STRATEGIES-BASED INSTRUCTION FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Introduction

The paper begins by defining second-language learner strategies, making a distinction between language learning strategies and language use strategies, and then categorizing language use strategies into retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies. Next a description is given of strategies-based instruction — a learner-centered approach to teaching that focuses on explicit and implicit inclusion of language learning and language use strategies in the second-language classroom. Thirdly, approaches to teacher development for strategies-based instruction are discussed. Finally, a brief account of a research study which set out to determine the impact of strategies-based instruction on undergraduate foreign language learners is provided.

Defining Second Language Learning and Use Strategies

In a volume on second language learning strategies that appeared some years ago, I defined learning strategies as: “learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner. The element of choice is important here because this is what gives a strategy its special character. These are also moves which the learner is at least partially aware of, even if full attention is not being given to them” (Cohen, 1990: 5). It still seems appropriate to link the notion of consciousness to a definition of a strategy. This element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic. What I would add to the definition is a distinction between language learning and language use strategies, and mention of the specific stage in cognitive processing when the strategy is applied. Thus, language learning and language use strategies can be

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1 We would like to thank George M Jacobs for feedback on this paper.

2 Second language (L2) will be taken to refer to both second and foreign language learning for the purpose of this paper, although in reality they may constitute two somewhat or very different teaching and learning experiences.
defined as those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of a foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about the target language.

Further, given that strategies themselves have sometimes been referred to as good, effective, or successful and the converse," it needs to be pointed out that with some exceptions, the strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively — whether by the very same learner from one instance within one activity to another instance (e.g., at one point in a task vs. some other point), from one activity to another for the same learner, or across learners. Perhaps if enough of the learners in a given group successfully use a given strategy in a given task, then claims could be made for the effectiveness of that strategy in that instance for that group. Otherwise, it is safest to refer to what often amounts to a panoply of potentially useful strategies, depending on the learner, the context, and the specific task.

The literature is replete with studies suggesting that higher proficiency or lower proficiency learners use more or fewer strategies than the other group — sometimes indicating that the better learners use fewer strategies and sometimes the reverse. For example, in a study at the Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute with six high-proficiency and six low-proficiency English majors, it was found the more proficient used fewer communication strategies when communicating abstract and concrete concepts to a native speaker in an interview setting, as well as using those strategies more effectively than did the low-proficiency subjects (Chen, 1990). Presumably, the use of fewer strategies would mean that the better learners can get by with fewer consciously selected moves, while the poorer learners keep trying different things without comparable success, and so they end up using more strategies altogether. It is possible to find studies that show higher-proficiency learners used more strategies — both in quantity and in variety, so a frequency count is often not the most effective means for describing strategy use.

3 See Naiman, Fröhlich and Todesco (1975), Rubin (1975), and Stern (1975), Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco (1978), often collectively known as the “good language learner” studies, as well as Hosenfeld (1976). Nation and McLaughlin (1986) have addressed the difficulties associated with this approach to strategies research.

Another approach to strategy description is through labeling the function of each strategy that is selected. Bialystok (1990) considered it too simplistic to classify strategies according to their function because they can have multiple functions. The issue that she raised is an important one. Those who have done empirical research on strategies have seen that what is ostensibly the same strategy can have more than one function. However, strategies often do have one function, and even if they have more than one function, there may still be one principal function. In any case, it would seem useful to continue to identify the various functions that strategies may have.

The following represents a broad definition of second language learning and use strategies. Second language learner strategies encompass both second language learning and second language use strategies. Taken together, they constitute the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both. Language learning strategies include strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material if need be, grouping it for easier learning (e.g., grouping vocabulary by category into nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and so forth), repeatedly engaging oneself in contact with the material (e.g., through classroom tasks or the completion of homework assignments), and formally committing the material to memory when it does not seem to be acquired naturally (whether through rote memory techniques such as repetition, the use of mnemonics, or some other memory technique). Note that repeated contact with material could be seen as a form of rehearsal, although rehearsal usually implies that the material is at least partially learned already and therefore is able to be rehearsed. Adult learners may have a keen sense of just what it is they may need to consciously commit to memory (e.g., certain complex vocabulary or grammatical forms) and what they can leave to unmonitored language acquisition. For the purpose of this discussion, then, a distinction is being made between that language material which is learned at least to some extent consciously and that material which is acquired with little or no conscious effort or control.

The strategies for learning the subjunctive in Spanish as a foreign language, for example, could include grouping together and then memorizing the list of verbs that take a subjunctive in constructions like quiero que vengas ‘I want you to come,’ or noticing the difference in imperfect subjunctive inflections between the -ar conjugation (e.g.,
Rehearsal strategies constitute another subset of language use strategies, namely, strategies for rehearsing target language structures. An example of rehearsal would be form-focused practice, such as by practicing the Spanish subjunctive forms for different verb conjugations to be able to use them correctly on a mid-term examination. A learner could also rehearse a subjunctive form in preparation for using it communicatively in a request in Spanish to a boss for a day off. As suggested above, some rehearsal strategies could be part of language learning as well as part of language use. Bialystok (1990: 27) gives the example of memorizing how to request a loaf of bread and two rolls at the bakery. So in this case memorizing serves as a learning strategy, but most likely followed by the language use strategy of actually employing the material in a communicative exchange.

Cover strategies are those strategies that learners use to create the impression that they have control over material when they do not. They are a special type of compensatory or coping strategy which involves creating an appearance of language ability so as not to look unprepared, foolish, or even stupid. A learner's primary intention in using them is not to learn any language material, nor even necessarily to engage in genuine communication. An example of a cover strategy would be using a memorized and not fully-understood phrase in an utterance in a classroom drill in order to keep the action going. Some cover strategies reflect efforts at simplification (e.g., learners use only that part of a phrase that they can deal with), while other such strategies complexify the utterance because this is actually simplest for the learners (e.g., saying something by means of an elaborate and complex circumlocution because the finely-tuned vocabulary is lacking or in order to avoid using the subjunctive) — both cases representing an attempt to compensate for gaps in target language knowledge.

Communication strategies constitute a fourth subset of language use strategies, with the focus on approaches to conveying meaningful information that is new to the recipient. Much focus has been given to this category of strategies in the literature (see Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1977, 1981; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1990; Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei, 1995). Communication strategies have been seen to

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5 Retrieval strategies have appeared primarily in the communication strategies literature, with the focus on the retrieval of vocabulary rather than grammatical forms. Faerch and Kasper (1983), for example, included at least six strategies for retrieving vocabulary words from memory: just waiting for the word to appear, appealing to formal similarities, retrieving the word through its link to other words in the same semantic field, searching for the word via other languages, thinking back to the language learning situation, using sensory memories.

6 The term “cover strategy” was suggested by Tim McNamara (Personal Communication, July 9, 1996).
include intralingual strategies such as that of overgeneralizing a grammar rule or vocabulary meaning from one context to another where it does not apply, interlingual strategies such as that of negative transfer (i.e., applying the patterns of the native or another language in the target language where those patterns do not apply), topic avoidance or abandonment, message reduction, code switching, and paraphrasing (with circumlocution as a subcategory). Communication strategies may or may not have any impact on learning. For example, learners may use a vocabulary item encountered for the first time in a given lesson to communicate a thought, without any intention of trying to learn the word. Quite to the contrary, they may insert the new vocabulary item into their communication expressly in order to promote their learning of it.

Language learning and use strategies can be further differentiated according to whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social (Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1990). Cognitive strategies usually involve the identification, retention, storage, and retrieval of words, phrases, and other elements of the second language. Metacognitive strategies deal with pre-assessment and pre-planning, on-line planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities and of language use events. Such strategies allow learners to control their own cognition by coordinating the planning, organizing, and evaluating the learning process. Affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes (e.g., strategies for reduction of anxiety and self-encouragement). Social strategies include the actions which learners choose to take in order to interact with other learners and with proficient second-language speakers (e.g., asking questions to clarify social roles and relationships and cooperating with others in order to complete tasks).

Strategies-Based Instruction

During the last few decades, there has been a marked shift in the focus of language instruction, toward the needs of individual learners. Language teachers have begun to accommodate individual learners in the classroom by attempting to meet the various linguistic, communicative, and sociocultural goals of their students, while at the same time adapting their instruction to meet students' differing language learning needs. In general, the philosophy of foreign language instruction has changed to one which is more interactive and communicative, and less static and teacher-centered. The domain of language teaching has thus been broadened (Tarone and Yule, 1989: 20).

Inherent in this shift in focus is also a shift in the responsibilities of both teachers and students in the foreign language classroom. No longer does the teacher act as the locus of all instruction, controlling every aspect of the learning process. Rather, the learners themselves now, more than ever, are sharing the responsibility for successful language acquisition and, in doing so, are becoming less dependent on the language teacher for meeting their individual language learning needs. By giving the students more responsibility for learning, language programs are inviting the learners to become more autonomous, to diagnose some of their own learning strengths and weaknesses, and to self-direct the language learning process. In other words, in select instructional programs learners are being encouraged to learn how to learn a foreign language.

Unfortunately, many learners do not develop on their own sufficient mastery of the strategy repertoire to enable them to make impressive strides in their language learning. They need to be explicitly trained to become more aware of and proficient with that broad range of strategies that can be used throughout the language learning process. With strategy training, students can learn how to learn a foreign language at the same time they are learning the language content. Students can improve both their learning skills and their language skills when they are provided with the necessary tools to self-diagnose their learning difficulties, become more aware of what helps them learn the language they are studying most efficiently, develop a broad range of problem-solving skills, experiment with both familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies, make decisions about how to approach a language task, monitor and self-evaluate their performance, and transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts. Research has indicated that both more and less successful learners at varying levels of proficiency can learn how to improve their comprehension and production of a foreign language (see, for example, Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Cohen, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Oxford, 1993; Mendelsohn, 1994; Cohen, Weaver and Li, 1997; Dörnyei, 1995; McDonough, 1995; Oxford, 1996).
Strategy training can take a number of forms, such as: general study-skills training which is separate from the language course, awareness training both through lectures and through workshops, peer tutoring, the insertion of strategy discussions directly into the textbooks, video-taped mini-courses, and strategies-based instruction in which strategy training is fully integrated into the language curriculum under the guidance of the teacher. Each option differs in the level of explicitness of the training, the level of student awareness of the practical applications and transferability of the strategies, and the level of integration into the foreign language curriculum. We will focus in this paper just on strategies-based instruction.

Strategies-based instruction (SBI) is a learner-centered approach to teaching that extends classroom strategy training to include both explicit and implicit integration of strategies into the course content. Students experience the advantages of systematically applying strategies to the learning and use of the language they are studying. In addition, they have opportunities to share their own preferred strategies with the other students in the class and to increase their strategy repertoires within the context of the typical language tasks they are asked to perform. The teachers can individualize the strategy training, suggest language-specific strategies, and reinforce strategies at the same time that they are presenting the regular course content.

In a typical SBI classroom strategy training situation, the teachers:

1. describe, model, and give examples of potentially useful strategies;
2. elicit additional examples from students based on the students' own learning experiences;
3. lead small group/whole class discussions about strategies (e.g., reflecting on the rationale behind strategy use, planning an approach to a specific activity, and evaluating the effectiveness of chosen strategies);
4. encourage their students to experiment with a broad range of strategies; and
5. integrate strategies into everyday class materials, explicitly and implicitly embedding them into the language tasks to provide for contextualized strategy practice.

The first four of these components have often stood alone as the approach when strategies are included in the language classroom. The field has referred to this approach as "strategy training," "strategies instruction," or "learner training" (cf. Chomot and Rubin, 1994: 771, with regard to these three terms). The component that makes it strategies-based instruction is the added element of explicit (as well as implicit) integration of the training into the very fabric of the instructional program.

Teachers may start with the established course materials and then determine which strategies might be inserted, start with a set of strategies that they wish to focus on and design activities around them, or insert strategies spontaneously into the lessons whenever it seems appropriate (e.g., to help students overcome problems with difficult material or to speed up the lesson). These strategies-based activities are designed to reinforce the strategies being taught during the strategy training activities. They also allow students to choose their own strategies and do so spontaneously, without continued prompting from the language teacher. In all likelihood, teachers will be engaged in strategies-based instruction with an explicit focus on strategies only part of the time, while the rest of the time the strategies will be implicitly embedded into the language tasks. Whether or not strategies are embedded into the textbooks, classroom teachers can integrate the strategy training into the regular language course work, thus providing the students with contextualized strategy practice.

The goal of this kind of instruction is to help foreign language students become more aware of the ways in which they learn most effectively, ways in which they can enhance their own comprehension and production of the target language, and ways in which they can continue to learn on their own and communicate in the target language after they leave the language classroom. In other words, strategies-based instruction aims to assist learners in becoming more responsible for their efforts in learning and using the target language. It also aims to assist them in becoming more effective learners by allowing them to individualize the language learning experience. For example, strategies such as "rehearsing structures" are gone over in class and practiced so that in real speaking situations, the learners would select the strategies as a regular part of their functioning.

In principle, SBI is not specific to any given teaching methodology or culture. It is possible that a given teaching method might favor certain strategies over others — for example, not translating material or, to the
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contrary, putting an emphasis on translation. Also, certain cultures may favor or refrain from certain practices such as public correction of spoken errors in class. SBI is not prescriptive, but rather provides a panoply of strategies and students must determine which to use, when, for what purposes, and how to use them.

Although it may seem that in-class strategy training takes valuable time away from teaching the language content, teachers who have used this approach have reported that their students become more efficient in completing classroom language tasks, take more responsibility for self-directing their learning outside of class, and gain more confidence in their abilities to learn and use the target language. While research conducted on the effects of SBI on strategy use and on language achievement will be reported on below, there has been only limited evaluation of such interventions by the teachers and the students themselves. One of the three experimental group teachers in the SBI study to be reported on below did, however, write up her own assessment of the approach (Lybeck, 1996). While she expressed her enthusiasm for SBI, she found the students’ reactions to be somewhat mixed. Some felt SBI was more helpful than others did and there was limited agreement that there was perhaps too much of it. Such feedback is useful in planning future SBI interventions.

Approaches to Teacher Development for Strategies-Based Instruction

There are various ways that program administrators can provide language teachers with the tools to provide their own strategy training for students, ranging from general awareness training to full-scale SBI training seminars. For example, the director of language instruction or an associate could provide short awareness-raising workshops and lectures. Secondly, language instructors could be asked to attend any of the numerous presentations, colloquia, and workshops on strategy training at professional conferences. Thirdly, in-service SBI seminars could be developed.

Of these options, in-service seminars provide the most extensive and efficient means for training classroom teachers in how to conduct their own strategy training in the form of strategies-based instruction. O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 154) refer to this as “developing in teachers the understanding and techniques for delivering effective learning strategy instruction to students.” The participating language instructors can gain a better sense of the individual needs of their students and positively reinforce effective strategy use as the language course progresses. In addition, they can learn how to embed the strategies into everyday class activities and how to help students choose strategies related to specific curricular guidelines. Teacher training in strategies-based instruction can also prepare language teachers for the spontaneous introduction of strategies in their classes, thus providing both individualized and contextualized strategy training for all of their students.

These seminars could be offered as part of the pre-service orientation program for incoming foreign language instructors within specific language departments or be provided as in-service training across language programs. This kind of training would ideally include several different methods of instruction: lectures, outside reading of journal articles and book excerpts describing learning/teaching experiences and issues, paired and small-group discussions, hands-on strategy activities, observation of classes taught by teachers who have already implemented strategies-based instruction with their students, interactive sessions to practice the development of strategy-integrated lesson plans, and peer/student micro-teaching.

Lectures and readings on the theoretical and research contexts in which strategy training has developed can provide an important foundation upon which to examine any given set of strategies. However, experience has shown that the amount of theory and the manner in which it is introduced needs to be tailored to the individual needs of the participants in order to assure its effectiveness. For example, it may pay to intersperse the theoretical underpinnings with the practical applications so that teachers can see just how the theory and the practice relate to one another.

Discussions among teachers are likely to focus on the emergence of SBI as a means of integrating diverse teaching philosophies, methodologies, and approaches to learning, as well as on philosophical and methodological issues concerning the language learning process. These discussions (in pairs or small groups) can serve to create a genuinely meaningful classroom context for these instructors. Experience has also shown that these teachers-in-training need numerous opportunities.

\begin{itemize}
\item[4] Whereas this paper focuses on language teachers, content area teachers who have nonnative students in their classes may also benefit from training in SBI.
\end{itemize}
to reflect on the information being presented in the seminar, as well as to discuss their own language learning and teaching experiences, in order to prepare them for their future roles as facilitators of their own students' reactions to the strategy training. In addition, if this part of the training program emphasizes the role of the learner as a source of knowledge about language learning and language use strategies, the instructors may feel more comfortable with these kinds of discussions in their own classes since they will have already had experience sharing similar ideas and suggestions.

A practical hands-on approach, where the participant instructors themselves actively experiment with the strategies presented, will help to prepare them to train their own students and allow them to practice implementing the strategies at the same time. For example, they could take diagnostic surveys (e.g., learning style inventories and strategy assessment surveys), reflect on ways that they may differ from other language learners (e.g., think about and discuss their own language learning experiences and how individual learning style preferences and other factors can affect strategy choice), actively participate in learner training activities (e.g., learn new vocabulary with different mnemonic devices, answer general comprehension questions after skimming a text, rehearse short speeches, selectively attend to short listening passages), and engage in problem-solving or metacognitive discussions (e.g., in small groups or pairs, discuss various ways to approach a particular task, isolate potential difficulties, make strategy choices, implement the selected strategies, and evaluate their effectiveness). After actively engaging in and reacting to authentic strategy use, the teachers-in-training can gain a better understanding of what to expect from their own students, as well as getting first-hand practice with generating multiple problem-solving techniques (i.e., choosing their own strategies). In this way, the instructors will truly experience the strategies before actually teaching them.

Participants may also find it useful to keep journals of their experiences during the training sessions to use as a resource when later called upon to present strategy training themselves. These journals could include affective reactions to the training, as well as ideas for the integration of strategies into various kinds of activities. Excerpts from these journal entries could later be compiled into a resource handbook for the teachers to use as support after the training program has ended.

Another useful resource for the teachers is the opportunity to observe authentic class sessions conducted by other language instructors who have already undergone the strategy training program. The teachers can meet to exchange ideas about specific aspects of the presented lessons and discuss how the strategy training fits into the overall language curriculum. It would also be beneficial, if possible, to have the teachers-in-training talk with the students in the class to hear their reactions to being SBI participants. It is the learners themselves who can provide some of the most significant and insightful comments about the realities of classroom strategy training. If there are not enough language classrooms to observe, teachers could also watch videotapes of class sessions taught by colleagues who regularly provide strategies-based instruction. These demonstrations of explicitly teaching strategy use to students in authentic contexts can be especially helpful in showing the teachers how the strategies are being embedded into a particular course curriculum.

An additional important feature of the teacher-training seminar is the provision of opportunities for teachers to practice integrating strategies into everyday lesson plans and developing strategies-based teaching materials. If the teachers only receive pre-prepared strategy materials to use with their students, they may have difficulty adapting the instruction to the needs of their own students. The seminar could provide the teachers with opportunities to generate their own ideas about how the strategies could be incorporated into their current language curricula by having them adapt existing course materials or create new teaching materials. This can be accomplished by having the teachers bring in actual lessons that they have already prepared, and in pairs or small groups, they could work together to brainstorm ways in which different strategies could be inserted into the activities, create new materials to fill in any gaps, and then share their ideas with the rest of the class. As a group, the participants could then generate several possibilities for presenting each activity, and by sharing these lesson plans, they would have access to a wide variety of ideas for strategy integration that they could later incorporate into future lessons. In addition, these activity-writing sessions can also serve as a feedback mechanism for both the training coordinator (to assess the effectiveness of the strategy training) and for the teachers themselves (to gauge their ability to apply the content of the seminar in practical ways).

Finally, after the teachers have had opportunities to create new materials, as well as to integrate strategies into their existing lesson plans,
they are likely to be willing and able to present short strategies-based language lessons to their peers in order to practice the instructional techniques before introducing them into their own classrooms. They would get further receptive practice with strategies from these presentations, as well as getting essential productive practice with teaching various strategies. These micro-teaching sessions can also be extended to small groups of current language students for additional teaching practice. This would provide authentic responses to strategy training from actual language learners, allowing the teachers to experience a simulated classroom atmosphere much like what they will eventually face. If possible, these sessions could be videotaped, be used to generate discussions about the effectiveness of the lessons, and allow the teachers to reflect on their teaching skills, as well as provide the training coordinator with additional insight into the teachers’ needs within and beyond the training sessions (e.g., to adjust the current training curriculum, for follow-up support after the “official” training has ended, or for future training sessions).

Anna Chamot at George Washington University and her colleagues from the Washington DC area school districts have offered training seminars for same-language teachers as part of an on-going series of research projects. The teachers who participate in these projects receive pre-packaged lesson plans, as well as instruction in creating their own materials, in order to provide students with strategy-integrated activities as part of the regular language curriculum. The teachers have opportunities to observe their same-language colleagues and are eventually able to conduct the class sessions without further help from the research team (see O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Chamot and O’Malley, 1994).

In contrast to the same-language approach, the SBI the teacher-training seminars at the University of Minnesota have been created for teachers from different foreign language programs and no pre-packaged teaching materials are provided, other than examples from the course itself. The SBI training program, which is contained in a training manual offering 30-, 15-, 6-, and 3-hour courses of instruction (Weaver and Cohen, 1997), focuses on helping the teachers create and adapt their own instructional materials from the very beginning of the program. The teachers are thus responsible for applying the strategies to their own curricular needs, and, when possible, are paired with teachers from their own language department to share lesson plan ideas. For the less commonly taught languages (e.g., Hebrew, Hindi, Irish, Norwegian, Portuguese, and so forth), the teachers are asked to form cross-language strategy support teams. Teaching suggestions are shared throughout the different foreign language programs and teachers thus have contact with a wide variety of instructional materials, teaching philosophies, and performance criteria.

Both of these teacher-training methods have been successful in bringing fully-integrated strategy training to a great number of students through the regular classroom language teachers. The administrative decisions regarding the format for each of these seminars are based upon the needs of the individual institutions, as well as the need to provide students with systematic strategy training which has been integrated into everyday classroom activities. The goal of this kind of seminar is to train classroom language teachers (who will eventually train their own students) in the identification, practice, reinforcement, and transfer of language learning and use strategies via strategies-based instruction.

A Research Study to Determine the Impact of Strategies-Based Instruction on Speaking a Foreign Language

A research study was conducted in order to examine the contribution that formal strategies-based instruction might offer learners in university-level foreign language classrooms, with a particular focus on speaking (Cohen, Weaver and Li, 1997). The emphasis was on speaking because this area had received such limited attention in the research literature, although it is in many cases the most critical language skill of all. The study asked the following three research questions:

9 For a full description of this program, see Weaver and Cohen’s (1997) Strategies-based instruction: a teacher-training manual. Copies of the manual can be obtained from the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), 1313 Fifth Street SE, Suite 111, Minneapolis, MN 55414 (e-mail: carla@tc.umn.edu, tel.: 612-627-1870, fax: 612-627-1875).
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1. How does explicit instruction in language learning and use strategies affect students’ speaking proficiency?
2. What is the relationship between reported frequency of strategy use and ratings of task performance on speaking tasks?
3. How do students characterize their rationale for strategy use while performing speaking tasks?

In the study, 55 foreign language students, learners of intermediate French and Norwegian at the University of Minnesota, were either participants in a strategies-based instructional treatment or were comparison students receiving the regular ten-week language course. Both groups filled out a pre-treatment background questionnaire, and completed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) and a series of three speaking tasks on a pre-post test basis.

A Speaking Task Battery was developed and piloted for the study, and consisted of a series of three speaking tasks. All subjects from the experimental and comparison groups were asked to complete the same three tasks on a pre-posttest basis to determine whether there were gains in speaking ability over the ten-week term. The prompts were written. The data were collected in a language laboratory in a semi-direct fashion, with the subjects audio-taping their responses to the tasks at their individual consoles, and were collected during non-classroom hours due to constraints on class time. For each of the tasks, students were allowed time to prepare what they would say before they began their individual recordings. Forty-five minutes were allotted for all three tasks, or about 15 minutes per task. The respondents were told in their written instructions that they should take a few minutes to prepare for each task. The following are descriptions of the three speaking tasks in the battery:

1. **Self-Description**: This task required students to make use of previously-studied material. In this task, the students were prompted by a hypothetical situation where they were asked to pick someone up at the airport (a native speaker of French/Norwegian who did not speak English). The students were asked to describe themselves in the target language in order for the visitor to recognize them. Because this topic was based on content the students had already covered in their classes and it simulated an authentic language exchange, we considered the task to be the most naturalistic. The respondents were not given any vocabulary to assist them on this task—in order to stimulate them to use compensatory strategies when they were unable to produce the necessary vocabulary. This task was the first administered, to help put the students at ease.

2. **Story Retelling**: This task called upon the students to learn new material. The students were given a short reading passage (approximately 300 words) adapted from French/Norwegian folklore with some unfamiliar words or phrases. A glossary of these unfamiliar words and phrases was provided on the task sheet in order to ensure that it was more a learning and speaking task than one of reading comprehension. After reading the text, the students were asked to summarize the story orally, referring back as little as possible to the written text.

3. **City Description**: This task called for the use of both previously-learned and new vocabulary in describing a favorite city. The learners were provided with a list of 30 target language words/phrases and their English equivalents relevant for describing a city was included to stimulate the students’ production. They were asked to give a brief description of their favorite city and to give the reason why they had chosen to describe it. The reason why a list of words was provided for this task was so that this task was meant to simulate classroom tasks where language is provided, unlike in the self-description task which was meant to tap their knowledge base.

The three speaking tasks were expected to elicit a range of learning strategies, including grammar and vocabulary retrieval strategies. For example, some students were more likely to prepare their responses and even write words and phrases down, a strategy that is possible with a semidirect test such as the one in this study. Across all tasks, it was assumed that if the students did not have the linguistic ability to easily complete a particular task, they might be expected to employ a range of language use strategies.

A native speaker and near-native speaker of Norwegian rated the student tapes in Norwegian and two near-native speakers of French rated the tapes in French. The raters did not know whether the responses to the
three tasks which comprised each taped sample were from the experimental or comparison groups, nor whether they were from pre- or posttesting. The first and third tasks were rated for self-confidence in delivery (smoothness and uninterruptedness of speech flow, wherein pauses are clearly in order to find appropriate material rather than signaling a loss for words), acceptability of grammar (subject-verb agreement for person, number, and tense; correct use of negation and articles; acceptability of grammar), and control over vocabulary (variety in word choice, contextual appropriateness, and degree of fine-tuning). The second was rated for the identification of key story elements and for the ordering of these elements.

After performing each of the three speaking tasks, the experimental and comparison group students completed a Strategy Checklist geared to that task. These Strategy Checklists were designed to elicit data on self-reported frequency of strategy use at three points in time: before the students began the speaking task, during the task itself, and after the completion of the task (including projected strategy use beyond the testing context). The intention of the checklist was to capture the three-stage process involved in strategy use: (1) preparation before using the language skill, (2) self-monitoring during the use of the skill, and (3) self-reflection afterwards. The subjects were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which they used each of the strategies on the Checklists. Examples of these strategies included: rehearsal, note taking, prediction of potential difficulties, self-encouragement (“positive self-talk”), word coinage or substitution, attention to grammatical forms, reflection on task performance, and plans for future learning. Specific to the individual tasks were the strategies of visualization, accessing known material, inferencing, memorization or repetition for remembering words/phrases, simplification, as well as others. The strategies on the checklists reflected both those found in the language strategies’ literature, as well as those particular to the three tasks in this battery.

The posttest version of the Checklists also included four additional questions for self-reflection. Three of these questions dealt with the students’ experiences as language learners in completing the three tasks: the extent to which the tasks had elicited their knowledge about the foreign language, whether the tasks had allowed them to demonstrate this knowledge, and how aware they were of their learning patterns and strategy use. The purpose of the fourth question was to determine whether they had become more independent language learners as a result of participating in the Fall quarter language course.

Since the checklists indicating frequency of strategy use before, during, and after each speaking task contained strategies that were, at least to some extent, designed specifically for the given task, the intention was to make a fine-tuned link between strategies and their use on specific language tasks. Such a link had been missing from previous research which reported strategy use in broad terms but not necessarily linked to specific tasks.

The posttest data collection also included an extra feature for a subsample of twenty-one students from both the experimental and comparison groups (representing high, medium, and low proficiency in speaking). These subjects were asked to give their reasons for the frequency-of-use ratings that they had assigned to each strategy on the checklist by providing a verbal report while completing the checklist. This involved removing the audiotape that they had used for the speaking tasks and inserting a different audiotape to record their thoughts while they were filling out each of the three Strategy Checklists.

With regard to the question of whether strategies-based instruction makes a difference in speaking performance, the finding was positive: the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group on the third task, city description, in the posttest, after adjusting for pretest differences (Cohen, Weaver and Li, 1997). In addition, while there were no significant differences in overall mean performance on any of the three tasks for the advanced intermediate and intermediate French students grouped together, there was one difference in looking at the French posttest task performance by scale. The experimental group students were rated as significantly higher on the vocabulary scale for the self-description task.

The relationship between reported frequency of strategy use (pre-post) and ratings of task performance (pre-post) was complex. An increase in the use of certain strategies included on the Strategy Checklist was linked to an improvement in task performance for the experimental group, in other instances only for the comparison group, and in some cases for both groups. Furthermore, there were other strategies which could be
considered less supportive to the students on the given speaking tasks. Some of these were more frequently reported by the comparison group students, who did not benefit from having received the treatment.

For the experimental group, it was seen that an increase in certain preparatory strategies (e.g., translating specific words, writing out sentences, and practicing the pronunciation of words) and monitoring strategies (e.g., monitoring for grammar, paying attention to the pronunciation of words, and analyzing a story for its key elements) related to an increase on one or more of the rating scales—self-confidence, grammar, vocabulary, and identifying and ordering elements in a story. For the comparison group, an increase in the use of certain strategies during the self-description and city description tasks was positively related to an increase in ratings on task performance. Of the fifteen total positive correlations for the comparison group across tasks, eleven of these involved strategies from the “During” part of the Checklist on tasks #1 and #3. These included communication strategies, as well as learning strategies.

Instances where comparison students had positive correlations and not experimental students would seem to run counter to expectation, since the strategies were stressed in the treatment. A possible interpretation for these findings is that even without extensive strategy instruction, some resourceful learners can and do utilize strategies effectively—whether as a result of their own insights about language learning, suggestions provided to them by their teachers or peers, or insights provided in the textbooks.

There were also instances where an increase in use from pre- to posttesting could be seen as detrimental to the students' performance on the given speaking tasks. Most of these negative correlations were found in comparison group data: an increase in substituting a forgotten word with another word or phrase related significantly with a lower vocabulary rating, an increase in skipping parts of a description calling for forgotten words related to a poorer rating in both vocabulary and grammar, an increase in translating the story to help summarize it related to doing a poorer job of ordering the elements in the story, an increased ability to identify the key elements in the story correlated negatively with an effort to purposely use new vocabulary from the story, and an increase in pronunciation practice was related to a decreased rating in vocabulary. These findings would suggest that students without the benefit of systematic training and practice in strategy use over time were consequently less adept at using certain strategies to their benefit.

While the Strategy Checklist proved itself effective as an instrument for linking task-specific strategies with improved task performance, the SILL performed more as a general measure of the patterns of strategy use, in keeping with its intended purpose. Nonetheless, the results of the data analysis suggested certain items on the SILL (e.g., the use of idioms, previewing lessons, attention to language form, word-for-word translation, avoiding the use of translation, and remembering words by their image) were sensitive enough to correlate significantly with increases on ratings scales for the various tasks.

Concerning verbal-report characterizations of Strategies Checklist completion, at least one experimental subject conducted multiple practices before recording a particular response. In addition, the students reported avoiding new words they were not yet comfortable with, paraphrasing when they lacked a precise word, and sometimes avoiding pauses so as to sound more fluent. Students also reported having learned certain things about themselves as language learners, such as recognizing the benefits of relaxing more while performing language tasks.

With respect to the comparison group, the use of translation into the native language mostly came up as a counter-productive activity, but one student reported using it as a way to get his mind thinking in the target language. Another student saw it as “cheating” to write out a response to an oral task ahead of time. Finally, there were students who voiced frustration at their limited language skills, something that did not come up in the experimental group verbal report data. The verbal report data also provided some useful insights as to weaknesses in the Strategy Checklist itself, insights which could be put to good use in follow-up research.

It should be pointed out that the study briefly described above was not intended as a program evaluation in that no efforts were made to include within the study the teachers' evaluations of their SBI development seminar (even though such data were collected at the time of the seminar), nor to gather more than cursory reactions from the students.
who participated in the large courses that included SBI. As noted above, Lybeck, who was one of the three experimental group teachers in the SBI study did, however, use her own assessment of the approach (Lybeck, 1996). She found students' reactions to be somewhat mixed. Some felt SBI was more useful than others did and there was limited agreement that there was more too much of it. Such feedback is useful in planning future SBI initiatives.

Conclusions

The paper would first of all that it is important to define terms carefully so that various kinds of strategies are clearly understood, regardless of specific terms used to refer to them. With regard to the delivery of SBI to the classroom, it is necessary to design and implement a program that supports the learners without being unnecessarily intrusive. With regard to teacher development for SBI, the work undoubtedly comes at the teacher development phase. It is important to determine how to inform teachers about SBI and how best to provide them with training. Finally, there is a need for more research studies to determine effects of SBI both in and out of the classroom. While it is still early to determine whether the inclusion of SBI in instruction will prove effective, there is a wave of attention to strategies in the second language classroom that would seem the potential is great for such an approach and that language educators may well wish to explore the SBI option.

References


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