

Learner Strategies in Second Language Acquisition

TUNKU MOHANI TUNKU MOHTAR

Introduction

It is every teacher's wish to help his or her students become proficient in English. More often than not ESL teachers find students having difficulty in learning English. After using several approaches, methods or techniques, teachers often wonder why students do not learn what teachers teach. There is a gap between teaching and learning. Teaching strategies may not be compatible with learning strategies. While teachers develop strategies of teaching, students have their own strategies of learning.

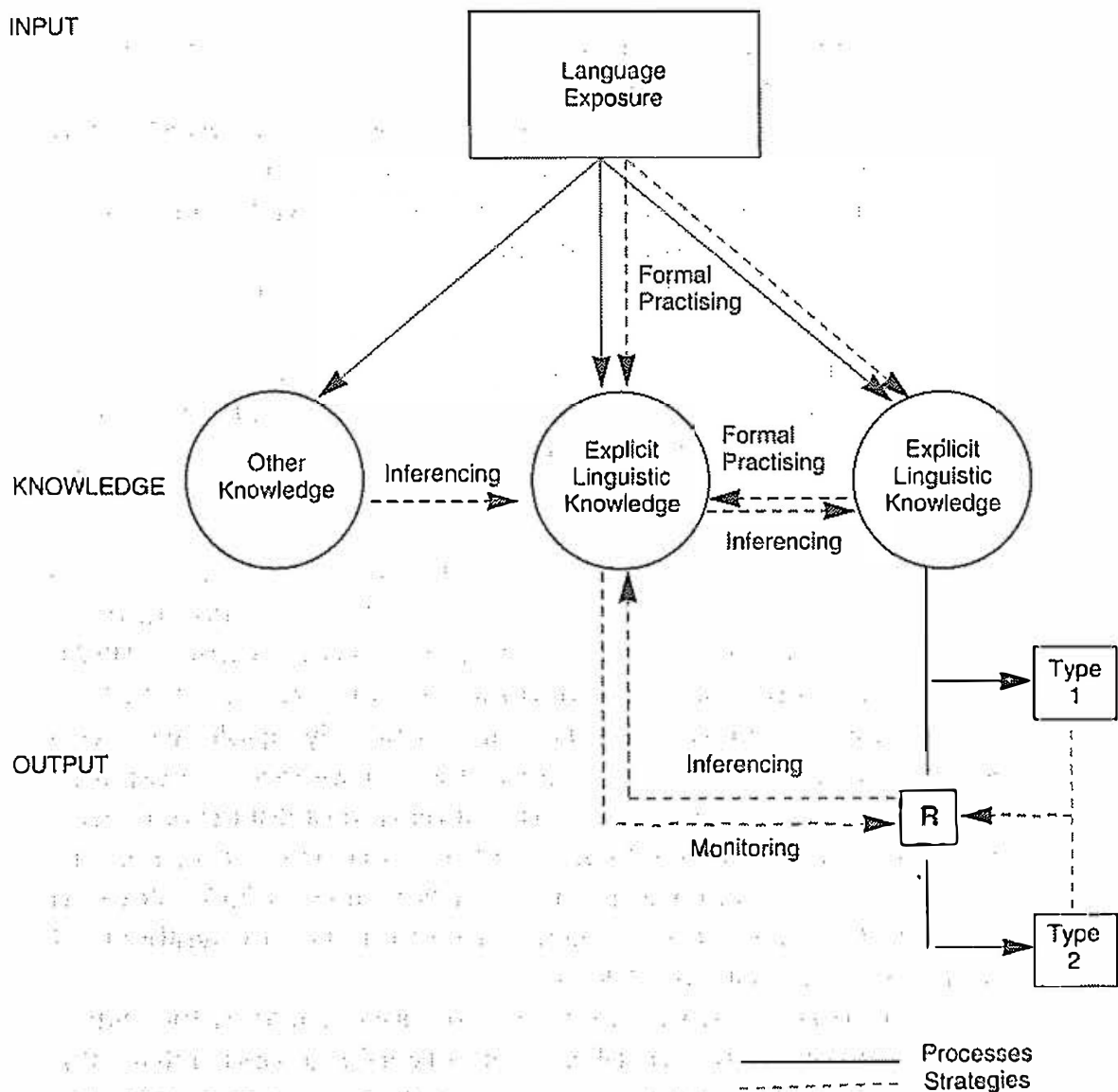
It is the objective of this paper to put forward some learning strategies employed by the learner and discuss their importance in terms of teaching and learning.

Learner strategies have been described to include any set of operations, steps, plans or routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information (O'Malley et al., 1983; Brown et al., 1983), that is, what learners do to learn and do to regulate their learning (Rubin, 1987). Learner strategies include metacognitive and cognitive activities. Metacognitive learning strategies are generally applicable to a variety of learning tasks and include the knowledge of cognitive operations of oneself or others and planning, monitoring and evaluating a learning activity (Brown, 1982). Cognitive strategies are often specific to distinct learning activities and include steps in learning that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials (Brown, 1982).

The strategies used by learners are observable in the classroom. However such a display is observable among active students. The learning strategies of the quiet ones remain unknown.

How do they learn? How much control over learning do these learners exercise?

To gain a better insight into the learning process, it might be worthwhile examining some theoretical constructs. The learning process includes both explicit and implicit knowledge. Both types of knowledge facilitate the process of getting, storing, retrieving and using information (Bialystok, 1978; McLaughlin, 1978; Smith, 1981). For some learners and some tasks, it is assumed that conscious attention to the learning process is the first step to making language automatic (Rubin, 1987). Bialystok clarifies the learning process and the learner's strategies in a model of second language learning.



According to Bialystok, the learner makes use of three types of information in the learning process. They are explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge and other knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to conscious facts about the language such as rules of grammar. Implicit knowledge is intuitive information upon which the learner operates to produce responses such as comprehension or production. Other information includes information the learner brings to the language task such as the cultural context associated with particular words or expressions. The learner's responses can be spontaneous and immediate as in speaking (type 1) or they can be deliberated and occur after a delay as in reading (type 2).

Bialystok identifies four strategies which the learner uses. The formal and functional practising enables the learner to increase his exposure to the language. In formal practising he focuses on the language code. The learner would thus refer to grammar books, dictionaries and so on. He operates on information already in explicit knowledge for automising it and transferring it to implicit knowledge by means such as language drills. In functional practising, the learner uses the language in communicative situations. Meaning is of primary importance here. The learner also monitors or uses conscious knowledge of the language to examine and modify or correct linguistic output. This concept of monitoring is similar to that postulated by Krashen (1977) in his "Monitor" theory. Since time is required for this conscious knowledge to be utilised, monitoring can only affect output after some delay. The learner also uses inferencing as a strategy whereby he may arrive at particular linguistic information which was previously unknown. Inferencing is an effective way to increase comprehension of linguistic material (Bialystok, 1978). The learner also uses inferencing in exploiting information from other knowledge, for example, getting cues from the environment, gestures and knowledge of other languages and the like. Inferencing from implicit knowledge may be unconscious. The learner may be unaware that adverbs end in "ly" but may implicitly use this information to infer that some previously unknown word is an adverb and hence arrive at the meaning of the word. Inferring from explicit knowledge may occur by means of using the context of the passage or message to obtain meanings of words or forms.

Rationale

It is worthwhile investigating the metacognitive and cognitive strategies of the learner as they are useful for school-based learning and they also have the potential for informal learning environments (Wenden, 1983). According to Rubin (1987), once the learners have developed an ability to evaluate their own learning process, they become the best judge of how to approach the learning task.

It is not possible for a teacher to follow the learning path of each of her students because much of it is not readily accessible to the teacher. Since teachers find it difficult to determine how each student learns best, students must be taught to help themselves (Rubin, 1987). Some learners are more successful than others. This success can be attributed to particular sets of cognitive processes and behaviours which they use to enable them to be successful. Some learners are more analytic in their approach to the learning tasks, others are intuitive. Some prefer to use written materials in learning a foreign language while others prefer to hear the language. In his study of learner preferences, Willing (1985) discovered four different types of learners, mainly:

- **concrete learners:** the learners who prefer learning by using games, pictures, films and videos, talking in pairs, learning through the use of cassette and going on excursions.
- **analytic learners:** the learners who like studying grammar, studying English books, studying alone, finding their own mistakes, having problems to work on, learning through reading newspapers.
- **communicative learners:** the learners who like observing and listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, watching TV in English, using English in shops etc., learning English words by hearing them and learning by conversation.
- **authority-oriented learners:** the learners who like the teacher to explain everything, writing everything in a notebook, having their own textbook, learning to read, studying grammar and learning English words by seeing them.

In recent years attempts at remediating the strategies of unsuccessful language learners have proliferated. Some examples are studies conducted by Wenden and Rubin (1987), O'Malley and Charlot (1990), Oxford (1990) and Van and

Abraham (1990). The strategies employed by the more successful learners could perhaps be taught to the less successful ones. Learning strategies are used by "good" language learners to assist them in gaining command over required skills (Naiman et al., 1975) and are associated with language acquisition (Politzer and McGroarty, 1983). These strategies are applicable to a variety of language tasks (Bialystok, 1981) and can be adapted to the language proficiencies of individual learners (Cohen and Asphek, 1980). Learning strategies are relatively easy to use and are teachable to learners who are not familiar with them (Rubin and Thompson, 1982). Teaching the use of learning strategies in reading has been relatively successful (Wittrock et al., 1975) and extensions to second language learning would be fruitful (O'Malley et al., 1985).

Learners need to be aware of different learning strategies so that they can become autonomous language learners (Wenden, 1987). They will become not only efficient at learning and using their second language but also capable of self-directing these endeavours. In self-directed learning, learners will be able to take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975).

In fostering autonomy, Holec (1980) stresses the importance of critical reflection. If learners are to be weaned away from their state of dependence to one of autonomy, they must not only acquire a number of relevant strategies but also experience a change of psychological attitudes towards what learning is. This means they must have very clear ideas of what a language is, what learning a language means, the roles of the teacher and the learner, the materials which are necessary and so on.

Self-direction promotes learning both inside and outside the classroom. If students are dependent on teachers to shape language to suit them and to provide them with proper input, they will not be able to take control of their own learning when the teacher is not there (Rubin, 1987). Thus if the learner can exert control over the learning process and use of the correct strategies, he will be able to increase his efficiency. As discovered in Van and Abraham's (1990) study, learners were unsuccessful because they failed to apply strategies appropriately to the task at hand and not because they lacked strategies.

Various research studies have identified strategies used by good language learners. Naiman et al. (1978) suggest that good language learners will:

- actively involve themselves in the learning task by responding positively to the given learning opportunity, by identifying and seeking preferred learning environments and exploiting them.
- develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system by referring to their native language or analysing the target language and making inferences about it.
- develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction.
- accept and cope with effective demands of the second language.
- constantly revise their second language system by inferencing and monitoring.

More specific techniques uncovered by Naiman et al, include repeating aloud after the teacher and/or native speaker, following rules as given by the grammar books or textbooks, making up vocabulary charts and memorising them, listening to radio, TV, records etc., having contact with native speakers and reading anything – magazines, newspapers, comics etc.

Rubin(1981) studied adult learners' learning strategies and concentrated on the cognitive processes they used. The strategies they employed were:

- clarification/verification: the learner asks for examples of how to use a word or expression, asks for correct forms to see and looks up words in the dictionary.
- monitoring: the learner corrects his or her own or others' pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar etc.
- memorisation: the learner takes note of new items and finds some association with them for purposes of storage and retrieval.
- guessing/inductive inferencing: the learner uses clues to guess rules.
- deductive reasoning: the learner looks for and uses general rules. He compares his language to the target language to identify similarities and differences.
- practice: the learner experiments with new sounds, uses a mirror to practise, talks to himself in the target language and drills himself on words in different forms.

In a study of ESL learners, O'Malley et al. identified 26 learning strategies. The metacognitive strategies were to use advance organisers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, advance preparation, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation and self-reinforcement. The cognitive strategies were: repetition, resourcing (using target language reference materials), directed physical attention, translation, grouping or classifying materials, note-taking, consciously applying rules, combining known elements of language in a new way, imagery, auditory representation, using key words, contextualisation, elaboration; transfer, inferencing and questions for clarification and cooperation.

Implications for teaching and learning

Once the range of possible learner strategies has been obtained, the teacher would be able to provide an environment which would enable students to identify those strategies that work best for them. Any strategy sincerely adopted by the learner is more likely to help him if he considers assuming responsibility for his own learning a fundamental requirement for success in language learning (Carver, 1984). Some learner strategies are better than others. The learner will improve his command of the language by using efficient strategies in performing a particular task.

The teacher does not have to depend on others for new techniques. Furthermore, a technique which is effective in engendering learning in one class may not produce the same result when used in another class. When the teacher has identified the learning strategy that would benefit the learner she can develop and/or use the technique that is compatible with that learning strategy.

The classroom teacher knows her students best. Therefore investigations into learner strategies can easily be conducted by the teacher. She can observe both the active and the inactive students and find out the strategies they use in learning. To get more information about learning, a learner may be asked to 'think aloud' as he performs a task, that is, he is asked to let his thoughts flow verbally (Hosenfeld, 1976). The teacher then records what the student says. She may probe the subject's thoughts if they are not being expressed.

Teachers can also make learners aware of learning strategies through discussions and comments as a means of helping the

learners decide on the strategies to use with materials given (Caver, 1984). Allwright (1980) suggests that learners be asked to describe the strategies they employ and rate them in terms of frequency of use, enjoyment, usefulness and efficiency. Research regarding learning strategies (Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1986; O'Malley et al., 1985; Hosenfeld, 1976) have shown that learners are able to describe their choice of strategies, their setting of priorities and the way they evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies (Cohen, 1987).

Rubin (1981) provides some helpful guidelines in making use of student reports of their own strategies. This serves as a means of recording possibilities of what a learner might do in the future. It can also help the learner increase his techniques by discovering strategies used by others.

Teachers can also encourage their students to develop learning strategies which are efficient in ensuring successful learning. Teachers should allow students to give feedback on their learning difficulties so that teaching strategies could be designed to develop certain learning strategies.

According to O'Malley et al. (1985: 43)

Classroom instruction has the potential to influence a wide range of skills to which the strategies can be applied teachers can go beyond their traditional role of providing information and create circumstances in which students become acquainted with and apply strategies that are appropriate for the type of learning activities being presented. Furthermore, the teacher can encourage and assist students in applying the strategies to an expanded range of language activities and materials so that the strategies are transferred to new activities and are used by students independently of the teacher's support.

To understand further the cognitive and metacognitive strategies of students, teachers can experience learning a second or foreign language themselves. Strategies which are effective in enhancing learning can then be suggested to others.

Learning strategies can be taught to learners. However, learners need to be informed of the value and significance of the strategies. They need to be taught both the metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

Conclusion

Research on learner strategies has been motivated partly by the desire to discover how successful learners learn so that this information can be used to help less effective learners (Wenden, 1986). The activities used should not only be limited to transmitting effective strategies but also to discovering what the learners believe or know about their learning. Research on mental states in second language learning is becoming important and the findings can benefit learners, that is, make them more successful learners. Learners themselves may have important insights into how they learn (Cohen and Hosenfeld, 1981). However, individuals differ in their cognitive skills. They also differ in their ability to get the required exposure to the language and in the amount of help they need from others in order to learn. If the teaching strategy is compatible with the learning strategy, then learning is facilitated, if not, then learning will be impeded.

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