TYPES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR BACKGROUND

Major varieties of language learning strategies are cognitive, mnemonic, metacognitive, compensatory (for speaking and writing), affective and social. Theoretical distinctions can be made among these six types; however, the boundaries are fuzzy, particularly since learners sometimes employ more than one strategy at a given time.

Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies help learners make and strengthen associations between new and already-known information (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990, 1996) and facilitate the mental restructuring of information (Iran-Nejad *et al.* forthcoming). Examples of cognitive strategies are: guessing from context, analysing, reasoning inductively and deductively, taking systematic notes and reorganising information.

A different theory of language learning is the **tapestry approach** (Scarcella and Oxford 1992), which reflects work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986). Vygotsky emphasised that learning occurs in interaction with other people (social learning), especially with the help of a 'more capable other', often a teacher. The teacher provides scaffolding, or assistance given to the learner, which is gradually pulled away when the learner no longer needs it (Williams and Burden 1997). In these approaches teachers can help students develop cognitive learning strategies (known as **higher thinking skills**), such as analysing, synthesising and reasoning. Cognitive strategies usually involve hypothesis testing, such as searching for clues in surrounding material and one's own background knowledge, hypothesising the meaning of the unknown item, determining if this meaning makes sense and, if not, repeating at least part of the process.

Mnemonic strategies

Mnemonic strategies help learners link a new item with something known. These devices are useful for memorising information in an orderly string (e.g. acronyms) in various ways; examples are: by sounds (e.g. rhyming), by body movement (e.g. total physical response, in which the teacher gives a command in English and learners physically follow this) or by location on a page or blackboard (the locus technique). Theoretical and empirical justification exists for separating mnemonic strategies from cognitive strategies. In contrast to cognitive strategies, mnemonic strategies do not typically foster deep associations but instead relate one thing to another in a simplistic, stimulus–response manner. Even with their limitations, mnemonic strategies are often the first step in learning vocabulary items or grammar rules.

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies help learners manage: (1) themselves as learners, (2) the general learning process and (2) specific learning tasks. Several varieties exist. One group of metacognitive strategies helps individuals know themselves better as language learners. Self-knowledge strategies include identifying one's own interests, needs and learning style preferences. **Learning styles** are the broad approaches that each learner brings to language learning or to solving any problem. Examples of learning styles include visual vs. auditory vs. kinesthetic, global vs. analytic, concrete-sequential vs. intuitive-random, and ambiguity-tolerant vs. ambiguity-intolerant (Ely 1989; Oxford and Ehrman 1995; Reid 1995a; Dreyer and Oxford 1996). Knowledge of learning styles helps learners choose strategies that comfortably fit with their learning styles, although using and learning others is obviously useful.

Another set of metacognitive strategies relates to managing the learning process in general and includes identifying available resources, deciding which resources are valuable for a given

Copyright © Cambridge University Press

task, setting a study schedule, finding or creating a good place to study, etc. This set also includes establishing general goals for language learning. Language learning may be hindered if goals are unclear or in conflict.

Other metacognitive strategies also help learners deal effectively with a given language task, not just with the overall process of language learning. This set of metacognitive strategies includes, among other techniques, deciding on task-related (as opposed to general) goals for language learning, paying attention to the task at hand, planning for steps within the language task, reviewing relevant vocabulary and grammar, finding task-relevant materials and resources, deciding which other strategies might be useful and applying them, choosing alternative strategies if those do not work and monitoring language mistakes during the task.

Compensatory strategies for speaking and writing

Compensatory strategies for speaking and writing help learners make up for missing knowledge when using English in oral or written communication, just as the strategy of guessing from the context while listening and reading compensates for a knowledge gap. Compensatory strategies (or communication strategies) for speaking include using synonyms, circumlocution and gesturing to suggest the meaning. Compensatory strategies for writing encompass some of the same actions, such as synonym use or circumlocution.

Cohen (1997) asserts that communication strategies are intended only for language use, not for language learning, and that such strategies should therefore not be considered language learning strategies. However, Little (1999) and Oxford (1990) contend that compensatory strategies, even when employed for language use, simultaneously aid language learning: each instance of language use provides an immediate opportunity for 'incidental learning'. Incidental learning is one of the most important but least researched areas in language learning (Schmidt 1994a).

Affective strategies

Affective strategies include identifying one's feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger and contentment) and becoming aware of the learning circumstances or tasks that evoke them (see Arnold 1999). Using a language learning diary to record feelings about language learning can be very helpful, as can 'emotional checklists' (see Oxford 1990). However, the acceptability or viability of affective strategies is influenced by cultural norms. Some cultures do not encourage individuals to probe or record their own feelings in relation to learning.

Language learning anxiety – which has received an abundance of attention in the last decade (Horwitz and Young 1991; Young 1998) – is usually related to fear of communicating in English (or, indeed, the native language) when a judgement of performance is anticipated. In some individuals anxiety can sorely sabotage the language learning process (Young 1998). Certain affective strategies can help learners deal with anxiety through actions such as deep breathing, laughter, positive self-talk ('I know I can do it!', 'I know more than I did before') and praising oneself for performance. Corno (1993) suggests additional strategies, including generating useful diversions or visualising success and feeling good about it.

Negative attitudes and beliefs can reduce learners' motivation and harm language learning, while positive attitudes and beliefs can do the reverse. Using the affective strategy to examine beliefs and attitudes is therefore useful for, e.g., learning any language, the native speaker, the teacher and the language classroom.

Social strategies

Social strategies facilitate learning with others and help learners understand the culture of the language they are learning. Examples of social strategies are asking questions for clarification or

Copyright © Cambridge University Press

confirmation, asking for help, learning about social or cultural norms and values and studying together outside of class. Cognitive information-processing theory tends to downplay social strategies in favour of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990); however, social strategies are nevertheless crucial for communicative language learning.

Research

We first present tools for assessing use of language learning strategies and then address three areas of strategy research: the 'good language learner', strategy instruction research and influences on strategy choice.

ASSESSING STRATEGY USE

Rubin (1975) originally used observation to assess language learning strategy use. Some strategies – such as asking questions for clarification, taking notes and making outlines – are directly observable. However, other strategies – such as using inductive logic to determine a grammar rule or making mental associations between a new word and known concepts – are not. Other techniques are therefore used, including interviews, verbal reports while doing a task ('think aloud' procedures), strategy diaries, and strategy questionnaires such as the **Strategy Inventory for Language Learning** (**SILL**; Oxford 1990). Cohen and Scott (1996) discuss the purposes and limitations of each technique.

THE 'GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER'

Studies in the mid-1970s focused on characteristics of the 'good language learner'. Rubin (1975) identifies the following characteristics of the good language learner; he or she:

- is a willing and accurate guesser;
- has a strong drive to communicate;
- is uninhibited and willing to make mistakes;
- focuses on form by looking at patterns and using analysis;
- takes advantage of all practice opportunities;
- monitors his or her own speech and that of others;
- pays attention to meaning.

Naiman *et al.* (1975) added that good language learners learn to think in the language and deal with affective aspects of language learning. Although tantalising, 'good language learner' studies are sometimes interpreted as being a little too prescriptive and not always open to multiple ways of language learning. Such studies led to investigations comparing more successful language learners with less successful peers. At first it was thought that the former, compared with the latter, employed more strategies and did so with greater frequency, more awareness and better ability to describe their strategy use.

However, none of these factors consistently distinguished between more and less effective language learners. It was observed that more successful learners typically understand which strategies fitted the particular language tasks they were attempting. Moreover, more effective learners are better at combining strategies as needed (Abraham and Vann 1987).

Relationships between strategy use and language proficiency

Research shows that greater strategy use is often related to higher levels of language proficiency (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford and Ehrman 1995; Oxford 1996; Cohen 1997). Many

Copyright © Cambridge University Press