LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Learning theories can best be described as conceptual or philosophical orientations about ways that human beings learn. These include behaviorist, cognitive, and socio cultural perspectives. Behavioral learning theory views learning as a response to stimuli in the environment; the learner is a "creature of habit" that can be manipulated, observed, and described. Behaviorist influences in second language teaching can be observed in methods such as the audio-lingual approach and situational language teaching. Language teaching is influenced by the fields of linguistics and psychology and, by extension, second language teaching methods are closely related to concepts and theories about the ways in which humans learn in general, along with the ways in which linguists define language. The following sections briefly review theories of language, followed by theories of learning.

Introduction

Language is a cognition that truly makes us human. Whereas other species do communicate with an innate ability to produce a limited number of meaningful vocalisations (e.g. bonobos), or even with partially learned systems (e.g. bird songs), there is no other species known to date that can express infinite ideas (sentences) with a limited set of symbols (speech sounds and words). This ability is remarkable in itself. What makes it even more remarkable is that researchers are finding evidence for mastery of this complex skill in increasingly younger children. Infants as young as 12 months are reported to have sensitivity to the grammar needed to understand causative sentences (who did what to whom; e.g. the bunny pushed the frog (Rowland & Noble, 2010). Even after 60 years of research into child language development, the mechanism that enables children to segment syllables and words out of the strings of sounds they hear, and to acquire grammar to understand and produce language is still quite an enigma.

Early Theories

One of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner (1957). As one of the pioneers of behaviorism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence. Skinner argued that children learn language based on behaviorist reinforcement principles by associating words with meanings.

Correct utterances are positively reinforced when the child realises the communicative value of words and phrases. For example, when the child says 'milk' and the mother will smile and give her some as a result, the child will find this outcome rewarding, enhancing the child's language development (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011).

Universal Grammar

However, Skinner's account was soon heavily criticised by Noam Chomsky, the world's most famous linguist to date. In the spirit of cognitive revolution in the 1950's, Chomsky argued that children will never acquire the tools needed for processing an infinite number of sentences if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone.

Consequently, he proposed the theory of Universal Grammar: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitate the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults.

Universal Grammar is considered to contain all the grammatical information needed to combine these categories, e.g. noun and verb, into phrases. The child's task is just to learn the words of her language (Ambridge & Lieven). For example, according to the Universal Grammar account, children instinctively know how to combine a noun (e.g. a boy) and a verb (to eat) into a meaningful, correct phrase (A boy eats). This Chomskian (1965) approach to language acquisition has inspired hundreds of scholars to investigate the nature of these assumed grammatical categories and the research is still ongoing.

Contemporary Research

A decade or two later some psycholinguists began to question the existence of Universal Grammar. They argued that categories like noun and verb are biologically, evolutionarily and psychologically implausible and that the field called for an account that can explain for the acquisition process without innate categories. Researchers started to suggest that instead of having a language-specific mechanism for language processing, children might utilise general cognitive and learning principles.

An example of the gradual pattern learning is morphology acquisition. Morphemes are the smallest grammatical markers, or units, in language that alter words. In English, regular plurals are marked with an –s morpheme (e.g. dog+s). Similarly, English third singular verb forms (she eat+s, a boy kick+s) are marked with the –s morpheme. Children are considered to acquire their first instances of third singular forms as entire phrasal chunks (Daddy kicks, a girl eats, a dog barks) without the ability of teasing the finest grammatical components apart.

When the child hears a sufficient number of instances of a linguistic construction (i.e. the third singular verb form), she will detect patterns across the utterances she has heard. In this case, the repeated pattern is the –s marker in this particular verb form. As a result of many repetitions and examples of the –s marker in different verbs, the child will acquire sophisticated knowledge that, in English, verbs must be marked with an –s morpheme in the third singular form (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011; Pine, Conti-Ramsden, Joseph, Lieven & Serratrice, 2008; Theakson & Lieven, 2005). Approaching language acquisition from the perspective of general cognitive processing is an economical account of how children can learn their first language without an excessive biolinguistic mechanism.

Importance of Language Learning Strategies:

Recently attention not only to ´what to learn´ but also to ´how to learn´ has been paid in educational programs. Therefore, emphasis is placed on developing learning strategies generally – teachers should be aware of various kinds of strategies in order to inform subsequently their pupils of using and advantages of the strategies. The first step to realization of this approach, which means implementing learning strategies to teaching process, is to know what learning strategies are about.

As for definitions of language learning strategies in the area of linguistics, Ellis, a renowned linguist aimed to second language acquisition, specifies them in the following way:

"Learning strategies are the particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn an L2" (1997: 76-77).

As Wenden (1985) reminds that there is an old proverb which states "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a life time". When this approach is applied to language learning, instead of giving the learners immediate solutions to their problems, if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they are empowered to manage their own learning. Rubin and Stern (1975) in the mid-seventies have created awareness on the importance of the strategies used by the learners in the language learning process. Nyikos and Oxford (1993 pg.11) put it "learning begins with the learner According to Fedderholdt (1997:1)

"………the language learner is capable of using a wide variety of language learning strategies appropriately can improve his language skills in a better way."

There is no consistent and generally used classification of language learning strategies. Thus different researchers have suggested different taxonomy of language learning strategies.

Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategies have been classified by many scholars (Wenden and Rubin 1987; O'Malley et al. 1985; Oxford 1990; Stern 1992; Ellis 1994, etc.). However, most of these attempts to classify language learning strategies reflect more or less the same categorizations of language learning strategies without any radical changes. In what follows, Rubin's (1987), Oxford's (1990), O'Malley's (1985), and Stern's (1992) taxonomies of language learning strategies will be handled:

Rubin's (1987) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Rubin, who pionered much of the work in the field of strategies, makes the distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute directly or indirectly to language learning. These are:

- Learning Strategies
- Communication Strategies
- Social Strategies

Learning Strategies

They are of two main types, being the strategies contributing directly to the development of the language system constructed by the learner:

- Cognitive Learning Strategies
- Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Cognitive Learning Strategies

They refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that requires direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin identified 6 main cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning:

- Clarification/Verification
- Guessing/Inductive Inferencing
- Deductive Reasoning
- Practice
- Memorization
- Monitoring

Metacognitive Learning Strategies

These strategies are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning. They involve various processes as planning, prioritising, setting goals, and self-management.

Communication Strategies

They are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker.

Social Strategies

Social strategies are those activities learners engage in which afford them opportunities to be exposed to and practise their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin and Wenden 1987:23-27).

Oxford's (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990:9) sees the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. Oxford divides language learning strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect, which are further subdivided into 6 groups. In Oxford's system, metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning, memory strategies are those used for storage of information, and compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge gaps to continue the communication. Oxford's (1990:17) taxonomy of language learning strategies is shown in the following :

Direct Strategies

    I. Memory
    A. Creating mental linkages
    B. Applying images and sounds
    C. Reviewing well
    D. Employing action
    II.Cognitive
    A. Practising
    B. Receiving and sending messages strategies
    C. Analysing and reasoning
    D. Creating structure for input and output

III. Compensation strategies

A. Guessing intelligently

B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

Indirect Strategies

I. Metacognitive Strategies

A. Centering your learning

B. Arranging and planning your learning

C. Evaluating your learning

II. Affective Strategies

A. Lowering your anxiety

B. Encouraging yourself

C. Taking your emotional temperature

III. Social Strategies

A. Asking questions

B. Cooperating with others

C. Emphathising with others

It can be seen that much of the recent work in this area has been underpinned by a broad concept of language learning strategies that goes beyond cognitive processes to include social and communicative strategies.

O'Malley's (1985) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley et al. (1985:582-584) divide language learning strategies into three main subcategories:

- Metacognitive Strategies
- Cognitive Strategies
- Socioaffective Strategies

Metacognitive Strategies

It can be stated that metacognitive is a term to express executive function, strategies which require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Among the main metacognitive strategies, it is possible to include advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, self-evaluation.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferencing are among the most important cognitive strategies.

Socioaffective Strategies

As to the socioaffective strategies, it can be stated that they are related with social-mediating activity and transacting with others. Cooperation and question for clarification are the main socioaffective strategies (Brown 1987:93-94).

Stern's (1992) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

According to Stern (1992:262-266), there are five main language learning strategies. These are as follows:
- Management and Planning Strategies
- Cognitive Strategies
- Communicative - Experiential Strategies
- Interpersonal Strategies
- Affective Strategies

Management and Planning Strategies

These strategies are related with the learner's intention to direct his own learning. A learner can take charge of the development of his own programme when he is helped by a teacher whose role is that of an adviser and resource person. That is to say that the learner must:
- Decide what commitment to make to language learning
- Set himself reasonable goals
- Decide on an appropriate methodology, select appropriate resources, and monitor progress,
- Evaluate his achievement in the light of previously determined goals and expectations (Stern 1992:263).

Cognitive Strategies

They are steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. In the following, some of the cognitive strategies are exhibited:

- Clarification / Verification
- Guessing / Inductive Inferencing
- Deductive Reasoning
- Practice
- Memorization
- Monitoring

Communicative - Experiential Strategies

Communication strategies, such as circumlocution, gesturing, paraphrase, or asking for repetition and explanation are techniques used by learners so as to keep a conversation going. The purpose of using these techniques is to avoid interrupting the flow of communication (Stern 1992:265).

Interpersonal Strategies

They should monitor their own development and evaluate their own performance. Learners should contact with native speakers and cooperate with them. Learners must become acquainted with the target culture (Stern 1992: 265-266).

Affective Strategies

It is evident that good language learners employ distinct affective strategies. Language learning can be frustrating in some cases. In some cases, the feeling of strangeness can be evoked by the foreign language. In some other cases, L2 learners may have negative feelings about native speakers of L2. Good language learners are more or less conscious of these emotional problems. Good language learners try to create associations of positive effect towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as towards the learning activities involved. Learning training can help students to face up to the emotional difficulties and to overcome them by drawing attention to the potential frustrations or pointing them out as they arise (Stern 1992:266).

Factors Influencing the Choice of Learning Strategies

The results of previous research studies have demonstrated that many factors affect the choice learning strategies. Those factors might include degree of awareness, age, sex, nationality, learning style, personality traits, motivation, learning context, and language proficiency (Zare & Nooreen, 2011; Khamkhien, 2010; Rahimi, et al. 2008; Chamot, 2004; Griffiths, 2003; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2007; Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). Studies have shown significant gender differences between males and female language learners in which females have demonstrated to use more and

wider range of strategies than males (Zare, 2010; Lee, 2003; Green, and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). Moreover, many research studies have explored the relationship between learning strategies and learners' proficiency in which the findings have indicated that more proficient language learners use a greater variety and often a greater number of learning strategies (Rahimi et at., 2008; Griffiths, 2003; Lee, 2003; Anderson, 2005; Bruen, 2001; Green and Oxford, 1995; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Ehrman, and Oxford, 1989). Motivation is another influential variable which has been widely examined with respect to its relationship with learning strategies. Findings have demonstrated that learners with high motivation use a significantly greater range of learning strategies than less motivated students (Oxford, 1990; McIntyre and Noels, 1996; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). Moreover, learning styles of language learners play a crucial role in choice of language learning strategies. It has been argued that learning styles and learning strategies of an individual learner can work cooperatively with a given instructional methodology (Oxford, 2003). If a harmony exists between these factors, the learner will perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety (Oxford, 2003). Studies in the area have shown that an individual's learning style preferences influence the type of learning strategies that they use (Rahimi et al., 2008; Chamot, 2004; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). For instance, extroverts have demonstrated strong preference for social strategies, while introverts use metacognitive strategies more frequently (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989). Learners who favor group study are shown to use social and interactive strategies, such as working with peers or requesting clarification (Rossi-Le, 1995). The findings of research studies in the area of language learning strategies provide a greater understanding of strategy use among EFL/ESL learners and support language instructors and curriculum developers to improve their approaches toward teaching and learning goals. These findings also strengthen the fact that strategy use is a complex phenomenon that interacts with a number of variables. These variables have influences on the use of overall strategies, strategy categories, and individual strategies in different ways. So, to obtain a clear idea of learners' patterns of strategy use, it is important to take all these aspects into consideration (Rahimi et al., 2008).

Language Learning Strategies and Language Learning Achievement

The findings in the area of language learning strategies have repeatedly demonstrated that the use of language learning strategies leads to better proficiency or achievement in mastering the target language (Lee, 2003; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Rahimi et at., 2008; Griffiths, 2003; Hong, 2006; Oxford, 1993). O'Malley et al., (1985) clearly highlighted the importance of learning strategies by defining them as "any set of operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information" (p.23). In a study (O'Malley et al., 1985), it has been found that

successful language learners have reported to use more and wider range of learning strategies than less-successful students. The same conclusion has been reached in another study (Green and Oxford, 1995) in which language learning strategies of all kinds were used more frequently by more proficient students. In a different study (Griffiths, 2003), a strong positive correlation between learning strategy use and language proficiency has been discovered. The findings revealed that advanced language learners have reported to employ learning strategies more frequently than elementary students. In this regard, language instructors should take their students learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students' learning strategies in order to support less successful student to achieve success and master the target language. Teachers can identify these strategies through observations, language diaries, questionnaires, interviews and so on. By doing so, teachers will be able to assist language learners to recognize and appreciate the power of language learning strategies in the process of second or foreign language learning. Through learning strategies, teachers can also help the students to maintain their motivation, autonomy, and confidence and keep on going and try to accomplish the goal of learning the target language.

As it was mentioned before, early research studies on language learning strategies put more emphasis on identifying strategic behaviors and characteristics of "the good language learner", while more recent studies have tried to illuminate taxonomies of language learning strategies and classify strategies which are employed by language learners in the process of language learning. Besides, by conducting numerous studies, researchers have discovered that there is an association between the use and choice of learning strategies and different variables like learning contexts, learner characteristics and learning experiences, language proficiency, or cultural and educational backgrounds (Oxford, 2003; Khamkhien, 2010; Hong, 2006; Deneme, 2008; Fuping, 2006). The findings have concluded that the employment of language learning strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learner in different ways. It is also found that a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and language learning achievement (Griffiths, 2003; Yang, 2007; Ya-Ling, 2008). Learning strategies are oriented towards the main goal of communicative competence, allow learners to get more self-directed, and support learning (Oxford, 1990). In this regard, language instructors need to incorporate language learning strategies into their teaching methods and approaches, train the students to apply the appropriate strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and encourage them to use the strategies as frequently as possible. Students can learn to use language learning strategies to improve their language skills.

Conclusion

Our understanding of the process of second language learning theories continues to evolve. These developing conceptions in turn influence our beliefs as to what is best practice for the teaching of English language learners in our schools. Recommendations for teachers have changed over the years along with our understanding of the research on classroom practice. In this module our goal is to present the latest knowledge on both the theory and practice of teaching English language learners.

In the light of historical experience, therefore, it is perhaps, important that, although learning strategies have the potential to be "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley, 1985, p.43), we should keep them also in perspective. It is probably unlikely that learning strategies will prove to be a magic wand to solve all language learning problems any more than any of the other eagerly-seized new ideas have proven to be in the last 50 years. But, used eclectically, in conjunction with other techniques, learning strategies may well prove to be an extremely useful addition to a language learner's tool kit.

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