

## **A Critical Review of the Fundamental Directions on Language Learning Strategy Research**

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### **Abstract**

The unsatisfactory results from a focus on the products of language teaching led some language learning researchers since the mid 1970s to place the learner at the heart of the learning process and hinge upon the language learning strategies (LLSs) that advanced multilingual speakers often deploy to improve their language skills. This growing interest on LLS research was based on the grounds that language learners 'may be empowered to manage their own learning' if they are taught 'to work out the answers for themselves' through using effective LLSs (Griffiths 2013, 1). Although LLS research is very prolific and much has been written and discussed the LLS types and the correlation between strategy use and successful language learning across different learning contexts, very few published papers traced the history and development of LLS research by anchoring it from different approaches to learning language.

No empirical data was collected for this paper; instead, the paper aims to examine the controversy and developments of each of the three major directions on LLS research drawing on both cognitive and sociocultural language learning research perspectives. This paper also suggests some areas that deserve further investigation in LLS research in the coming years.

### **Introduction**

One of the prominent challenges in the field of second language teaching and learning is the noticeable variations in L2 learners' linguistic accomplishments although they might receive similar amounts and quality of exposure to the target language. Therefore, some language learning researchers' concern has essentially paid to learners' individuality factors, in particular the study of LLS use, as an avenue to capture how language learners contribute to their own language learning. LLSs can be either unobservable mental operations such as selective attention, or observable behaviour such as seeking out a conversation partner or both. Besides, LLSs need to involve some degree of consciousness or awareness on the part of the learner because 'the element of *choice*... is what gives a strategy its special character' (Cohen 2011, 7, author's italics). The following discussion will review and describe separately the three main directions pertaining to the field of LLS research.

## **Review of the Fundamental directions on language learning strategy (LLS) research**

### **The First Direction: Investigating the characteristics of good language learner (LLG) strategies**

Language learning strategies (LLSs) research began in earnest with an article by Joan Rubin (1975) on what 'the good language learner' (GLL) can teach us. Rubin's seminal article was an outgrowth of her insightful observations of different learners' behaviours on some French, German, and Spanish classes. At that time (1970), the focus was on the methods and products of language teaching on the grounds that 'good teaching automatically meant good learning' (Cohen 2011, 683). Therefore, Robin (1975)

spawned exploration into 'how learners manage their learning and the strategies they use as a means of improving their target language competence' (White 2008, 8). According to her observations, Rubin (1975, 44-47) constructed a list of LLSs typical of GLLs, who are willing and accurate guessers, are attentive to both form and meaning, are extroverted and uninhibited about mistakes, are willing to practise and spend time monitoring their own speech and that of others. Following Rubin's (1975) landmark work on the characteristics of the prototypical GLL, many empirical studies underpinned by cognitive psychology theories (e.g. Cohen 1977; Naiman et al. 1978; Politzer 1983; Reiss 1981; Rubin 1981) were conducted in the hopes of recognising the LLSs used by GLLs and imparting them to their less successful counterparts. These early GLL studies, as Gu (1996, 6) notes, were primarily based on the premise that the less successful learners are 'inactive' learners and have insufficient required repertoire of LLSs. This assumption is noticeably articulated by Wenden (1985, 7) through suggesting that 'ineffective learners are inactive learners' and that 'their apparent inability to learn is, in fact, due to their not having an appropriate repertoire of learning strategies'. In this sense, Chamot (2001) referred to six major GLL characteristics, which were often documented in the early LLS studies:

The good language learner... is an active learner, monitors language production, practises communicating in the language, makes use of prior linguistic knowledge, uses various memorization techniques, and asks questions for clarification (Chamot 2001, 29).

Thus, success at language learning from a cognitive psychology standpoint, as expressed by both Parks and Raymond (2004, 375), is primarily seen as 'a matter of individual initiative, notably in terms of strategy use and personal motivation'. Put it another way, GLLs do not simply have motivation to learn the target language, but they deploy a larger repertoire of LLSs than the less successful learners. Consequently, these early studies on the GLL are pedagogically-oriented because it is believed that LLSs are 'teachable' (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, 291, authors' emphasis), and that learners can benefit from coaching in LLSs to find their own means to success.

Continuing these initial investigations, various other researchers (e.g. Gan Humphreys and Lyons 2004; Green and Oxford 1995; Porte 1988; Purpura 1998; Vann and Abraham 1990; Wen and Johnson 1997) explored the LLSs used by GLLs with those employed by less successful learners. The general findings from these studies are that the main weakness of the less successful learners was a result of their lack of *appropriateness* and *flexibility* in using LLSs in the given contexts rather than the *quantity* and *variety* of the LLSs they use (Chamot 2005, 120; Gu 1996, 647). Porte (1988), for example, carried out semi-structured interviews with fifteen Italian less successful learners of English, whose scores were noticeably low in both placement tests and homework. Porte's (1988) study suggested that the less successful learners tended to use many LLSs similar to those usually used by the GLLs such as the use of dictionary and inferring from context. Nonetheless, the major flaw with the less successful learners was in applying inappropriate LLSs to a particular activity as an outcome of learners' transferring their LLSs across different learning situations. One of the Italian adult less successful learner, Maria, for instance, used to deploy a specific set of LLSs when she was studying at an Italian school such as using a bilingual dictionary and giving the translated equivalent. Although these LLSs worked well for Maria in Italy, she later recognised that her past LLSs were no longer valid in the new learning situation in

London, where a learner-centred approach was adopted. Addressing the results of Porte's (1988) LLS study, some LLS researchers (e.g. Cohen 2008; Oxford 2011; Grenfell 2000, Macaro 2001, 2006) point out that teaching the less successful learners only a specific set of LLSs often deployed by some GLLs might disparage learners' individual variation and their agency i.e. 'the human capacity to act on informed choices' (Benson and Cooker 2013, 7) simply because 'what works for one learner may not work for another' (Grenfell 2000, 14).

A recent volume edited by Griffiths (2008), 'Lessons from Good Language Learners', celebrated more than 30 years of research since the emergence of Rubin's (1975) article. The book included twenty-three chapters that dealt with LLSs used by GLLs for the receptive and productive skills, and for grammar and vocabulary. In a review of Griffiths' (2008) book, Macaro (2010, 291) postulates that the focus of that book was essentially on the characteristics that each author of twenty-three chapters believes a GLL might possess, without explaining '*how to measure* a good language learner' (author's italics). Consequently, Norton and Toohey (2001, 310) in their illuminating critique of GLL research utilise a sociocultural viewpoint and conclude that the proficiencies of GLLs 'were bound up not only with what they did individually but also in the possibilities their various communities offered them'. To exemplify this argument, both Norton and Toohey (2001) reviewed two examples of Polish-speaking learners of English in Canada (an adult learner, Eva, and a kindergarten learner, Julie). According to Norton and Toohey (2001), both learners were considered GLLs because they succeeded in exercising their agency in resisting and shaping the access to learning provided by their environments. In Julie's case, for example, she was five years old at kindergarten and was regarded as 'a desirable playmate with access to valued information', relying on her knowledge of Polish to teach her peers some words in addition to the salient scaffolding that she obtained from her adult cousin, Agatha, who was an experienced speaker of English and Polish (Norton and Toohey 2001, 317). The findings of Norton' and Toohey's (2001, 310) study disparaged the underlying assumption of a cognitive psychology approach to the GLL literature that principally focuses on learners' motivation for learning languages and control of a wider variety of linguistic forms and cognitive traits without adequately taking into account the 'situated experiences' of language learners in real-life contexts. Put it more plainly, GLLs from a sociocultural stance are those 'who find ways of exercising agency to negotiate entry into the desired social networks' given that a learner's environment might bolster or hamper their access to learning (Ushioda 2008, 23). Like Norton and Toohey (2001), Palfreyman (2003, 244) questions the value of the GLL research studies based on a cognitive psychology approaches and argues that these studies 'divorced the learner from her context' through ascribing the use of LLSs entirely to learners' 'personal assets' or cognitive predispositions. With this in mind, an impoverished portrait of a language learner from this point of view is painted through reinforcing 'the cognitive individual' with paying scant attention to the salience of the social, cultural, historical, and political-economic situations in which a language learner involves (ibid).

The aforementioned discussion has reviewed what the literature has to say on the characteristics of the GLL. A plethora of GLL research has been underpinned by a cognitive psychology approach and has supported the idea that learning is an individual accomplishment and a GLL is the one who is internally motivated to learn the target language and has specific cognitive capabilities. Related to this, there is surprisingly very

little of the existing literature on GLLs (e.g. Gao 2013; Norton and Toohey 2001) that tells us much about how individuals struggle to situate themselves in the contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, further research into the changing perspectives of a GLL from a sociocultural perspectives encouraged to unearth the dynamic interrelatedness between language learners' exercises of their cognitive capacity and willpower and different contextual realities (e.g. family members, the availability and accessibility to learning materials) while attempting to accomplish the main goals of learning languages.

### **The Second Direction: Delineating the relationships between metacognitive knowledge and strategy use**

Given that no one model of a GLL exists and addressing the empirical studies that examined how less successful learners approached their language learning, both Oxford (1996) and Rubin (2005) point out that more attention should be drawn to the metacognitive strategies to enable learners to think about their own thinking, identify their own learning goals and manage effectively their repertoire of LLSs. According to Kozulin (2005, 2), metacognition is often considered to be 'the highest level of mental activity, involving knowledge, awareness, and control of one's lower level cognitive skills, operations and strategies'. That is, metacognition represents learners' ability to make their thinking visible and this in turn can cause them to be in a greater awareness and control of 'how they learn and how they react to successes and setbacks in learning' (Anderson 2012, 170). Examples about metacognitive strategies are strategies like selective attention (i.e. paying attention to specific parts of the language input), self-management (i.e. arranging appropriate conditions for learning such as sitting in the front of the class), advance organisation (i.e. planning the learning activity in advance such as reviewing before going into class) and self-monitoring (i.e. checking one's performance as one speaks).

Since 'there is little or no variation in the use of metacognitive strategies by GLLs' (Rubin 2005, 53), some LLS researchers utilising a cognitive standpoint (e.g. Anderson 2008; Chamot 2004, 2009; Ellis and Sinclair 1989; Grenfell and Harris 1999; Murphy 2008, Rubin 2013) have highly valued the potential of the incorporation of strategy training activities into language programmes and language learning materials. According to these researchers, the notion of strategy instruction through focusing on metacognitive strategies can empower learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their performance, in addition to practising the transfer of LLSs to new learning settings. Cohen (2008, 46) asserts that 'strategy instruction' signifies 'any efforts by teachers, textbooks, or websites' in the process of helping learners gain a greater awareness of their LLS repertoire, and then develop this repertoire to accomplish their learning goals. This interest has, in effect, been maximised especially after identifying various taxonomies and inventories of LLSs by some language learning researchers (e.g. Cohen 2011; Dörnyei 2005; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). Dörnyei (2005, 169), for instance, suggests a four-component classification of LLSs: 1) cognitive strategies, including 'the manipulation and transformation of the learning materials' (e.g. repetition, using imaging); 2) metacognitive strategies, involving higher-order strategies aimed at analysing, monitoring, evaluating and organising one's own learning process; 3) Social strategies, involving interpersonal behaviours aimed at increasing the amount of L2 communication (e.g. initiating interaction with native speakers, cooperating with peers)

and 4) affective strategies, involving control of the emotional conditions and experiences.

Nevertheless, some language learning researchers endorsing socially oriented theoretical perspectives (e.g. Coyle 2007; Donato and McCormick 1994; Gao 2010a; Lantolf 2013; Norton and Toohey 2001) have responded differently towards the worth of strategy instruction. Guided by sociocultural theory arising from one of the tenets of Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory that the initial motive for an activity *determines* the outcome of that activity, Gillette (1994), for instance, conducted a longitudinal study of three successful and three less successful language adult learners enrolled in a French course in a United States university. Through extensive interviews, class notes and diaries, Gillette (1994) found that the personal histories of the participants constituted a crucial role in formulating their different motives and goals for studying a foreign language (e.g., to learn the language or to fulfil the language requirement), which in turn influenced the kinds of LLSs that the participants deployed. For example, one of Gillette's (1994, 197) less successful learners, J, regarded learning foreign languages as 'useless baggage' because he had never travelled out of his hometown. Since learning foreign languages had little meaning in his life, J employed heavily less effective LLSs such as translation and rote learning in order to complete the course requirement. As a result, the value of teaching LLSs or inserting them into language learning materials was debatable to Gillette (1994, 212) because language learners use only the LLSs that are linked to the significance which languages and language study have for their own individual sociocultural histories, not the ones presented by their own teachers or incorporated into language materials.

Some researchers utilising a LLS framework from a cognitive perspective (e.g. Cohen 2012; Griffiths 2013; Oxford 2011) have also contended that although focusing on metacognitive strategies seemed to be intuitively appealing to both language teachers and materials developers, some internal and external factors influencing strategy use also needed to be taken into account such as gender, motivation, learning age and cultural background. In order to understand the 'differential success' in learning a particular language (Larsen-Freeman 2001, 21), a great number of empirical studies have been conducted to explore the correlation between learners' strategy use and other factors such as motivation (e.g., Fields 2011; Salem 2006), learners' field of study (e.g., Dreyer and Oxford 1996; Ghasedy 1998; Lee and Oxford 2008), gender (e.g., El-Dib 2004; Goh and Foong 1997; Khalil 2005), language proficiency (Abu Shamis 2003; Griffiths 2007; Wharton 2000), ethnicity (Ehrman and Oxford 1995; Grainger 1997), and nationality of learners (Griffiths and Parr 2001).

Most of these studies, as Radwan (2011, 121) argues, were carried out quantitatively on the grounds that LLSs are 'malleable' and have 'a positive link with language proficiency' (i.e. the advanced learners use more LLSs), using question surveys especially Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL is 'the most widely used instrument in language learner strategy research' (White et al. 2007, 95) because approximately 10,000 learners around the world have used the SILL, and it has been translated into over 20 languages (Oxford 2011, 160). For example, almost all published LLS studies that have addressed the strategy use of language learners from the Middle East in both English as a second language (ESL) context (e.g. Al-Harhi 2005; Al-Zubaidi and Cameron, 2010) and English as a foreign language (EFL) context

(Kaylani 1996; McMullen 2009; Radwan 2011; Riazi 2007; Salem 2006) have undertaken a cognitive psychology approach and used Oxford's (1990) SILL as the major method to measure the participants' strategy use.

The aforementioned discussion has reviewed what the literature has to say on the role of metacognition and strategy instruction in increasing learners' language proficiency. However, the above direction on LLS research has been primarily based on a cognitive psychology perspective, and has fundamentally suffered from two main weaknesses, which stem from the methodological approaches usually followed in LLS research and the theoretical inconsistencies concerning the construct of LLS (Macaro 2006, 469). More specifically, the excessive use of survey methods in LLS research studies have been criticised by some researchers utilising a LLS framework (e.g. Dörnyei 2005; Gao 2004; Gu 2012; LoCastro 1994, 1995; Rose 2012; Woodrow 2005) for four main reasons:

- Strategy questionnaires tend to minimise the impact of contextual variations on learners' strategy use through attempting to use a particular strategy questionnaire in different sociocultural settings. LoCastro's (1994) study, for instance, revealed that Oxford's (1990) SILL was context-insensitive simply because the most frequent LLSs employed by the participants were the memory strategies although SILL implied that these strategies should be rarely used by learners.
- The items of the written questionnaires can be interpreted differently by the participants. For example, learners may become confused when responding to the following item in Oxford's (1990) SILL 'I pay attention when someone is speaking English' because they might be unable to decide who is 'someone'.
- Most strategy questionnaires focus primarily on the frequency of learners' strategy use rather than on their attitude and efficiency. That is, learners are often invited to respond to a frequency scale, ranging from 'never or almost never' to 'always or almost always' without giving them the opportunity to explain if they use specific LLSs in a particular learning context but not in others.
- Most strategy questionnaires tend to replicate learners' expressed strategy preferences rather than capturing the dynamic and fluid nature of their strategy use in accordance with the specific learning settings and learners' goals.

As regards the under-theorisation of the construct of LLS, Dörnyei (2005: 179), for instance, drawing on cognitive psychological theories, have found it particularly problematic to characterise the construct as simultaneously behavioural, affective, and cognitive.

The theoretical and methodological issues related to the field of LLSs have actually encouraged some language learning researchers (e.g. Dörnyei and Skehan 2003; Ortega 2009; Rubin 2001, 2005; Tseng et al 2006) to use the term 'self-regulation' in place of the construct of LLS in order to capture learners' self-regulatory capacity and their cognitive processes. In other words, the notion of 'self-regulation' for these researchers is a more dynamic concept than LLS because it describes learners' strategic efforts in managing their personal learning processes, especially how to plan, monitor, focus on and evaluate their own learning. However, Rose (2012, 1) argues that the use of learner self-regulation instead of the construct of LLS 'might be a matter of throwing the baby out with the bathwater' simply because the term 'self-regulation', similar to LLS, suffers

from 'definitional fuzziness'. To put it more clearly, the construct of 'self-regulation' has been used more or less synonymously with different technical terms such as 'self-management' (Rubin 2001, 2005; Dörnyei 2005); 'autonomy' (Oxford 2011), 'self-direction' (Pemberton 2011).

In order to make reconciliation between the optimistic and pessimistic approaches towards LLS research, Gao (2010b) affirms that this can be accomplished through undertaking a sociocultural standpoint in understanding learners' strategic learning or use of LLSs. According to Gao (2010b, 580), utilising a sociocultural perspective in LLS research seeks to conceptualise 'learners' individuality as dynamic and contextually situated'. In other words, this perspective does not seem to see learners' strategic learning efforts, indicative of agency, as completely independent, but rather mediated by the contextual conditions in which learners are engaged. This point will be further explained in the last direction on LLS research. As regards the contrasting views between cognitive and sociocultural standpoints in relation to the importance of strategy instruction, a compromise between these two views can be created through designing language learning textbooks or websites by local materials writers, and incorporating explicit strategy instruction in these materials with giving a language learner multiple chances to suggest their own LLSs to enhance both their meta-awareness and self-centredness in the light of the past language learning experiences of the target learners. This is the gap which we would hope to see filled in the near future.

### **The Third Direction: Examining the potential of contextual conditions in mediating learners' actual use and development of language learning strategies (LLSs)**

With the so-called 'social turn' in education (Atkinson 2011; Benson and Cooker 2013; Block 2003), the landscape of language learning research has challenged the domination of cognitive approaches to language learning through arguing that 'language learning takes place not just in individual learners' minds but also in society' (Gao 2010a, 18). In other words, some researchers endorsing socially oriented theoretical perspectives (e.g., Gao 2013; Palfreyman 2011; Parks and Raymond 2004; Toohey and Norton 2011) suggest that language learning does not take place in a sociocultural vacuum, but rather it is a social process in which culturally and historically situated individuals are in active pursuit of both linguistic and non-linguistic objectives basically related to identity formation. Thus, learning context or 'real-world situations' are 'fundamental, not ancillary, to learners' (Zuengler and Miller 2006, 37).

From this sociocultural stance, language learners act on the world with the assistance of both some social agents (e.g., family members, friends or neighbours) and a host of material tools (e.g., textbooks, travel brochures or technology) and symbolic artefacts (e.g., language, gestures) (Kalaja et al 2011; Kehrwald 2013; Kuure, 2011). Addressing this point, Lantolf (2013, 19) postulates that language learners need to be viewed as 'human-entities-acting-with-mediational-means' simply because disparaging the value of socially and culturally artefacts seemingly leads to engendering 'human organisms' rather than 'human agentive individuals'. Both Donato and McCormick (1994, 462) note that the sociocultural framework constitutes 'a robust framework for investigating and explaining the development and use of strategies'. From this perspective, LLSs are shaped from the mediational processes of particular learning communities along with learners' agency, which is intimately related to the significance

that language study has for their lives and their sociocultural historical backgrounds (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001). Therefore, learners' motivations, beliefs and strategy use in language learning from a sociocultural viewpoint are often seen as the outcome of a complex dynamic interaction between shifting contextual conditions and learners themselves, underlying their past English learning experiences. Guided by sociocultural theory, Gao (2006), for example, reinterpreted the data of his earlier study in 2002 to examine the changing use of LLSs by fourteen Chinese learners after they moved from an undergraduate stage at a Chinese University to complete their higher studies at Warwick University in the UK. The analysis of the learners' experiential narratives in Gao's (2006) study showed that the participants' strategy use was congruent to their changing contextual needs. That is, the Chinese learners of the study mainly used repetition, note-taking and rote memorisation strategies in their Chinese learning context because these strategies enhanced them to pass the exam and address both their teachers' recommendations and their cultural beliefs which imply that 'a person can memorize a word if s/he repeats exposure to it [particularly visually] seven times' (ibid). However, the intensity of the strategies applied by most of these Chinese learners in China was decreased when they moved to the UK because the assessment method of learners' language proficiency shifted from 'authoritative' standard exams followed in China into 'coursework assessment' through the medium of English in the UK (ibid). Consequently, the learners employed LLSs up to the demands of their coursework such as retaining only vocabularies that appear many times in their coursework rather than relying heavily on a dictionary. Gao (2006, 64) concluded that the choice of learners' strategy use was the result of not only their personal motivation and mental processes but also the social context of learning and 'the mediating agents, including teachers, learning experts, and family members'. For this reason, a more qualitative and contextualised approach in investigating learners' LLS use can be favoured because SILL and other strategy questionnaires seem to examine merely learners' frequency of strategy use, and underestimate the importance of both contextual variations and task influence.

The body of sociocultural LLS research has actually played a crucial role in enriching our insights into the mediated nature of LLSs in classroom culture, including artefacts, interactions and relations among people (e.g., Coyle 2007; Donato and McCormick 1994; Jang and Jiménez 2011) and the dynamism of learners' strategy use in response to shifting learning contexts across time (e.g., Gao 2013; 2010a; Parks and Raymond 2004). However, these qualitative LLS studies undertaken from a sociocultural standpoint, as Mason (2010, 647) notes, are 'still relatively rare'. Thus, further empirical LLS research studies that are conducted qualitatively are needed to present a holistic, dynamic picture of the construct of LLS.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the different directions on LLS research reviewed in this paper, LLSs have played a highly varied role in research, with the bulk of LLS empirical studies have been based on cognitive psychology perspectives and used survey methods, especially Oxford's (1990) SILL, to explore the trait and static aspect of learners' strategy use. There is still much research that needs to be completed to gain a more holistic picture of the key role of LLSs in the process of language teaching and learning. We hope that we can see more empirical LLS studies that are underpinned by sociocultural theory in order

to reveal the dynamic and actual use of language learners' strategy use mediated by different social conditions.

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