Coming to terms with language learner strategies: surveying the experts

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Introduction

Chapter 1 dealt briefly with the issues of strategy terminology, the linking of specific strategies to specific tasks, individual differences in strategy use, and strategy instruction, and reviewed some of the critiques of language learner strategy (LLS) approaches. The current chapter takes up the issues of definition and rubric, and explores the construct 'language learner strategies' by reporting on the results of a survey questionnaire administered to an international group of strategy experts to find out how they conceptualize and use the terminology in language learner strategy research and practice. This is one of the first surveys of its kind in the SLA field.

This chapter will first briefly describe how the survey questionnaire was constructed and administered, and how the data were analyzed. Then key findings from the survey will be presented in the following order: emergent themes in strategy description, views concerning purposes for LLS, and treatment of constructs regarding learners' use of strategies, including both areas of consensus and where it is lacking.

The construction of a language learner strategy survey

As a co-organizer of the Oxford University meetings described in the Introduction to this volume, I designed a questionnaire to collect views of respected strategy experts about terms and issues in the LLS field. I identified key terms and issues in position papers, PowerPoint presentations, discussions, and other products posted on the closed University of Oxford website for our International Project on Language Learner Strategies (IPOLLS). I subsequently prepared in draft form a questionnaire covering these key issues, plus others that were not in those papers but worthy of consideration. Next, this draft questionnaire was circulated to IPOLLS participants for feedback. Then the questionnaire was revised and posted on the IPOLLS website. It had
Data collection and data analysis procedures

In September of 2004, the 23 colleagues who had attended the University of Oxford meeting the previous July were asked to respond to the IPOLLS survey questionnaire. Altogether, 18 of those who were at the meeting as well as one who was unable to attend, responded to the questionnaire. Given the questionnaire’s length and the difficulty of the issues addressed, it took six months to obtain the complete set of 19 responses.

In the first stage of analysis the questionnaire responses were entered into a data base of 60 pages of text. In the second stage, these responses were read carefully and those which seemed to best represent one or another position were grouped under the respective question. In addition, if the question called for a yes/no or agree/disagree response, then a numerical tabulation was also made as to how many respondents used the terms or concepts relating to strategies in a given way, or agreed or disagreed with a given statement. In the third stage of the analysis, an effort was made to summarize key statements in order to arrive at the findings presented below. Rather than giving a long string of quotes, an effort was made to paraphrase the respondents’ comments accurately and succinctly. In the fourth stage, key findings from the survey were identified and integrated into this chapter, while the complete survey was posted on the IPOLLS website as ‘Coming to Terms with LLS’ on May 29, 2005 (https://www.weblearn.ox.ac.uk/site/socsci/edstud/langforum1/).

Results from this survey underscore the paradox of LLS research. On the one hand, the field fascinates researchers and teachers alike, perhaps because there is a sense that the answer to language learning is bound up in the successful use of strategies. On the other hand, the field is still lacking consensus on a unified theory, with agreement by learner strategy experts on some concepts and definitions and not on others. The goal of the chapter is to demonstrate how this kind of survey can help identify the points of agreement and disagreement, which can serve to move the action along, and ideally bring about greater consensus among international experts as well. The key findings from the questionnaire will now be presented, except for responses to items dealing with research methodology and with strategy instruction, which are covered by Chapters 5 and 7 respectively.

Results

Before getting into the specific findings, it is important to note that the experts reported consulting a wide range of fields when making a case for the theoretical underpinnings of the LLS work (Question 3). The most cited fields were educational psychology, cognitive psychology, and cross-cultural psychology. In addition, information-processing theory, sociocultural theory, and social constructivist theory were mentioned. The field of neurolinguistics (for example, neural functioning, associative memory, and brain chemistry studies) was mentioned not so much as a field of current study, but rather one that strategy experts would probably want to consult. Respondents also made more general reference to the fields of applied linguistics and its sub-branches.

So there was a fair degree of consensus here, with psycholinguistics serving as the ‘base’ discipline that most respondents seemed to turn to, applying it to divergent areas of interest. That experts consult different research literature helps explain why at times they espouse differing terminologies in their LLS work.

The exercise of having the experts react to the same description of LLS provided an opportunity to see the level of consensus regarding the features of these strategies. The questionnaire offered the following definition (Question 4):

Strategies can be classified as conscious mental activity. They must contain not only an action but a goal (or an intention) and a learning situation. Whereas a mental action might be subconscious, an action with a goal/intention and related to a learning situation can only be conscious.

The responses to this item illustrate why there is no popularly-accepted definition. While three respondents accepted the definition fully, one agreed but felt more was needed. Others were not in agreement with most parts of it. With regard to strategies being ‘consciously’, one view was that strategies have developed into routines at high levels of competence and are no longer conscious. Another view was that consciousness is not just one thing but actually involves intentionality, attention, awareness, and control (after Schmidt 1994a), and so the level of strategic involvement would vary.

With regard to ‘mental activity’, some asserted that strategies are not always mental, but rather may be manifested in a physically observable form (for example, ‘eating a rich dessert as a reward for studying hard for a language test’). Also, some argued that not all strategies must contain an action, but could just be mental (for example, thinking about doing something but not actually doing it). In addition, a few did not feel that all strategies had to have a goal.

The next section will look in turn at survey results for the seven major themes associated with efforts to define LLS: level of consciousness, degree of mental activity, extent of describable actions, degree of goal orientation, strategy size, amount of strategy clustering, potential for leading to learning.
Major themes in the description of strategies

1 Level of consciousness

The majority of respondents agreed that any given strategy has to have a metacognitive component whereby the learner consciously and intentionally attends selectively to a learning task, analyzes the situation and task, plans for a course of action, monitors the execution of the plan, and evaluates the effectiveness of the whole process (Question 5.4). The strong view was that overall metacognitive control must be present for a mental action to be 'strategic' and that metacognitive strategies are the overarching strategies determining the cognitive strategies the learner will deploy. Nonetheless, there was a rather robust group of undecided and dissenting respondents as well. One of the undecided respondents noted that ideally every strategy should have a metacognitive component, but that in actuality this is not necessarily the case as less effective language learners use strategies repetitively, inflexibly, and inappropriately.

One of the dissenting respondents suggested there may be metacognitive moments, however fleeting. Thus, if learners did metacognitive stocktaking, they might be unable to reconstruct a description of their attention level, the nature of the analysis, the exact plan intended, or the nature of the monitoring and evaluation. Another suggested that highly intuitive students may not need to go through a highly analytic sequence, but could consider the task (not analytically), instantly select the necessary strategy, and sense its effectiveness.

Whereas four respondents categorically accepted that strategies could be situated along a continuum regarding the necessary degree of planning involved in their use, others felt that there were invariably a number of unplanned strategies (Question 7.1). While these respondents would consider a degree-of-planning continuum as irrelevant to the description of the strategy, it could be argued that being 'unplanned' is a useful descriptor for a strategy. The view was expressed that some intuitive learners instantly know the strategies to use with the given task.

While there was relative consensus that the metacognitive function of monitoring is a prototypical feature of a strategy, the extent of monitoring likely to be found in actual strategic behavior was questioned (Question 7.1). While one view was that monitoring is a necessary dimension for a strategy, another was that its extent would depend on the activity and for some tasks, it might not take place at all (for example, when engaging in monitoring on that particular task would detract from task performance, such as in certain speaking tasks). Another view was that the extent of monitoring depended on the learner's style preference. The respondent felt that since monitoring implied learners were conducting an analysis of the effectiveness of a strategy while using it, this might apply more to concrete-sequential learners than to intuitive learners, who might simply sense whether the strategy was working.

While some respondents recognized the metacognitive function of evaluation as a necessary dimension for a strategy, they felt that in reality learners do not often reflect on the effectiveness of a strategy (Question 7.1). Turning to the style preference literature, one respondent noted some students perform end-of-task evaluation, while others rely on an ongoing, intuitive sense of strategy effectiveness.

Two-thirds of the respondents indicated making a distinction between strategic knowledge and strategic action (Question 1.9). Several of the experts pointed out that metacognition was comprised of two components: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Another respondent added that procedural knowledge drew from four general sources: knowledge about the tasks (their purpose, their type, the demand), oneself (learning styles, multiple intelligences, and motivation), background knowledge (about the domain, the culture, the language, the context, the given language text, and the world), and beliefs (about learning and about language learning). (See Rubin 2005.) Several other respondents pointed out that having strategic knowledge does not guarantee that the learner can mobilize those strategies, especially if they are not part of their own 'culture of learning'.

Finally, there was some disagreement regarding the level of consciousness necessary for a process to be considered as strategy. Some felt strongly that once a process is automatic, it can no longer be a strategy since in this context 'automatic' means habitual and unconscious (Question 6.5). Others felt that various phases of strategy deployment could be at differing levels of consciousness. Taking this view, then, the execution phase of a strategy could, for example, be less conscious and more automatic.

2 Extent of attention

The questionnaire also focused separately on that part of consciousness represented by attention (Question 7.1). There was relative consensus that attention can be viewed on a continuum from full focus on the strategy at one end to only minimal attention at the other. In contemplating this continuum, one respondent pondered the issue of just how much attention was necessary for a process to make it strategic. In the view of another respondent, we need to allow for the level of attention to shift during the strategic process. In other words, at the beginning of the process, the strategy might be at the center of attention, but as the plan is carried out, the strategy is reduced to peripheral attention, then to a standby mode, and perhaps ultimately to a 'no attention' mode. So that would give this feature a potentially fluctuating nature, depending on the strategy being used by a given learner.

3 Explicitness regarding 'action'

There was a range of reactions to the statement that the action component in a given learning situation needs to be explicit (for example, what is meant by 'rereading a text' or 'rehearsing and memorizing' a dialog) (Question 5.2). Some felt that since strategies are conscious, the learners should be able to
state explicitly what a strategy such as ‘rereading a text’ actually entailed. Then there were those who, while being in agreement with the intent of the statement, felt it was the job of the researcher eliciting strategy data to find out what ‘re-reading a text’ actually means since the action could have various possible goals. One respondent noted that while he had not in the past taken this kind of fine-tuned tack in his own investigations, the result had been the collection of fuzzy data where it was not exactly clear what the learner had actually done or why.

Among the undecided regarding ‘action’, the opinion was voiced that whereas it is better if learners can articulate their strategic action since it enhances their awareness and consciousness, this may require strategy instruction and then practice. One of these respondents questioned what was meant by ‘explicit’. She felt that while learners need to know what they are doing, the degree of explicitness required depends on the learner. For instance, if the strategy is ‘I will ask myself questions while reading to improve my comprehension’, numerous students could leave it at that, others who are more detail-oriented or who need more structure, might take the strategy to the level of specifying that they will ask themselves at least three factual questions per page and will look in the text for answers to them, while yet other students might break it down at a one-step-at-a-time level (processing the text on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis). Those disagreeing with the statement felt that learners are unlikely to make explicit statements to themselves about the strategies that they use, partly because they lack the metalinguage to do so.

So what emerges from the survey relating to the explicitness of the action is the conceptualization of a ‘strategy’ as being a behavior which may change according to the given learner. Whereas some respondents seemed happier with ‘fixed concepts’, others were happier with more fluid concepts.

4 Degree of goal orientation
Most respondents agreed that strategies have a goal (Question 5.1). Whereas a teacher or a researcher may be able to identify this goal, various respondents were not sure whether learners would be able to articulate the goal, either because they may never have been conscious of their strategy use at that level of specificity or because they were no longer conscious of it. Those who disagreed with the statement did not interpret this feature as allowing for the teacher or researcher to be the one identifying the goal, and that despite the learners’ lack of awareness of goals, they would often use strategies none the less. It was felt that especially the less successful learners may not have a clear goal for specific tasks or have very general goals (for example, ‘to finish the book by English class’).

Most of those responding supported the notion that any given strategy can be situated on a continuum from more to less goal-oriented (Question 7.1). They felt they could make this distinction because it was easy to decide if a process was motivated by a purpose. Purposefulness was viewed as the intentionality aspect of consciousness. All the same, several were in doubt, such as one who said he could envision strategies where the learner could not articulate a clear goal for using them.

5 Strategy size
While the majority of the respondents tended not to make the distinction between macro- and micro-strategies, even some of those not making the distinction could see the advantages of doing so (Question 7.2). One said that she could see some strategies as ‘umbrella’ strategies that incorporate smaller ones. Another felt that person-related strategies tended to be more macro than task-related strategies, and that within task-related strategies, some tasks were more macro than other tasks. Still another respondent felt that the macro-micro strategy distinction could be related to the distinction that was once made between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’. So whereas note-taking could be viewed as a macro-strategy, using outline form to take notes could be seen as a micro-strategy.

6 Amount of strategy clustering
There was general consensus among respondents that strategic behavior could fall along a continuum from a single action to a sequence of actions (Question 7.3), with only one or two dissenting voices. Respondents generally felt that depending on the task at hand, sometimes one strategic action (for example, ‘selecting a keyword mnemonic to remember a difficult vocabulary word’) would be enough to handle the task, but for more complex tasks (for example, ‘looking up a new word in a dictionary’) a cluster of strategies would be needed.

Taking this strategy clustering notion further, there was relatively strong agreement with the statement that for a strategy to be effective in promoting learning or improved performance, it must be combined with other strategies either simultaneously in strategy clusters or in sequence, in strategy chains (Question 5.5). The experts generally felt that no single strategy can function well in isolation. One respondent felt that while the notion of strategy combinations sounded sensible, the field had tended to describe strategies as isolated phenomena rather than as existing in clusters. Several of the respondents were quick to point out that the use of strategy clusters would depend on the nature of the task. One of these respondents contrasted a complex reading comprehension task, where a series of strategies would be needed to interact successfully with the text, with a less complex decoding task, which could conceivably be completed with the strategy of ‘finding/applying patterns’. But that respondent was quick to note that a strategy such as ‘using prior knowledge’ would most likely be needed for virtually any learning task. Another respondent considered this clustering of strategies to be an irrefutable reality if we take a close look at the task-specific or situation-specific research. She drew upon her recent research with beginning French
students in suggesting that strategies do not simply increase as a result of instruction, but rather that clusters of them change over time.

Among the undecided, one respondent did not feel that strategy clusters were always essential. Another felt that although strategy combinations are often used for even the simplest of tasks, the use of strategies in combination is not a necessary precursor to success. Finally, a dissenter insisted that learning is neither black nor white, and that some strategies work more effectively when combined with others into strategy clusters or chains, but that other strategies can work well without clustering.

There was also relatively strong agreement with the statement that strategy clusters include and are evaluated via a metacognitive strategy or series of metacognitive strategies (which monitor and evaluate them) (Question 5.6). One respondent commented in agreement that strategy clusters are complex and involve adding and shedding strategies often from moment to moment, in line with ongoing monitoring and evaluation. In her view, the bringing together of strategy clusters involves a high level of planning and orchestration which is the result of metacognitive strategies. Another respondent said that such strategy orchestration is what enables learners to distinguish the best strategies from the rest. Others were keen to point out that while metacognition may play a beneficial role, only some of the strategies in sequences or clusters receive metacognitive scrutiny and that not all learners monitor or evaluate their use of strategies, whether singly or in clusters.

7 Potential for leading to learning

The majority agreed that included in a description of a strategy would be its potential for leading to learning, even if only expressed at the level of an hypothesis (Question 5.3). So, if ‘putting a word into a sentence so as to remember it’ is to be considered a strategy, then it must be made clear how doing this action would lead to learning. Several even felt that it was ‘vital’ to specify the relations between a certain strategy and its consequences in learning. One respondent noted that while we can only propose that the use of a given strategy will lead to learning in combination with other strategies, a hypothesis needs to be provided regarding how a given cognitive action in combination with others in working memory can lead to (a) long-term memory development and (b) the development of a skill in the long term. He offered ‘advance organizers in French L2 listening’ as an example of the development of a skill over time. He noted that these advance organizers constitute a strategy cluster (for example ‘predict content’, ‘identify possible French words that might come up’, ‘beware of any liaisons which might derail you’, ‘prepare to visualize certain parsed bits of language’) + metacognition (‘stay calm’, ‘think about how you coped last time’). He stated that eventually this cluster would become relatively automatic and if the hypothesis were correct, should lead to improved listening.

One undecided respondent felt that including ‘potential for learning’ as a feature would eliminate numerous behaviors which traditionally have been considered strategic but which do not involve making an effort to learn anything (for example, using the cover strategy of ‘laughing at a joke that was not understood’). Another respondent interpreted this feature as referring more to how a teacher rather than a learner might view a strategy, yet she agreed that at some level it could be beneficial for learners to consider the appropriateness of a strategy for a given task, goal, and purpose.

Among those who disagreed with the statement, one respondent noted that especially less successful learners might choose a strategy for the sake of comfort rather than because of its effectiveness in learning—for example, purposely committing only enough effort to language learning so as to get just a passing grade. Another felt that instead of loading a strategy description with details such as how a strategic action might work cognitively, we need to go for simplicity and clarity. In addition, she felt that a strategic action might lead to learning in different ways for different learners.

Strategy selection and effectiveness

The survey also included items dealing with the source for language learner strategies, the learner’s choice of strategies, and the effectiveness of strategy deployment for the given learner. With regard to the source for strategies, respondents saw this feature as being in flux, with the source sometimes being the teacher, sometimes a peer, and sometimes themselves (Question 7.1). Several respondents posited that there was likely to be a gradual movement from initially looking elsewhere for strategies to use and then eventually generating their own strategies. While respondents saw as potentially difficult identifying the actual strategy source, tracking the types of strategies learners used and their source might not be the less provide useful insights about the value of strategy instruction.

With regard to the effectiveness of the strategies deployed (Question 6.6), respondents were asked to react to the following statement:

The strategies a learner uses and the effectiveness of these strategies very much depend on the learner him/herself (for example, age, gender, language aptitude, intelligence, cognitive and learning style preferences, self-concept/image, personality, attitudes, motivation, prior knowledge), the learning task at hand (for example, type, complexity, difficulty, and generality), and the learning environment (for example, the learning culture, the richness of input and output opportunities). We must view strategies within this larger framework to properly interpret their role in the language learning process.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, this statement received almost uniform support. Those who have worked in the language learner strategy field as long as many of these experts have seen firsthand the impact of learners’ background, task, and context on strategy use and effectiveness. None the less, one respondent, speaking for himself but probably on behalf of others as well, admitted that
he rarely considered all these factors while conducting a given study or while engaged in strategy instruction since it would be ‘mind-boggling’. Another stressed that we need more research into the learners’ own prior knowledge base in order to understand the extent to which their strategy use reflects group behavior or individual patterns.

Now that we have looked at results on views about language learner strategies and how they function, let us consider what the experts considered their purpose to be.

The purpose of language learner strategies

1 To enhance learning

There was general agreement that learner strategies have as a purpose the enhancement of learning (Question 8.1). In addition, one respondent stated that without strategies, conscious learning cannot take place. Another respondent commented that if we accept the distinction between language learning and language use strategies (Cohen 1998), then learner strategies should be aimed at enhancing both the learning and the use of an L2.

2 To perform specified tasks

Most respondents were in agreement with the statement that learner strategies have as their purpose to perform specified tasks (Question 8.2), even though until now numerous strategies have been stated in broad, general, and even fuzzy terms. Several respondents noted that the selection of strategies depends upon the task, with some strategies being appropriate for more than one task. Finally, one respondent felt that it was inappropriate to assume that learner strategies had as their predetermined purpose the performance of specific tasks, but rather the individual learner had to make that determination.

3 To solve specific problems

Most respondents agreed that a purpose for strategies is to solve specific problems (Question 8.3). One respondent gave the example of how a series of listening strategies might be used when a learner is having difficulty perceiving and correctly parsing an L2 phrase. In this case, he felt it would take other strategies to show that this first strategy was not useful in making sense out of the utterance. A dissenting voice commented that strategies are not necessarily aimed at solving problems and gave as an example the strategies for using filled pauses which, in his view, may not be intended to solve a problem at all.

4 To make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable

While most respondents agreed with the notion that strategies serve to make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable (Question 8.5), they sometimes did so with reservations. On the positive side, strategies were seen to allow learners to develop more knowledge of themselves and of language learning. This self-awareness aspect was what made learning for them more satisfying and enriching. Another respondent pointed out that at the beginning stages of strategy instruction students may (and usually do) perceive that incorporating new learning strategies into task completion takes more time and effort than just working on a task in their accustomed way. But then when the learning strategy pays off in greater success on the task, the students begin to find that use of this strategy with the given task makes for truly easier, faster, and more enjoyable learning. On the more negative side, it was felt that overusing strategies or using them too much in isolation rather than in meaningful combinations could prove unhelpful and might lead to slowing down the learning process. It was also pointed out that there are strategies used in self-defense, which do not make learning easier, faster, or more enjoyable. It was felt, in fact, that some strategies end up making learning more tedious, more complex, and slower (for example, ‘finding L1 equivalents for all unknown words in a text before answering the reading comprehension questions’).

5 To compensate for a deficit in learning

The notion of ‘compensating for a deficit’ (Question 8.4) drew a range of responses with half disagreeing, some of them strongly. As one respondent put it, it depends on what we mean by ‘deficit’. He noted that if someone were to give him an advanced text in Spanish to read (and he had only received a few hours of Spanish instruction), then he would compensate for his extreme language deficit by using everything at his disposal such as other Romance languages, common sense, and any prior topic knowledge. However, if he encountered phonological problems while attempting to understand spoken Spanish after only minimal instruction in the language, the use of compensatory strategies might not help him identify and distinguish the Spanish sounds.

Among the numerous dissenters, one commented that given the way she interpreted the notions of ‘compensate’ and ‘deficit’, the terms were a bit loaded for her, and did not capture the extent to which strategies can facilitate future learning. She did not view the use of strategies as a stopgap measure, especially since she viewed learners as continuing to develop and refine their strategy use throughout their language learning experience, an aspect which the statement did not reflect. Another respondent felt that for years we have been trying to avoid operating from a deficit mentality or a medical model (i.e. to cure the sickness of ignorance). Finally, a respondent speculated that whereas many people would probably relate to strategy use in terms of deficit
(for example, ESL students need strategies to help with their 'problems' in learning to speak, write, etc.), learners can be highly strategic in an area where they do not have a deficit or problem.

Finally, let us take a look at survey results dealing with the opinions of the experts regarding areas related to language learner strategy use.

Concepts related to learners’ use of strategies

1 Autonomous language learning

While the clear majority used the concept of 'autonomous language learning' (Question 2.3), there was some diversity in terms of how the concept was applied. Generally, respondents reported using it to refer to learning which has as its ultimate goal to produce self-motivated students who take control of the 'what, when, and how' of language learning and learn successfully, independently of a teacher, and possibly outside of the classroom without any external influence.

One respondent saw the value of defining 'autonomy' at three different levels—(1) 'autonomy of language competence': the threshold level at which learners can say or write what they want to say or write, (2) 'autonomy of language learning competence': the level at which learners can deploy cognitive and metacognitive strategies consistent with or in place of the teacher's teaching approaches, and also without the immediate presence of a teacher, and (3) 'autonomy of choice': the learners' role in determining personal language goals, the designated purposes for learning the language and proficiency goals, and the extent to which the learner has input into the content and modality of the language curriculum.

With regard to problems encountered in using the term, a respondent noted that while 'autonomy' (from the ancient Greek) literally means 'self-regulation', the phrase 'autonomous language learning' has over time gathered many new accretions of meaning, some of which are mutually exclusive (for example, autonomy from a technical, psychological, sociocultural, or political-critical perspective—Oxford 2003). In addition, 'autonomous language learning' was sometimes understood (or maybe misunderstood) to be counter to the values of certain cultures. As a case in point, another respondent indicated that the term 'autonomous' was not amenable to the EFL context in Japan in that teachers regarded it as an excuse for abandoning teaching. A third respondent noted that while the field of language autonomy had turned to learners' narratives as a source of insights, she was not sure how having learners go through the process of telling their stories about language learning actually improves the product, namely, their language proficiency. Finally, a fourth respondent pointed out that 'autonomous learning' is not the same as 'strategic learning' in that a learner can work independently in a rote, non-strategic manner. She also noted that learners who are not effective autonomous learners may be very effective (and strategic) learners in a supportive group setting. (See Chapter 4 for more on this issue.)

2 Self-regulation

The majority of respondents reported using the term 'self-regulation' (Question 2.2). One identified the term as that used in the educational psychology literature and as synonymous with 'self-management'—see below. Another said if she used it, it was referring to Vygotsky's concept of self-regulation, with his theoretical and practical focus on specific sets of learning behaviors that would be recognized today as cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. She added that various experts see general learning strategies as what students use to become more self-regulated in their learning. A third respondent indicated that grounding learner strategies in cognitive psychology does not allow for the recognition of the affective side of learning. He views 'self-regulation' as a broader term that allows for both the cognitive and the affective side of strategic learning.

Various respondents alluded to a major difficulty in using this term, namely, that it is difficult to distinguish 'self-regulation' from 'autonomy'. In fact, two respondents indicated that they used 'self-regulation' synonymously with 'autonomy', with 'autonomous' being used as an adjective to describe the self-regulating person or group. One respondent pointed out that for some scholars, 'self-regulation' is now being used to more or less replace 'strategy' as a term, but that doing so leaves unanswered the obvious next question, 'What do learners do to self-regulate? (which is to use strategies)'. Another respondent picked up on this same use (or misuse) of the term and viewed this use of self-regulation as being in conflict with the research and theory on learner strategies from cognitive and educational psychology.

3 Self-management

As with self-regulation, the majority of respondents indicated that they used the term 'self-management' (Question 2.1). For one respondent, learner self-management was the combination of procedures and knowledge. Another reported using the term to refer to learners who (a) use metacognitive strategies extensively to monitor, plan, and evaluate their strategy use, and (b) are able to control their own learning and seek/find solutions to problems in their learning. A third respondent similarly reported using self-management as a metacognitive strategy which can be applied to any learning task. She saw four components to the concept of self-management which included having learners (1) determine how they learn best, (2) arrange conditions that help them learn, (3) seek opportunities for practice, and (4) focus attention on the task.
Various problems were raised with regard to the use of the term. One respondent felt that while in her view all strategies reflect a form of learner self-management, some researchers in the field have used the term ‘self-management’ to refer only to metacognitive strategies (as noted in the previous paragraph). In the strategy instruction sessions that she has led, this usage (limiting ‘self-management’ to metacognitive strategies) has been confusing to the participants, especially to those teachers among them who were using the term more broadly. Another respondent saw self-management as a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite to strategic behavior. She viewed the concept as having some overlap with self-regulation, but she thought that the self-regulation was more inclusive of the range of strategic behavior—including both the will (i.e., the motivation to use self-management) and the skill (i.e., the ability to deploy both metacognitive and task-specific learning strategies).

4 Independent language learning

The term ‘independent language learning’ (Question 2.4) drew a mixed response. Half of the respondents reported that they used it and half not. Six of those indicating that they used it tended to use it as a synonym for ‘autonomous language learning’, which also says something about how they relate to the term ‘autonomous’. Another respondent said that she uses this term when she wants to focus on learners who are taking responsibility for their learning through independent study (for example, in self-access centers).

As to problems with the term, one respondent felt that the term interfaced with autonomous language learning in sometimes ambiguous ways. Another respondent indicated that it was a problematic term in distance education because it was associated with a perception that learners can and should be independent, without sufficient attention being paid to issues of learner proficiency or support. In her view, independence needs to be balanced with an awareness of the abilities and competencies of the learner and with concern for the support available to learners to ensure successful learning experiences. A third respondent commented that while for some learners there is language material which is best learnt independently, there is also material which certain learners best learn in an interactive social context.

5 Individual language learning

Most of the respondents reported not using the term ‘individual language learning’ (Question 2.5). Two of those who reported using it, indicated that it serves for them as synonymous for ‘independent language learning’. According to one respondent, what makes the term problematic is the lack of clarity in comparing it to ‘independent’ and ‘autonomous’ language learning. Another respondent gave an interesting spin to the notion of ‘individual’ language learning, suggesting that it could refer to personal or even quirky approaches to language learning. She was thinking of how some good language learners she has encountered are reluctant to share their strategies with others out of a belief that their strategies are not good for anyone else because they are highly personalized.

Discussion

This survey is perhaps the first of its kind in the area of language learner strategies, so for that reason alone, it constitutes a valuable undertaking. By probing the strategy construct among learner strategy researchers engaged both in theory building and in the practice of strategy instruction, it is possible to determine just how much consensus exists. It is of course natural to find disagreement in any academic field. In fact, disagreement in academia is perhaps more of an indication of vitality than is seemingly uniform conformity. In any event, it would appear overall that the areas of consensus outweighed those of disagreement.

This rather unusual survey questionnaire produced a number of insights. The first was that strategy experts are generally accessing psycholinguistics as the ‘base’ discipline, but then they apply that discipline to a number of divergent areas of interest which are reflected in the professional literature from different fields. Accessing divergent research literature can help to explain some differences in approaches and perspectives.

Secondly, it is still a matter of debate as to how conscious of and attentive to their language behaviors learners need to be in order for those behaviors to be considered strategies. While there was consensus that learners deploy strategies in sequences or clusters, there was some disagreement as to the extent to which a behavior needs to have a mental component, a goal, an action, a metacognitive component (involving planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the strategy), and a potential that its use will lead to learning in order for it to be considered a strategy.

So, in essence, two contrasting views emerged, each with its own merits. On the one hand there is the view that strategies need to be specific, small, and most likely combined with other strategies for completing a given task; there is, on the other hand, the view that strategies need to be kept at a more global, flexible, and general level. What would lead an expert to favor one or the other of these conceptualizations would be a topic for future investigation. Notwithstanding these differing views, there was enthusiastic agreement for the view that strategy use and effectiveness will depend on the particular learners, the learning task, and the environment.

With regard to the purposes for language learner strategies, there was consensus that strategies enhance performance in language learning and use, both in general and in specific tasks. There was also consensus that strategies are used to help make language learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable. The experts were found to be less likely to see strategies as compensating for
a deficit, so the deficit notion of language strategy use seems to have fallen a bit out of favor. This finding is paradoxical in that while experts may wish to play down the deficit compensatory model of strategies, this model still plays a significant role in many of the learner strategy studies described in Part Two of this volume.

Again on the side of consensus, there was general consensus that terms like autonomy, self-regulation, and self-management, independent and individual language learning related in systematic ways to a learner's use of strategies. For example, the respondents generally felt that whereas the use of learner strategies can lead to enhanced autonomy, being an autonomous learner does not necessarily imply that the learner is drawing selectively and effectively from a refined repertoire of strategies. There was, however, less consensus concerning the interrelationship of these concepts to one another. Autonomy and self-regulation were reportedly used either synonymously or in a similar fashion. Self-management appeared a useful term but overlapped with self-regulation. Independent language learning was used by some of the respondents but was also seen to overlap with autonomous language learning, and individual language learning was not reported to be used much by this group.

A few limitations of this study should be noted. One limitation was that given the nature of the survey instrument, this chapter reports on 'sub-beliefs' from given respondents on specific issues on the questionnaire, and thus does not reflect the whole picture of how these issues interrelate for those respondents. Another limitation is that it was not always perfectly clear whose perspective was being represented in the various questionnaire statements—whether it was that of the learner, of a teacher, of a teacher educator, or of a researcher. One such example was with item number 5.3, which dealt with hypothesizing about a strategy's potential for leading to learning. (See Appendix 2.1 on the book's website.) A third limitation was the challenge of using general education terminology (for example, terms like 'learning context' and 'task') across such a wide educational spectrum as that represented by the experts participating in this survey. An additional limitation was that since seven of the 19 respondents were non-native speakers of the language used for the questionnaire, this could have influenced respondents' reactions to the terminological issues. A native Chinese-speaking respondent, for example, commented that she did not find it easy to locate equivalent terms for 'tactic' and 'technique' in Chinese.

In conclusion, conducting this survey brought numerous issues to the attention of the expert respondents, and in the process of completing the questionnaire the respondents identified lines of investigation that would need to be pursued to gather the kinds of information that could help resolve some of the issues raised. In various instances, experts noted that they simply had not considered some of the issues raised. So, including them in the questionnaire served the important purpose of consciousness raising. The next step would be to investigate some of the debated strategy features to determine more rigorously the extent of their role in language learning.

Notes

1. Along with Ernesto Macaro, Anna Chamot, Cathy Keatley, Vee Harris, and Do Coyle.