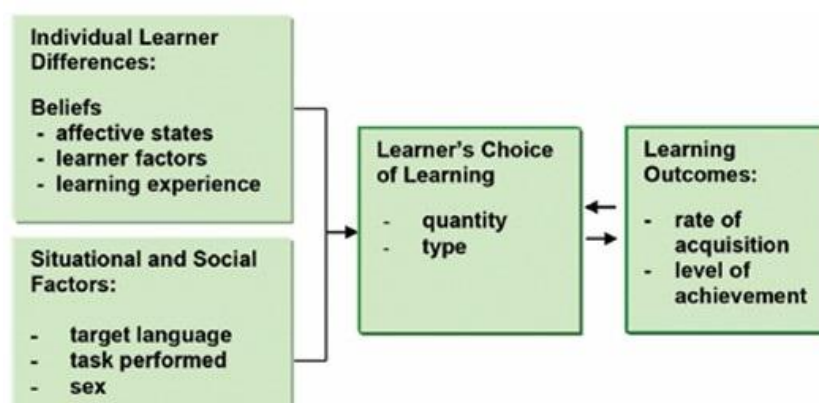# Lecture 05: Language Learning Strategies

1. Learning Strategies

→ "The notion of strategies has been controversial amongst applied linguists. In studies… strategies have been referred to as techniques, tactics, conscious plans, learning skills, cognitive abilities, language processing strategies, problem-solving procedures, etc."

→ "The researchers seem to disagree as to whether the strategies are observable behavior or mental operations. It is also disputable as to what kind of contribution they make to SLA, what might prompt language learners to use strategies, and finally whether strategies are more general in their use or tied to specific learning content and tasks. However, researchers, … seem to agree regarding the problem-solving and intentional nature of strategies as well as their facilitating function in the learning process."

→ "Wenden (1987:7), for example, emphasizes that learner strategies should include 'what learners know about the strategies they use', i.e., their strategic knowledge, and 'aspects of their language learning other than the strategies they use', e.g., personal factors facilitating learning, general language learning principles, etc. Also, Oxford (1990:1) points out the importance of strategies for language learners as "tools for active, self-directed involvement, which are essential for developing communicative competence." She adds that "appropriate learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence."

→ "Cohen (1998:5) showed the importance of taking both L2 learning and L2 use strategies into account when speaking about language learning strategies. He emphasizes that these strategies should aid the learner with the means to identify the material that requires more effort to learn, i.e., those materials that are more important than other materials should be grouped together for easier learning and then committed to memory."

→ **Importance of language learning strategies**

"Research in the area of language learning strategies provides us with some information about learners' perception of what to do to learn or to manage their learning. It demonstrates that L2 learning strategies play a significant role in the learning process. These strategies can be taught, and acquiring them can make a substantial difference in learner achievement."

→ **Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies**

The next list represents the main characteristics of language learning strategies which learners develop to overcome some particular learning problems

1. Strategies that involve linguistic behavior (such as requesting the name of an object) and non-linguistic behavior (such as pointing at an object so as to be told its name).

2. Some strategies are behavioral (directly observable, such as repetition of some words or language items for the sake of better pronunciation or recognition, etc.), while others are mental (not directly observable, such as internalization of items of language, etc).
3. Strategies are behavior which is amenable to change; they can be modified, rejected; new strategies can be learned/taught.
4. Strategies are systematic; learners uncover the strategy from their knowledge of the problem and employ it systematically.
5. Strategies contribute indirectly to learning by providing learners with data about the L2, which they can then process. However, some strategies may also contribute directly, as in memorization strategies directed at specific lexical items or grammatical rules.
6. Strategy use or communicative strategies vary considerably as a result of both the kinds of tasks the learner is engaged in and individual learner preferences.

Notes

2. Types of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley et al.'s Framework

"O'Malley and his colleagues, in extensive research based on cognitive psychology, studied the use of learning strategies by learners of English as an L2 in the USA … O'Malley and his colleagues defined three main types of strategies used by L2 students:

Metacognitive strategies are executive skills that involve planning and thinking about learning, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity (e.g., selective attention, self-monitoring, functional planning etc.).

Cognitive strategies are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entail direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials in ways that enhance learning. (e.g., repetition, resourcing, translation, note taking etc.)

Social strategies refer to learning by interacting with other people. (e.g., cooperation, question for clarification etc.)"

Oxford's Classification

"Oxford (1990) draws a distinction between two major classes of strategies: direct and indirect … The former consists of 'strategies that are directly involved in the L2 in the sense that they require mental pro cessing of the language' (1990:37), while the latter 'provides indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means' (1990:151).

Direct strategies include:
- *memory strategies* (for remembering and retrieving new information),
- *cognitive strategies* (for understanding and producing the language),
- *compensation strategies* (for using the language to make up for the lack of relevant knowledge).

Indirect strategies are divided into:
- *metacognitive strategies* (for coordinating the learning process),
- *affective strategies* (for regulating emotions),
- *social strategies* (for learning with others)"

Age

Age emerges as a clear factor affecting the way strategies are used. Young children have been observed to employ strategies in a task-specific manner, while older children and adults make use of generalized strategies, which they employ more flexibly. Young children's strategies are often simple, while mature learners' strategies are more complex and sophisticated. These differences may help explain why older children, adolescents and adults generally learn faster initially than young children and also why this advantage is more evident in grammar and vocabulary, for which there are many learning strategies, rather than pronunciation, for which there are few.

Aptitude

Aptitude does not appear to be strongly related to strategy use. Leino (1982) found that learners with high conceptual levels were better at describing their strategies than learners with low conceptual levels. It is possible, then, that learning strategies are related to that part of language aptitude shared with a general intelligence factor.

Motivation

Highly-motivated learners were found to use more strategies relating to formal practice, functional practice, general study, and conversation/input elicitation than poorly motivated learners (Oxford,1990). The type of motivation may also influence strategy choice. For example, employing integrative motivation can result in a preference for more communication-oriented strategies.

Personality

It has been found that there is a close relationship between personality types and strategy choice. For example, extrovert learners are credited with a willingness to take risks, but with dependency on outside stimulation and interaction. Extrovert learners also reported significantly greater use of strategies that involved searching for and communicating meaning than did introverts.

Learner's Personal Background

There is considerable evidence to support a link between learners' per sonal backgrounds and strategy use. For example, Ehrman (1990) found that students with at least five years of study reported using more func tional practice strategies than students with four years or fewer. Also, Chamot et al. (1988) found that novice high school learners of a foreign language (FL) were likely to panic when they realized they lacked procedural skills for solving a language problem. On the other hand, expert learners (who had studied another FL previously) approached tasks calmly and were able to employ the strategies they had developed elsewhere

Situational and Social Factors

Situational factors refer to the language being learned, the setting in which learning takes place, and the tasks that the learner is asked to perform. A number of differences between the learning strategies used by learners in a classroom as opposed to those used in a more natural setting have been found. Studies of classroom learners suggested that social strategies (such as questioning for clarification, cooperation, etc.) are rare. It is likely, however, that in many classrooms the kind of interaction that takes place affords little opportunity for the use of social strategies. The research has also shown that task type had an influence on learners' choice of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies (see 6.4.1). For example, Chamot et al. (1987 and 1988) found that vocabulary tasks led to the use of the cognitive strategies of 'resourcing' and 'elaboration' and the metacognitive strategies of 'self-monitoring' and 'self-evaluation'. Listening tasks, on the other hand, led to 'note-taking', 'elaboration', 'inferencing', and 'summarizing' as cognitive strategies, and 'selective attention', 'self-monitoring', and 'problem-identification' as metacognitive strategies.

Notes

Strategy training has been emphasized by many researchers (e.g. Cook 1982; 2001; Bialystok 1990; Oxford 1990; O'Malley and Chamot 1990). These researchers argue in favor of such training that helps the learners to be aware of strategies in general rather than teaching them specific strategies. It is the learners' involvement, the learners' strategies, and the learners' ability to select their own ways that count, regardless of what the teacher is trying to do. The learners in general, must be encouraged to develop independence inside and outside the classroom. The following are the main points that may help the teacher to better train his/her students to take on responsibility for their learning (Cook 2001:106–08).

1. The teacher may exploit good language learning strategies with his students and make them aware of these strategies, so that they can choose the ones which suit them.
2. The teacher may train his students to develop their learning independence.
3. The teacher may make his students aware of a range of strategies that they can adopt.
4. The teacher may explain to his/her students similarities and differences between learning an L2 and learning other school subjects. Students in learning both an L2 and other school subjects, may be trained how to prepare themselves for the class, take notes, pay attention to what is said in the classroom, etc. These are general strategies useful for the students whether they are studying Physics or English.

Further reading

Oxford, R. L. (2002). Language learning strategies in a nutshell: Update and ESL suggestions. . *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice, 4*(3), 124-132.