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ASSESSING AND ENHANCING LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ STRATEGIES*

Andrew D. Cohen
University of Minnesota

At the present time, the benefits of supporting language learners in being more strategic learners and users of a second or foreign language have been firmly established, regardless of the language in question. 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, 1998; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Oxford, 1993; Mendelsohn, 1994; Cohen, Weaver and Li, 1996; Dörnyei, 1995; McDonough, 1995; Oxford, 1996). There have been teacher seminars and summer institutes in Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., and Hawaii under the auspices of our National Language Resource Centers that have focused on this theme (occasionally with the participation of teachers of Hebrew). There are training sessions for teachers on how to conduct strategies-based or strategies-enhanced instruction. There are also books for teachers and for learners on the topic, and language textbook series that include direct reference to language learning and language use strategies. In addition there are academic textbooks with reports of research on the effectiveness of strategy training.

This strategy initiative, if one could call it that, has applications for language learning of all kinds, including the learning of Hebrew as a second language in Israel, Hebrew as a foreign language in the U.S., the maintenance or revival of native-language Hebrew literacy skills undergoing attrition in the U.S., and so forth. The applications will vary according to the particulars of the given language learning and use situation. Hence, Hebrew teachers need to determine the best ways to support their own students in being more strategic language learners.

This presentation will start by defining “language learning and language use strategies.” Then the focus be on how to collect information from learners regarding their language learning and use strategies, since in order to enhancing their strategies, it is necessary to have information on the strategies that they currently use. Third, we will look briefly at several new areas of development in language strategy work. Then we will review areas of strategy work. Finally,

strategies-based instruction will be described and two representative summer institutes will be identified.

A. Defining Language Learner Strategies

- The following are some basic definitions to guide us in our look at language strategies:

  1. **Language learning and language use strategies**: 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 (Cohen, 1998).

  2. **Strategies** are the specific behaviors that may sometimes be associated with one or another learning style (that is, an individual’s natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retraining new information and skills which persist regardless of teaching methods or content area; Kinsella, 1995). Examples of learning style preferences include visual vs. auditory, intuitive vs. concrete-sequential, open vs. closure-oriented, global vs. particular. These styles constitute the vehicle for realizing some skill (i.e., cognitive ability).

  3. **Language learning strategies**: strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material, grouping it for easier learning (e.g., vocabulary into nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), repeatedly engaging oneself in contact with the material (e.g., through classroom tasks or completion of homework), and Memorizing the material when not acquired naturally (whether through rote memory techniques such as repetition, mnemonics, or other memory techniques).

  4. **Language use strategies**: strategies for using partially-learned or more fully-learned material include four subsets of strategies—retrieval strategies, rehearsal strategies, cover strategies, and communication strategies.

    a. **retrieval strategies**: strategies for calling up words, phrases, structures in or out of class, and for choosing the appropriate forms. Strategies for retrieving vocabulary words from memory have been seen to include: 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 (Faerch and Kasper, 1983).

    b. **rehearsal strategies**: strategies for going over target language structures. An example of rehearsal would be form-focused practice (e.g., practicing the subjunctive forms for different verb conjugations).

    c. **cover strategies**: 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 strategies for 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.

    d. **communication strategies**: strategies for conveying new, meaningful information. They include intralingual strategies such as 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 (that is, 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 (see Tarone, Cohen and Dumas, 1976; Tarone, 1977, 1981; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, 1990; Dörnyei, 1995).

  5. Other distinctions in categorizing language learning and use strategies:

    a. **cognitive strategies**: usually involve both the identification, retention, storage, or retrieval of words, phrases, and other elements of the second language.

    b. **metacognitive strategies**: deal with pre-assessment and pre-planning, online planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities and of language use events; strategies which allow learners to control their own cognition by coordinating the planning, organizing, and evaluating of the learning process.

    c. **affective strategies**: serve to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes (e.g., strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encouragement).

    d. **social strategies**: include the actions which learners choose to take in order to interact with other learners and with native speakers (e.g., asking questions to clarify social roles and relationships or cooperating with others in order to complete tasks) (see Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1990).

So now that we have looked at definitions of strategies, let us consider how we might go about describing which of these our students use.

B. Collecting Information from Learners on their Strategies

In order to enhancing learners’ use of strategies, it is necessary to have information on the strategies that they currently use. Here are some of the key vehicles for obtaining those data.

1. **Verbal Report**: there are three types of verbal report, namely, think aloud,
introspective or retrospective self-observation, and self-report (e.g., most interview and questionnaire responses). Verbal report can be oral or written and it can involve anything from an open-ended probe to the completion of a checklist (such as the task-specific checklists in Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1996; Cohen, 1998, ch. 5) or the more general lists in the Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990).

a. **problems:** cognitive processes may not be conscious; verbal report may disrupt normal behavior; learners may not know how to do verbal report and may need practice; verbal report may not be reliable; learners may have difficulty verbalizing thoughts in an L2; predetermined probes or checklists may have ambiguities (especially if not carefully piloted) or may be leading (i.e., problems may contain information that biases the results); checklists may not get at all the students’ strategies; students may over—or underestimate the frequency of their strategy use or only make guesses about what they do when they actually learn or use language.

b. **advantages:** learners provide the data directly; information comes during the tasks or shortly thereafter.

2. **Diaries and Dialogue Journals:** diaries and journals are learner-generated and usually unstructured; in the dialogue journal format, space is left for teachers’ comments on a separate page or in the margin.

a. **problems:** they may cover a wide range of themes and issues, some or many of which are irrelevant to the interests at hand; entries may be so distant in time and space from the actual language learning or language use events as to diminish their reliability.

b. **advantages:** they could be based on the learner’s notes while in the process of learning or studying, and transferred subsequently into journal form, making them more immediate than usual journal entries; they could be interactive in nature if the teacher dialogues with the learner.

3. **Observations:** they can range from highly structured and formal to informal classroom observations as students are performing language tasks; they can be in person or with audio- and videotapes.

a. **problems:** many strategies are internal, mentalistic in nature and hence unobservable; they may be sampling more from the outspoken learners; there is a possibility of bias because of observer’s prior experiences; there are the potential reactive effects of being observed.

b. **advantages:** external observations of observable phenomena may provide a complement to the learners’ verbal report; strategies can be assessed on-the-spot as tasks are performed.

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**C. New Developments in Strategy Work**

What is new about the current approaches? Haven’t strategies been around a long, long time? What is new under the sun? What is new is the systematic effort to describe and then enhance learner strategizing. What is the purpose? To make the effects of language instruction and the benefits from language learning more long-lived.

1. **A task-based SILL:** Rebecca Oxford and a team of students at Teachers College Columbia University are working on a task-based SILL. The likely scenario is for an instrument which poses specific tasks and asks learners to indicate the extent that they would use certain strategies to deal with them.

2. **Efforts linking learning style preferences to strategy choices**

   a. It has been noted that style conflicts between teacher and learner may arise: for example, an analytic-reflective-auditory teacher and a global-impulsive-visual learner; or an analytic-sequential teacher and a global-intuitive learner (Oxford and Lavine, 1992). Solutions: change the teacher’s behavior, change students’ behavior, change the way group work is done in the classroom, or change the curriculum.

   b. The style-strategy link: efforts are beginning to appear to link strategies to styles in a significant way. Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 99) have applied this to reading and provide theoretical perspective on how, for example, readers with a more global style are likely to use strategies to help them get the main message such as avoiding getting bogged down in details, while more analytic readers might derive meaning from details or logical steps in a linear sequence in the text.

Gallan (1999) did a study with four Taiwanese students and one Saudi from two high-intermediate ESL classes at the University of Minnesota. The participants provide demographic and background language information. They all took Rebecca Oxford’s SILL and her Styles Assessment Survey (SAS). They were then trained in how to offer verbal report, and asked to perform a reading task—a one-page excerpt from an autobiographical account of using a microscope for the first time as a child. The subjects were to provide verbal report as they read the text. They also answered nine reading comprehension and vocabulary-in-context questions. One general finding was that those with a visual learning style preference had a greater frequency of reading strategy use altogether. In addition, the readers who were found to be more intuitive in their learning style preferences were also more likely to use the strategy of inferencing in order to get the gist of the reading passage. A reader who was not intuitive, was good at getting some details but was not so good at getting the
gist. The conclusion reached by Gallan in her case study was that whether or not learners prefer intuitive vs. concrete-sequential learning styles may affect the strategies they use while reading in a second language.

Let us now take a look at the language strategy areas which are included in strategy training in its various manifestations.

D. The Areas Encompassed by Strategy Training

This perusal of different types of language learning and language use strategies encompasses not only the four modalities, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but also two categories for language strategies which crosscut the various language abilities, namely, vocabulary learning and translation strategies. In the case of translation strategies, this set of strategies appears to represent a newly-defined one. For years, learners have been using translation in order to perform in another language but not necessarily in a systematic way.

1. Attending to assure learning: attentive listening calls for taking input of various kinds and converting it into intake. It involves creating ways that learners can make out-of-class input work for them (the media, eating out, getting a native-speaking conversation partner), strategies for being a better listener in class (for example, being every student in the class), using top-down and bottom-up listening (that is, on the one hand using situational clues and knowledge of the world, and on the other, using key words from the input to trigger understanding). The attentive listener makes good use of the ability to process the linguistic forms in distinguishing sounds and words from each other, the ability to cope with fast speech, and the ability to pick up the gist in an interaction among others.

2. Learning vocabulary words: the effective vocabulary learner makes beneficial use of strategies for remembering words such as creating mnemonic keywords, word analysis strategies (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, part of speech), strategies for practicing words (e.g., grouping words, use of cognates, the use of flash cards), and strategies for deciding which words to learn and how.

3. Speaking to communicate: the learner who is an effective strategist in speaking plans to say (the selection of elements – linguistic, discoursal, sociocultural and sociolinguistic; the ordering of the elements; agreement of the elements; and pronunciation), makes use of strategies for timing the communication appropriately, is an appropriate monitor user and has control over self-correction strategies, benefits from compensatory strategies (borrowing, foreignizing) when there are gaps in his/her knowledge, choose strategies based on the first-language where appropriate (the use of general word, approximation, description, word coinage, appeal for assistance), employs discourse planning strategies (avoidance, topic avoidance), calls upon strategies for learning how to use situationally appropriate speech (e.g., the use of speech acts like complaints, apologies, requests, compliments, and so forth), and gives thought to strategies for creating opportunities to speak.

4. Reading for comprehension: key reading strategies include clarification of purpose, organization of the text, reading for meaning, focusing on the major content, using the dictionary parsimoniously, judicious use of context, reading in broad phrases, making ongoing summaries, making predictions, looking for markers of cohesion, and strategies for supervising strategy use.

5. Writing as process and product: effective writing strategies may include going back to go forward (being recursive), repeating key words and phrases, using advanced or continuous planning, postponing major revision until the ideas are written down, searching extensively for the “right” words, distancing oneself from his/her writing, keeping in mind the goals and the audience, writing multiple drafts, and using strategies for seeking feedback and for making best use of it (e.g., reformulation with feedback on discourse functions, cohesive links, selection of vocabulary, choice and ordering of syntactic structures, paragraphing and mechanics).

6. Mental and written translation strategies: in speaking, such strategies may include preparatory strategies (e.g., writing down key words or sentences), monitoring strategies, post-speaking strategies; in speaking or writing—organization strategies and strategies for enhancing self-expression (e.g., the search for the most effective vocabulary to express the meaning of words in your L1); in reading—strategies for remembering points in the text (i.e., for chunking material into groups and for keeping your train of thought), for creating a network of associations, for enhancing the familiarity of the text (converting the reading into a more familiar, user-friendly L1 version), for clarifying grammatical roles, for checking on comprehension; in listening—light mental translation while listening.

Now that we have identified numerous strategies, let us look at programs that have been developed to serve as a conduit to get language strategy information out to learners directly as well as programs that serve primarily as a means for teacher development.

E. Strategies-Based Instruction for Learners and Training for Teachers

There are a variety of approaches to strategy training, from 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. In many ways strategies-based instruction is the most robust and inclusive, so we will focus on it in this presentation.

1. **Strategies-based instruction (SBI) for Learners**: In a typical SBI classroom strategy training situation, the teachers:
   
a. describe, model, and give examples of potentially useful strategies;
   
b. elicit additional examples from students based on the students’ own learning experiences;
   
c. 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);
   
d. encourage their students to experiment with a broad range of strategies;
   
e. integrate strategies into everyday class materials, explicitly and implicitly embedding them into the language tasks to provide for 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. SBI is **not** specific to any given teaching methodology or culture and is **not** prescriptive—rather, providing a panoply of strategies and students must determine which to use, when, for what purposes, and how to use them. In addition, rather than taking time away from teaching the language, SBI helps enhance students’ efficiency in completing classroom language tasks.

2. **Training in SBI for Teachers**: A typical summer institute in SBI for teachers has the following components:

a. lectures, hands-on strategy activities, paired and small-group discussions, viewing of videotaped sessions taught by teachers who have already implemented strategies-based instruction with their students, interactive sessions to practice the development of strategy-integrated lesson plans, peer/student micro-teaching, and outside reading of journal articles and book excerpts describing learning/teaching experiences and issues.

b. interspersing of theoretical underpinnings and practical applications so teachers can see fit between theory and practice (see Weaver and Cohen, 1997, for an example).

c. opportunities for teachers 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.

The next Summer Institute on SBI at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) will take place July 17–21, 2000, at the University of Minnesota (contact CARLA Office for more information: carla@tc.umn.edu, tel. 612–626–8600).

The next National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC) summer institute on “Teaching Learning Strategies in the Foreign Language Classroom” will be conducted by Anna Chamot at George Washington University, June 26–27, 2000 (contact the NCLRC Office for more information: nclrc@gwu.edu, tel. 202–739–0607). This summer institute provides foreign language educators with a rationale for teaching strategies, a model of strategic learning, and a framework for strategies instruction. Presenters introduce participants to a variety of strategies and demonstrate how to incorporate strategies instruction into a foreign language lesson. Participants engage in hands-on activities to: identify student strategies, practice modeling strategies using think-aloud techniques, analyze learning strategies lessons, design and share strategies lessons for their classroom, integrate language and culture through learning strategies instruction by applying the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) which Anna Chamot and Michael O’Malley developed.

**Conclusions**

Ideally, this presentation has helped to demonstrate that language learning and language use strategies have come into their own both as an important source of support to learners in their efforts to master a second language, and to teachers in their efforts to facilitate their learners’ acquisition of the language in question. The paper has briefly outlined some means for collecting information from learners regarding their language learning and use strategies. As was noted, every possible means for collecting strategy data has its pluses and minuses. No single instrument is perfect. For this reason, it may be best to use a combination of different means.

The paper laid out a series of potentially productive strategies for acquiring language in the various modalities, as well as for enhancing vocabulary learning across the modalities. We also saw that even the largely “invisible” translation strategies can be utilized more systematically to support the language learning effort. The mention of developing fields of inquiry with regard to styles and strategies was intended to alert colleagues to areas under development that may...
indicate where the field of will be going in the near future. Finally, while language strategy institutes were for many years a distant plan, they have now been solidly institutionalized and appear to be here to stay. Interested colleagues would be encouraged to check them out.

References


