to shift from one level to the other during the writing process. The high-level goals concern the basic direction of the writing, the general organisation of ideas, and so forth. The middle-level goals relate to the realisation of this direction, of these ideas, through definition, explanation, illustration, or whatever. The low-level goals relate to the form of the writing — lexical choice, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so forth. The better writers are able to tolerate dissonance at one level while functioning at another. For example, they are able to postpone editing for grammar and spelling while they are getting their ideas on paper. If they do not know a word in the target language, they might jot down the native language word or an estimate of the target language word, with a mark indicating that this needs to be checked later. The main point is that they make sure that they get their ideas down on paper first. The following are some of the other things that good second-language writers report doing:

1. engaging in retrospective structuring — i.e. going back to go forward (which would mean, for example, reading over the last
several sentences before proceeding ahead with any more writing);
(2) repeating key words and phrases, using parallel structures, selecting conjunctions and pronominal reference carefully—all to promote cohesion in the writing (i.e. the glue that holds the ideas together);
(3) writing multiple drafts.

The process of retrospective structuring (e.g. reading the last two sentences over before continuing to write) has been found to contribute to the cohesion of the piece. If the poorer writers see their task as that of plugging along, churning out word after word in a linear fashion, then their product will be an artifact of such a process. Not only do better writers go back before going ahead, they also have a sense of how to conjoin material—whether by subordination, co-ordination, or superordination—and they use conjunctive phrases that are meaningful to them. They are aware that good writing is a process of exploration and of discovery, and that it is unlikely to result from one single draft, but only as a result of several drafts. Finally, it could be said that successful writers have an effective repertoire for processing teacher feedback in order to get the most out of it (Cohen, 1987a).

Conclusions

This paper has drawn attention to the importance of looking at how learners go about the process of learning a second language. The claim has been made that insights accrued from this effort can have value in enhancing the learning experience of those learners who do not naturally arrive at successful learning strategies. It was pointed out that consciousness-raising is perhaps the crucial factor here. Since there may not be a single best way to learn given language material, awareness on the part of learners as to what does and does not work for them may be the most important thing. It was also noted that learner training involves a shift from the view that the teacher and the method are responsible for the learners' success to one which sees the learner as ultimately responsible for a successful learning experience.

This paper has provided examples of some strategies that research has shown to be successful in the skill areas of attending, speaking, vocabulary learning, reading, and writing. These examples are in many ways illustrative in that research has just begun to identify what learners actually do—as opposed to what teachers and the learners themselves might think they do. Furthermore, it is not clear yet how generalisable

such strategies really are, given differences in learning styles from learner to learner. Finally, it is not clear how best to go about the process of training learners to be more effective learners, nor whether such training needs to be explicit, or whether it can be built into a curriculum more implicitly. It is clear that both teachers and learners can benefit from answers to these questions.

Notes

1. Much of my own work reported on in this paper was influenced both directly and indirectly by gentle and insightful input from Claus Faerch. I will be forever indebted to him for the profound effect he had upon my research in the field of language learning.

References

All references can be found in the consolidated reference list at the end of the book.