A Critical Review of Language Learning Strategy Research

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Abstract: Since the mid-1970s a great deal of research has explored the language learning strategies (LLSs) that learners deploy to improve their language skills. Such research has studied LLS types and correlations between strategy use and successful language learning, yet very few papers have traced the history and development of LLS research by anchoring it to different approaches to learning language. In the present paper, we will examine developments in three major directions of LLS research and suggests some areas that deserve further investigation in future research.

Keywords: Language learning strategies (LLSs), good language learners (GLLs), cognitive psychology approaches, sociocultural theory, self-regulation

INTRODUCTION

One of the prominent challenges in the field of second language teaching and learning concerns the noticeable variations in L2 learners' linguistic accomplishments despite receiving similar amounts and quality of exposure to the target language. Some language learners appear to make more of what they experience than do others. This has led to a research concern with learners' individual factors, in particular the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) they use, as a means of capturing how language learners contribute

to their own language learning. LLSs can be unobservable mental operations such as selective attention, or observable behaviours such as seeking out a conversation partner or both. They also 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, p. 7). The following discussion will review and describe separately the three main directions underpinning the LLS research since its inception.

THE FIRST DIRECTION: INVESTIGATING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Language learning strategies (LLSs) research began in earnest with an article by Joan Rubin (1975) on what 'the good language learner' (GLL) might teach us. Rubin's seminal article stemmed from her observations of different learners' behaviours in some French, German, and Spanish classes. At that time, the focus was on the methods and products of language teaching on the grounds that 'good teaching automatically meant good learning' (Cohen 2011, p. 683). Therefore, Rubin (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, p. 8). According to her observations, Rubin (1975, p. 44-47) constructed a list of LLSs typical of GLLs, who are: willing and accurate guessers, attentive to both form and meaning, extroverted and uninhibited about mistakes, willing to practise and spend time monitoring their own speech and that of others. Following this, many empirical studies underpinned by cognitive psychology theories (e.g. Cohen 1977; Naiman et al. 1978; Politzer 1983; Reiss 1981; Rubin 1981) were conducted with the aim of recognising the LLSs used by GLLs and imparting these to their less successful counterparts. These early GLL studies, as Gu (1996, p. 6) notes, were primarily based on the premise that the less successful learners are 'inactive' learners and have an insufficient repertoire of LLSs (Wenden, 1985, p.

7). 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, p. 29).

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

Continuing these initial investigations, other researchers (e.g. 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 were that the main weakness of the less successful learners was a result of their lack of *appropriateness* and *flexibility* in using LLSs in given contexts rather than the *quantity* and *variety* of the LLSs they used (Chamot 2005, p. 120; Gu 1996, p. 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 GLLs, such as the use of a dictionary and inferring from context. Nonetheless, the major flaw with these less successful learners was in applying inappropriate LLSs to a particular activity. Addressing the results of this

study, some LLS researchers (e.g. Cohen, 2008; Grenfell, 2000; Macaro 2001, 2006; Oxford, 2011) pointed out that teaching the less successful learners only a specific set of LLSs often deployed by some GLLs might discourage learners' individual variation and their agency i.e. 'the human capacity to act on informed choices' (Benson & Cooker, 2013, p. 7) simply because 'what works for one learner may not work for another' (Grenfell 2000, p. 14).

A seminal volume, '*Lessons from Good Language Learners*' (Griffiths, 2008), celebrated more than 30 years of research since Rubin's initial (1975) conception. In a review of that book, Macaro (2010, p. 291) postulated that its focus was essentially on the characteristics that each author of the twenty-three chapters believed a GLL might possess, without explaining '*how to measure* a good language learner' (author's italics). Consequently, Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 310), in their critique of GLL research, utilised a sociocultural viewpoint and concluded 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, 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 & Toohey, 2001, p. 317).

Norton and Toohey's (2001) findings undercut the underlying assumption ofa cognitive psychology approach to GLLs that principally focused 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 more plainly, from a sociocultural stance GLLs 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, p. 23). Like Norton and Toohey (2001), Palfreyman (2003, p. 244) questioned the value of the GLL research studies based on a cognitive psychology approach and argued 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', paying scant attention to the salience of the social, cultural, historical, and political-economic situations in which a language learner evolves.

There is surprisingly little existing literature on GLLs (e.g. Gao, 2013; Norton & 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 perspective was needed, 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) pointed out that more attention should be given to 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, p. 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 give them greater awareness and control of 'how they learn and how they react to successes and setbacks in learning' (Anderson, 2012, p. 170). Examples of metacognitive strategies are strategies such as 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, p. 53), some LLS researchers utilising a cognitive standpoint (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Chamot, 2004; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Grenfell & 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, p. 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 the identification of various taxonomies and inventories of LLSs by some language learning researchers (e.g. Cohen, 2011; Dörnyei, 2005; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Dörnyei (2005, p. 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 & McCormick, 1994; Gao, 2010a; Lantolf, 2013; Norton & Toohey 2001) have responded differently regarding 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 at a United States university. Through extensive interviews, class notes and diaries, Gillette (1994) found that the personal histories of the participants played 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, p. 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, p. 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 espoused 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 'differential success' in learning a particular language (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 21), a great number of empirical studies have explored 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 & Oxford, 1996; Ghadessy, 1998), gender (e.g., El-Dib 2004; Goh & Foong 1997; Khalil 2005), language proficiency (Abu Shamis, 2003; Griffiths, 2007; Wharton, 2000), ethnicity (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995), and nationality of learners (Griffiths & Parr, 2001).

Most of these studies, as Radwan (2011, p. 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, p. 95) and approximately 10,000 learners around the world have used the SILL, and it has been translated into over 20 languages (Oxford 2011, p. 160).

The aforementioned discussion has reviewed the literature on the role of metacognition and strategy instruction in increasing learners' language proficiency. However, the above direction in 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 and the theoretical inconsistencies concerning the construct of LLS (Macaro 2006, p. 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. 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 specific learning settings and goals.

As regards the under-theorisation of the construct of LLS, Dörnyei (2005, p. 179), for instance, drawing on cognitive psychological theories, 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. 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, p. 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' and 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 a reconciliation between the optimistic and pessimistic approaches towards LLS research, Gao (2010b) affirms that this can be accomplished by undertaking a sociocultural standpoint in understanding learners' strategic learning or use of LLSs. According to Gao (2010b, p. 580), using a sociocultural perspective in LLS research seeks to conceptualise 'learners' individuality as dynamic and contextually situated'. In other words, this perspective does not see learners' strategic learning efforts, indicative of agency, as completely independent, but rather mediated by the contextual conditions in which they are engaged. This point will be further explained in the following section.

THE THIRD DIRECTION: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS IN MEDIATING ACTUAL USE AND DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

With the so-called 'social turn' in education (Atkinson, 2011; Benson & Cooker, 2013; Block, 2003), the domination of cognitive approaches to language learning has been challenged through arguing that 'language learning takes place not just in individual learners' minds but also in society' (Gao 2010a, p. 18). In other words, some researchers endorsing socially oriented theoretical perspectives (e.g., Gao, 2013; Palfreyman, 2011; Parks & Raymond, 2004) have suggested that language learning does not take place in a sociocultural vacuum, but rather 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

contexts or 'real-world situations' are 'fundamental, not ancillary, to learners' (Zuengler & 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). Lantolf (2013, p. 19) postulated 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 lead to engendering 'human organisms' rather than 'human agentive individuals'. Donato and McCormick (1994, p. 462) noted 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 & 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, including their past English learning experiences. Guided by sociocultural theory, Gao (2006), for example, reinterpreted the data of his earlier 2002 study to examine the changing use of LLSs by fourteen Chinese learners after they moved from an undergraduate course at a Chinese university to complete their higher studies at a UK university. Gao (2006) showed that his participants' strategy use was congruent with their changing contextual needs. That is, these learners mainly used repetition, note-taking and rote memorisation strategies in their Chinese learning context because these strategies enabled them to pass the exam and met both their teachers' recommendations and their cultural beliefs that 'a person can memorize a word if s/he repeats exposure to it [particularly visually] seven times' (Gao, 2006). However, the

intensity of the strategies applied by most of these learners in China was decreased when they moved to the UK because the assessment of their language proficiency shifted from 'authoritative' standard exams to 'coursework assessment' through the medium of English. Consequently, the learners employed LLSs to fit the demands of their coursework such as memorising vocabularies that appeared many times in their coursework rather than relying heavily on a dictionary. Gao (2006, p. 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 to investigating learners' LLS use appears to be necessary.

Existing 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 & McCormick, 1994; Jang & Jiménez, 2011) and the dynamism of learners' strategy use in response to shifting learning contexts across time (e.g., Gao, 2013; 2010a; Parks & Raymond 2004). However, qualitative LLS studies undertaken from a sociocultural standpoint, as Mason (2010, p. 647) notes, are 'still relatively rare'. Thus, further empirical qualitative LLS research studies are needed to present a more holistic, dynamic picture of the construct of LLS.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the different directions in LLS research reviewed in this paper, LLSs have been explored from a number of points of view, with the bulk of empirical studies based on cognitive psychology perspectives and using survey methods, especially Oxford's (1990) SILL, to explore the static aspects of learners' strategy use. There is still much research needed to gain a more holistic picture of the key role

of LLSs in the process of language teaching and learning. Hopefully, the next step will include many 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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