LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: SOME PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

JERZY ZYBERT

Introduction

The last two decades, or so, have witnessed an important change in foreign language pedagogy: the emphasis has shifted from the teacher to the learner. In line with the move away from the teacher- to the learner-centred approach the active role of the learner in the learning process has widely been recognized. The shift coincided with the advent of the principles of the communicative perspective in language teaching methods which accentuated the learner's individual involvement in the learning process. Two major concepts emerged in relation to this: that of needs analysis (the learner himself establishes his learning goals) and that of learner autonomy (the learner himself decides about his preferred procedures for accomplishing the learning tasks). In consequence, all this has led to the acknowledgement of the assumption that it is the learner that is ultimately responsible for his/her learning success/failure. In the ensuing research that attempted to find out why some learners are better than others, learner strategies began to be viewed as some of the major determinants of the process.

This paper is intended to aid those foreign language teachers who do not feel familiar with current developments in the field of second language acquisition to better understand some language learning processes. It seems clear that L2 learners employ certain learning strategies naturally and intuitively. Consequently, their potential for strategy use should be exploited to maximize teaching and enhance learning. Hopefully, learners can be trained to use those strategies that they have not discovered for themselves. Some suggestions are provided below as to how teachers might train their learners in strategy use in language classes.

Learner strategies – what they are

The obvious fact that foreign language learners differ in rate and achievement called for the need to identify the factors determining success or failure. Descriptions of successful language learners and careful examination of their characteristics (cf., for example, Rubin 1975) incited extensive research on language learning strategies. Researchers intended to establish the typical features of "good" learners and the learning procedures that they follow. The underlying assumption of the research was, apparently, the conviction that findings might guide teachers in aiding less successful learners.

Admittedly, language learning strategies are rather difficult to define. A number of their definitions and classifications have been advanced in related literature. For example, Ellis (1994) defines them as "the behaviours or actions that learners engage in, in order to learn or use the L2" (p. 712). Earlier, Tarone (1983) defined them as attempts "to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language – to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence" (p. 67). In Rubin's words, they "are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly" (Rubin 1987: 22). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have proposed that learner strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Finally, Oxford (1993) characterizes them as: "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability" (p. 18). She also provides specific examples of language learning strategies that include watching TV and guessing the meaning of new expressions and predicting what will come next.

What is conspicuous about these definitions is their emphasis on the learning processes and their characteristics. Even though the researchers are not always unvarying as far as their definitions go, they, nevertheless, seem to accept some fundamental attributes of learner strategies. They agree, at least, that strategies:

– are employed (usually consciously) by learners themselves (i.e., are learner generated),
– promote the development of language competence and facilitate language learning,
– can be observable (learners' actions) or hidden (mental processes or thoughts),
– involve learners' memory and the information they receive.

Apart from the above-mentioned characteristics, other aspects of learner strategies are also considered in relevant literature. However, they are not acknowledged so commonly – researchers differ from one another in assigning their emphasis; e.g., Wenden and Rubin (1987) believe that the strategies that learners use are a manifestation of their desire for control and autonomy in learning. The most comprehensive list of these characteristics to date has been provided by Oxford (1990a) in whose view language learning strategies:

– refer to approaches and actions used by the learner to learn L2,
– are problem-oriented (a given strategy is used to solve a particular learning difficulty),
– are, in general, used consciously and identified by learners,
– involve both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour,
– can be used in L1 and L2,
– are either behavioural or mental,
– contribute to learning (directly or indirectly),
– vary in use depending on the task being performed and on individual learner preferences.

Studies show that good language learners succeed in spite of a number of adverse learning conditions or situations, such as poor input and little opportunity for language use or bad materials and teachers (cf. Ellis 1994). Their success is, thus, evidence of using appropriate learning strategies selected to face the learning hardships. Therefore it seems appropriate to add, with emphasis, that strategy use also entails learners' critical thinking about their own learning problems and the materials used in the classroom. Critical thinking implies a mental activity that includes such processes as predicting, concluding, discovering, understanding, and evaluating. As a result, learners can make plans, create opinions, find solutions, and therefore achieve more independence in the process of learning a foreign language.

The significance of language learning strategies

The communicative approach to foreign language teaching concerns itself most of all with developing communicative competence in the learner. It is clear now that strategies can be of great help in this respect. Thus it appears obvious that training learners to use them can also help them to achieve better results. The real value of using strategies seems to be in making the learners actively involved in the learning tasks and enhancing their self-directed investment into the learning process. Learners are likely to be more successful if they, e.g., monitor their performance, pay conscious attention to what others say and how they say what they say, or orally interact with other speakers, particularly native ones. That strategy use actually benefits language learners has been documented by research; e.g. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) showed that successful learners are aware not only that they employ various strategies, but also of what strategies they use and why. Admittedly, poor learners also frequently employ the same strategies that successful learners use (as evidenced in the research conducted by students preparing their M.A. theses in the Dept. of English, University of Warsaw). However, their poor results are not attributed to the strategies, but to other factors. This, actually, is exactly in line with Skehan's (1989) remark that "other reasons cause them to be unsuccessful" (p.76). Nevertheless, poor learners differ from the successful ones in that they perceptibly do not use what are called metacognitive learning strategies. Thus, it seems, that both the number and the type of strategies used by learners are

determinants of their ultimate achievement. This fact should be a guideline for the language teacher in her attempts to train learners in strategy use.

The peculiar and important role that strategies play in language learning can easily be recognized when one looks carefully at their potential abundance and their variety. Various numbers of strategies and their different taxonomies have been proposed (c.f., e.g. Rubin 1987, O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990, Droździał-Szelest 1997). The significance of particular strategies can be illustrated by a number of the claims advanced by Oxford. She maintains, e.g., that memory strategies "aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving information when needed for communication"; that cognitive strategies are useful "for forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages in the target language"; and that compensation strategies "are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language"; she also claims that metacognitive strategies "help learners exercise 'executive control' through planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluating their own learning"; furthermore, affective language learning strategies "enable learners to control feelings, motivations, and attitudes related to language learning" and social strategies "facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation" (Oxford, 1990b: 71). Out of a large number of strategies it should suffice to quote only one type of social strategy, viz. asking questions, which the learner may use to request clarification/verification or correction. Even though it seems that asking questions to get clarification or confirmation is a natural learning behaviour, everyday teaching practice shows that many learners do not resort to it. For this reason it seems obvious that even such simple strategies can and should be taught.

Language learning strategies in the classroom

Strategy use and strategy training can be naturally put together in particular language lessons or learning tasks. One of the crucial points in this regard is that teaching should focus on the learning process itself and that the learners should understand its nature. With the help of a text like that of Rubin and Thompson (1994) teachers can aid learners in becoming aware of, e.g., the usefulness of particular learning strategies in improving their grammatical competence or lexical knowledge and seeing what learning resources are available for them to improve the particular language skills. Whatever the teaching and learning goals are, it is strongly believed that strategy training can greatly enhance foreign language learning and be fully complementary in teaching. Such training can easily be implemented provided at least three things are taken into careful consideration: the context of teaching, the relevance of strategies to what is taught, and the factors determining learners' choice of strategies.

The teaching context

It is understood here that the teaching context embraces the learners, the teaching materials, and the way materials are exploited. For effective strategy training, getting to

know the learners themselves will be basic: do they want to develop their language skills, which ones, and why? what their individual and common interests are? what types of learner they are? what learning styles they use? etc. Next, it will be important to determine what learning strategies they are already using, e.g., do they want correction and, if they do, how much and of what kind? do they exhibit particular needs, such as clarification, confirmation, and verification? what their social learning preferences are: are they rather individualistic or do they work collectively in pairs or groups? All this knowledge can best be obtained by using a questionnaire – answers should provide the most objective information about the learners. Nevertheless, straightforward observation of their behaviour during language lessons and informal discussions with them about language learning will also be valuable for the decisions concerning how and what to train them in.

As stated, the teaching materials are also very important in the course of strategy use training. Learning strategies are already included in a number of modern course-books and these will be particularly helpful for the teacher and the learner alike. Thus, teachers are advised to scrutinize the course-books they decide to use in class with regard to their potential for strategy use and strategy training. Close inspection of text-books and other ready-made materials will reveal the wealth and variety of language learning strategies incorporated in them together with suggestions, often made explicitly, of specific ways in which training to use them can be conducted. For example, FCE and CAE courses provide abundant possibilities in that respect, particularly for vocabulary learning strategies.

The teaching context also involves the teacher herself, or rather the way in which she implements her teaching. At issue are such questions as whether learners are allowed an active and varied approach in tackling the learning tasks, are given opportunity to work on their own and learn from one another, and are encouraged to ask questions. All in all, the teacher who wants her learners to use language learning strategies and to train them to use them should first examine her own teaching style: am I an omniscient type whose job is to transmit my knowledge of the language to my learners, or am I a collaborative type who believes that my mission is to help learners develop language skills? If I am the former type I had better transform, as soon as possible, into the latter type, that is, actually, not a teacher but an instructor. I can be a successful teacher only when I understand that it is learning, not teaching, that determines the ultimate outcomes of the classroom events.

Language learning strategies and actual language teaching

Taking into account the context, as outlined above, is a preliminary prerequisite to the successful implementation and practice of strategy training and use. While teaching particular aspects of language, it is imperative that regular and careful attention should be paid first of all to those strategies which the teacher finds the most suitable for the learners; in principle, they should be:

- appropriate for the task at hand,
- relevant to the teaching materials, and
- related to the teacher's own teaching style.

It is also important not to introduce too many strategies at a time, but to concentrate on those that are already employed in the teaching materials and are currently used in the classroom. Through explicit attention to selected strategies learners will notice their relevance for particular learning tasks and will ultimately develop awareness and appreciation of the strategies that they are using. This, in turn, will stimulate them to become more independent of the teacher and to take more responsibility for their own learning, thus developing autonomy in language learning.

Factors affecting the choice of language learning strategies

Language learners do not employ learning strategies at random or in a vacuum. Their preferences for selecting particular strategies are determined by a number of factors which operate in various combinations. Apart from the specific characteristics of strategies themselves (such as the learning task – cf. section above), it is obvious that individual learner factors strongly influence their choice of strategies. Particular strategies are chosen dependent on preferred approaches to learning, and there are many of them, such as visual or auditory, memory-based, analytic or holistic, rule-forming or data-gathering, etc. on the one hand, and factors such as learning style, motivation, risk-taking, anxiety, etc., on the other.

In training learners to use appropriate strategies, however, the teacher's awareness of her students' individual learning modalities or preferences and personality traits should/will facilitate the task only if the strategies and the individual differences match. This requires the teacher's continuous and deliberate reflection on her own past (or possibly current) experiences as a language learner. The contemplative teacher is more likely to succeed in strategy training than the unreflective one: the former is able, on the one hand, to compare the effectiveness of the strategies used by herself and, on the other, to refer those being implemented in the classroom to her personal experience. Conclusions drawn from these reflections will suggest important improvements for future language lessons, particularly if the learners' behaviour and their learning outcomes are considered.

It should be emphasised that learners' critical thinking is as significant as that of the teacher. Therefore, in order to ensure effective strategy training the teacher has to encourage the learners themselves to reflect on the strategies being implemented in the course. The materials used in the classroom may be of immediate assistance in developing reflection, learner autonomy, and, eventually, learning strategy selection and use. In deciding on the course-book the teacher should consider such questions as, e.g., whether it is designed to teach learners explicitly how to use various strategies, whether it shows learners how to evaluate their progress, whether it includes activities that teach them how to, or enable them to, solve problems, draw conclusions, summarize, form

opinions, infer meaning from context and whether it provides opportunities for distinguishing between facts and beliefs, for categorizing and associating, etc.

An experiment

To verify/validate some of the assumptions presented and discussed above I undertook an experiment in strategy training and use. It involved two groups of upper intermediate learners, all university students, aged 23-25, who were preparing to take the Cambridge CAE examination. They attended an evening course, meeting twice a week for two contact hours. The experiment started in mid-October 1999 and ended in late January 2000. The teaching materials used in the course were *Focus on Advanced English* by Sue O'Connell and the accompanying *Grammar Practice*. The groups were equal in size: Group A consisted of nine learners, and Group B of eight learners. They all exhibited a similarly strong eagerness to improve their competence in English, attending classes regularly and actively participating in them. Initially the teaching procedure was exactly the same in both groups. In order to obtain a valid comparison of the groups with regard to their language learning ability they were given the same vocabulary test after Unit 2 was completed. The results of the test showed no differences between them: the scores were almost identical in both groups and the minor differences were qualitatively insignificant.

Beginning with Unit 3, however, one essential difference in the teaching approach was introduced: Group B received explicit training in the use of language learning strategies, while group A did not. In group B deliberate emphasis was put on vocabulary learning strategies: during the rest of the course explicit arguments for the importance of lexical knowledge in everyday communication (and for the CAE examination) were purposefully raised and discussed in each lesson (to strengthen their motivation) This was always followed by drawing the learners' attention to specific vocabulary learning strategies whenever these were relevant to the activities and tasks performed during the lesson. The students in the experimental group also got additional exercises and practice (which the control group did not get) on synonyms/antonyms and items of multiple meanings; they were instructed on the ways in which they could expand their current lexical knowledge by learning new meanings of those items; they analysed the morphological structure of multi-morpheme words and practised forming new words from different stems provided either by myself or by individual students. They talked about their own ways of recording new (and difficult) words and their meanings and of returning to them – in this way they were learning, additionally, from one another and, simultaneously, strengthening their self-confidence. Also, to raise their lexical sensitivity and awareness, I gave them a short questionnaire about the methods of vocabulary learning they employed, both in and out of class. This was followed by a vocabulary knowledge test in which they were requested to provide the meaning, identify the part of speech, and give an example sentence they said they had "learned". Having been marked, the tests were returned to the students for a discussion of the results in class.

The experiment ended with a test on the vocabulary included in units 3-8. The test was taken by both groups and its results turned out to be very revealing: Group B, the experimental one, scored a surprising 100% of correct answers against only 71% scored by students in group A, the control one.

Conclusions

The small-scale experiment described above does not entitle one to make generalizations. Nevertheless, the procedure adopted in it indicates that vocabulary learning is a very individualised activity. For this reason any attempt at training learners in strategy use requires that learners reflect on their own methods of learning on the one hand, and that they are presented a variety of potential strategies, on the other. The results of the experiment provide clear evidence of at least three facts about language learning strategies; namely, they
– are actually used by learners,
– are useful tools for foreign language learning,
– can be taught and learnt.
Evidently, language learning strategies involve learners' individual learning styles. It follows that teachers should help students learn by making them reflect on their own learning. However, since many, if not most, school-learners expect to be told what to do, there is always a danger that learners may be manipulated when being encouraged to develop and use their own particular strategies. Yet, if teaching is appropriate, individualized, and focuses on the learners, they will recognise in the end that learning is their own responsibility. Awareness of this fact will also develop their learning autonomy. Teachers should thus conclude that their students' ultimate achievements as a direct result of strategy use are worth the effort they invest in teaching them.

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