Digging deeper: learners' disposition and strategy use

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The concept of 'learning strategy' is by now familiar to most language teaching professionals. The major impetus in investigating what learners do to help themselves learn came in the mid 1970s, with the well-known 'Good Language Learner Studies' (Naiman etc al., 1978) in which the assumption of the researchers was that an identification of what *good* language learners do would enable us to help less successful learners learn more efficiently. Significant research since then has continued apace and there is now a substantial literature offering detailed analyses and categorisations of strategies, and frameworks for practical applications (see, inter alia, Omalley et al, 1985; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Oxford, Cho, Leung & Kim, 2004). Chamot (2001) lists the main purposes behind this work.

> "…two major goals in language learning strategy research are to (1) identify and compare the learning strategies used by more and less successful language learners, and (2) provide instruction to less successful learners that helps them become more successful in their language study."
>
> (Chamot, 2001:25-26)

Although the assumption that intrinsically 'good' strategies actually exist has been challenged (notably by evidence that 'poor' language learners often use the same strategies as 'good' language learners and by evidence that an increase in strategy use can be detrimental to performance (see, for example, Alistair (2006) and Cohen et al, (1998; cited in Chamot, 2001)), the idea that learners can be taught improved strategies and improved selective strategy use lies at the heart of strategy research and identification. This has lead to the incorporation of strategy training activities into language

programmes and language learning materials worldwide, such that 'learner training' and 'learning to learn' now form an established, assumed component of any modern programme. Some variety exists in how writers recommend that strategy training is introduced to learners, but materials and training programmes often follow a common series of steps. This usually involves some kind of *presentation* of a strategy to learners (perhaps preceded by brainstorming or discussion), followed by *practice* of the strategy, and finally an *evaluation* of the effectiveness of the strategy. Grenfell and Harris (1999), for example, list six key steps:

- Raise students' awareness
- Help them brainstorm the strategies used
- Model the strategies
- Have them practise the strategies
- Guide them in selecting the strategies that address their
  particular needs
- Evaluate their progress and strategy use

Initially aimed at adult learners (see, for example, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) for some of the earliest commercially produced strategy materials), strategy training can now be found in classroom activities for all ages of learners. The course *Primary Colours* (Hicks and Littlejohn, 2003: 17) for example, presents various learning strategies for learners aged 8 and upwards, as the example in figure 1 shows. Figure 2 shows further examples for slightly older students, this time from *Cambridge English for Schools 3*, by the same authors (Littlejohn and Hicks, 1998:87).
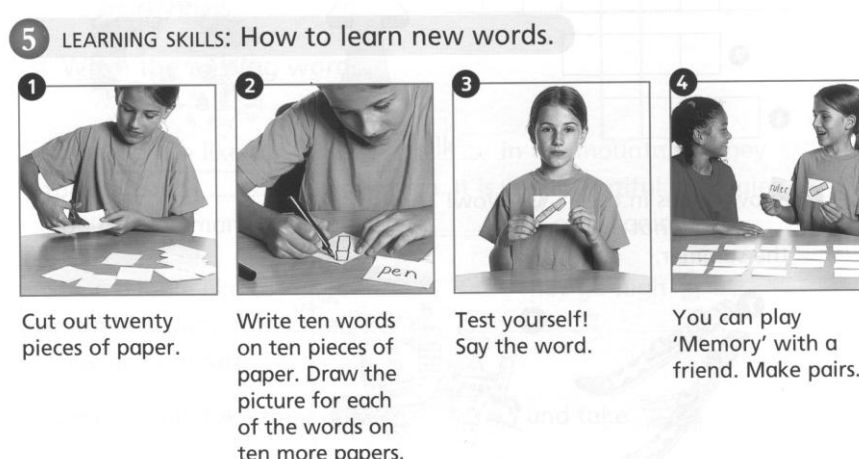

Figure 1: an example of strategy training for primary school learners (Hicks and Littlejohn, 2003: 17)

Help yourself to learn

Everybody and *anybody* can learn a language – you only need to discover the best way for *you*. If you find that you are not learning as quickly as you want to, experiment with these ideas.
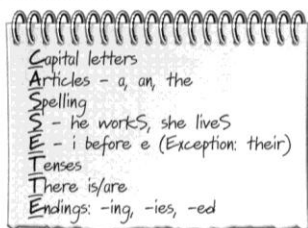
Checking your work

When you finish some work, check it. You can learn from your mistakes. Here are some ideas.

1 Make a list of your common mistakes

Look at the work you have done and make a list of your common mistakes. Use the list to check your work in the future.

2 Make a mnemonic

A mnemonic is a word that helps you to remember. You can make a mnemonic with the list of your mistakes. That's useful in an examination!

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Capital letters
Articles - a, an, the
Spelling
S - he workS, she liveS
E - i before e (Exception: their)
Tenses
There is/are
Endings: -ing, -ies, -ed
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3 Check your work in different ways

You can check your work in different ways to help you notice mistakes. For example:

Turn it upside down and read it.
Put a paper over it and slowly uncover it.
Copy it out again in a different colour ink.
Read it aloud to someone else.
Ask someone else to read it.

4 Look for examples

Look in your Student's Book for examples similar to what you have written. Use the *Wordlist/Index*.

Preparing for tests

Good preparation means that you will learn more *and* do better in the test.

1 Think about what you need to know

What will be in the test? Make a list. How well do you know each area? Which area do you need to revise most?

2 Choose the right place

Make yourself comfortable! Some people work best alone, some people work best with other people. Some people prefer silence, other people like music playing. Experiment!

3 Revise in different ways

You can prepare yourself in different ways. Here are some ideas. Experiment!

Learn things 'by heart'.
Read it aloud.
Read and then write it in your own words.
Tell someone else about what you have read.
Test yourself (see 4).
Read it aloud on to a cassette and then listen to it.
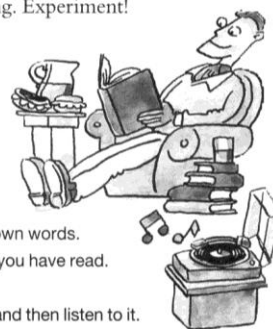
4 Test yourself

Don't be surprised in the examination – test yourself first. Use the *Help yourself list* on pages 144–7 in your Student's Book to make some exercises for yourself. You can also ask someone else to test you.

Memory

You can help yourself to remember in different ways.

1 Review things frequently

It is easier to learn a little at a time. Look back at your classwork every few days or every evening. After each lesson, make a list of the things you learned in your *Language Record*. Look at your *Language Record* whenever you have time to spare.

Figure 2: an example of strategy training for secondary school learners (Littlejohn and Hicks, 1998: 87)

Activities of the kind illustrated in figures 1 and 2 are often seen as self-evidently good. Who, for example, would argue against attempts to strengthen students' autonomy, and to encourage them to reflect on their own ways of learning? Despite this, however, and despite my own materials writing in this area, I want in this paper to voice some doubts about the assumptions behind strategy training and to raise the spectre of something far less tangible, *learner disposition*, as a major factor influencing the extent to which learners may incorporate any presented strategies into their 'learning system'. The significance of this lies in fact that teaching and learning always rely on opportunity cost – that is, that doing X in the classroom always entails not doing Y, and to that extent, *learning about learning* may have an opportunity cost for *learning language* (although the two can, of course, overlap). As I want to show, the risks of opportunity cost may be considerable, particularly with school-aged learners.

The requirements of learning strategies

I would like to begin by first reviewing the definition of learning strategies as it is frequently encountered in the literature. This is important because it indicates what is expected of learners and what it is that strategy training intends to modify. Chamot provides a succinct summary:

> "Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal. Strategic learners have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and learning approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet both the task demands and their own learning strengths."
>
> (Chamot, 2004)

It is useful to look closely at the definition being offered here. The emphasis on conscious control is obvious, as is the idea that effective learners (or 'strategic learners') will have a highly developed, sophisticated level of meta-awareness about 'their own thinking and learning approaches', the ability to analyse 'what a task entails' and the ability to select appropriate means (strategies) which fit with their self–diagnosis (learning strengths) in order to accomplish the task. The level of intellectual reflection is thus considerable. One may question how far this can be expected – or should be expected – of someone attempting to learn

a language, whose focus will in all likelihood be on the nature of the language being learned rather than the psychology of the learning enterprise. In particular, given that the teaching of learning strategies is intended to enhance the prospects of students in their initial or intermediate stages of learning, we can argue that the development of an ability to analyse learning tasks and make 'strategic' choices may itself present significant challenges – that is, that *learning how to learn* may constitute a significant increase in the learning burden. We can gauge some indication of the extent of this increase if we rephrase Chamot's definition to talk of *teachers*, rather than *learners*, and *teaching* rather than *learning*:

> *Teaching* strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that *teachers* take in order to achieve a *teaching* goal. Strategic *teachers* have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and *teaching* approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet both the task demands and their own *teaching* strengths.

How many of us, I wonder, would be able to label ourselves 'strategic teachers'. An ideal, perhaps, but, given the real time nature of teaching, such a level of critical self-awareness is likely to elude us for much of the time, even given a professional background in educational thinking. How realistic is it, therefore, to expect learners to be 'strategic' in their learning?

Learning strategies research

While there may be doubts about the feasibility of strategic learning as an achievable, widespread goal, it may still be argued that any attempt to raise students' awareness of how they learn, and to extend their repertoire of strategies, is of value, as it can enhance their control over what they do. Certainly, there are a good number of studies available which claim to demonstrate the benefits that can come from specific strategy instruction (see, for example, O'Malley et al, 1985; Thomson and Rubin, 1996; Cohen et al, 1998; Ellis and Beaton, 1993). However, it is clear that there remain some significant question marks which when considered may affect our appetite for devoting classroom time to strategy training. Here, I will simply list three key issues (for other concerns about learner training in general see Benson, 1995).

1 Assumptions of rationality Implicit in the premise for strategy research and strategy training is the notion that decisions about learning processes are essentially a matter of cognitive analysis. As I have already noted, Chamot's definition of a 'strategic learner' suggests a highly developed ability to analyse and weigh up all the options. The eminent scientist Herbert Simon once commented that such levels of rationality assume "powers of prescience and capacities for computation resembling those we usually attribute to God" (Simon, 1957:3). Yet, not only is our decision-making 'bounded' by the limits of our abilities, it is also now widely recognised that learners decisions are frequently premised on socio-emotional issues, and are intricately related to factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and identification with peer groups (see, for example, Williams and Burden, 1997).

2 Problems in strategy research.
Most research into the nature of strategy use relies on introspection as its main data collection instrument. In this, learners report what they are doing as they perform a specified task, or describe how they approach a particular aspect of language learning. Introspection, however, relies heavily on the ability of subjects to verbalise. As the processes of learning lie within the 'black box' of the brain (Grenfell and Harris, 1999:54), we have no certainty that what is being reported is what is actually happening. As one wit recently commented, it may be akin to trying to understand the processes of digestion by asking people to talk while eating.

3 A Hawthorne effect?
The Hawthorne effect refers to research which was done (at the Hawthorne factory, Chicago) in the 1920s to gauge the effect of lighting conditions on worker's productivity (see, inter alia, Draper, 2006, for details). Through experiments, the researchers discovered that any change in lighting conditions, whether it involved increased or decreased light, or even an eventual return to the original conditions, resulted in an improvement in production rates – a startling discovery which suggested that the simple fact of being studied can produce a positive effect. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a similar phenomenon may be at work in so many strategies experiments. Typically, researchers set up 'laboratory conditions' to investigate use of strategies, or small experimental groups to investigate the impact of strategy training. In these circumstances, and given the insights offered by the Hawthorne

studies, it is not entirely surprising that positive outcomes are reported. Chen (2007), for example, in describing listening comprehension strategy training, reports positive outcomes from the programme. One learner commented, for example, that "*I feel I've fallen in love with English… because of these techniques…*'. Chen's conclusion (2007: 26), however, that this "indicates that a strategy training programme can shape learners' perceptions of target language learning" can be balanced against the possibility that almost any socially acceptable change in the classroom can (probably temporarily) shape learners' perceptions.

With these concerns in mind, I want in the next section to look at some brief but revealing data which shows what can happen when teachers actually ask school-aged students to reflect on their learning.

Self evaluation: the case of school aged learners

The brief data which I will discuss here relates to a teacher's attempts to introduce a metacognitive level of thinking into the processes of learning by asking students to reflect on their aims. The data illustrates how the teacher's intention in doing this may be interpreted quite differently by students, who may already have their own established strategies for 'dealing with teaching'. The data further underscores the suggestion that learners' responses to language learning can be significantly premised on socio-emotional issues rather than cognitive ones.

At the end of the semester, students, aged between 13 and 14, had been given a self-evaluation form to complete, as shown in Figure 3. The form consists of a series of questions which aim to structure their thinking about their own goals for the current semester and the next.

1 What goals did you set yourself for this past semester?

2 Did you achieve your goals? If not, why not?

3 How did you achieve your goals?

4 What are your goals for the next semester?

5 How are you going to achieve these goals?

Figure 3: Extract from a self-evaluation form

Figure 4 is a verbatim account of a conversation recorded between three male students as they worked together to complete the form. They are here renamed as Mike, Yusuf and Dan. They are all aged between 13 and 14.

Mike:	What goals did you write? I can't remember what I put. You got any goals I can use?
Dan:	You can have some of mine and some of Yusuf's.
Yusuf:	Here's one. 'I want to improve my spelling'. Use that. It's all crap anyway.
Dan:	For number 2, just write you didn't achieve them, then you can write the same ones again next semester.
Mike:	What about this? 'Why didn't you achieve them?'
Yusuf:	You didn't work hard enough.
Mike:	Yeah. I'll put that.
Dan:	Hurry up, Mike. The others are waiting. We'll be late for the cinema.

Figure 4: Extract from a conversation between three students.

The data is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, it shows how the students have interpreted the self-evaluation form as just another piece of schoolwork. They have therefore applied their *own* ready made strategies for getting schoolwork done – sharing answers, and seeking out shortcuts. Mike asks Dan if he has "*any goals [he] can use.*" Yusuf offers a generic goal, revealingly commenting that "*it's all crap anyway*". Dan recommends a further labour saving strategy promoted by question 2 on the form: "*just*

write you didn't achieve them, then you can write the same ones again next semester".
We can also see how the self-evaluation form is generally viewed as
something that simply needs to be done, so that they can get on with what
really interests them. Dan comments "*Hurry up, Mike. The others are waiting.
We'll be late for the cinema.*".

Later conversation with the three boys revealed further interesting
comments. The following quotes are indicative of their line of reasoning.

'It's all crap'

'What's the point? We have to do what they tell us anyway.'

'My goal was to get into the basketball team. I can't write that.'

'It's not natural to write about it.'

'It's nerd stuff.'

It is possible to argue that the responses of Mike, Yusuf and Dan are
merely a cynical response to the teacher's attempts to develop a reflective
attitude in her students. However, I believe that many teachers will
recognise that the data reflects the real world nature of the attitudes of
many – perhaps most – school students, and that it shows a clear division
between the culture and purposes of the teacher, and culture and purposes
of the students. Slembrouck (drawing on Pratt, 1989:51ff), while discussing
attempts by teachers to negotiate curriculum demands with students,
suggests that this involves a process of "pupilling", in which school pupils
build a common culture, largely impervious to teachers. Speaking of the
failure to engage students in negotiated decisions, for example,
Slembrouck remarks:

> "…it seems that the 'pupilling' side of peer relations in classroom
> interaction remains largely a world inaccessible to teachers … In other
> words, it is something which many students prefer to keep outside
> the scope of the classroom."
>
> Slembrouck (2000:147)

Given the existence of a 'pupilling' culture, it is not difficult to see why
Mike, Yusuf and Dan have responded the way they have. Clearly, a self-
evaluation form can pose a threat, as 'school space' (requirements to do

exercises, homework etc.) threatens to invade 'personal space' (personal attitudes and views about school, shared only with peers). While we can see that the self-evaluation form aims to develop a particular kind of metacognitive analysis, it is also clear that the students are *already* engaged in *their own* metacognitive analysis. The students have identified a clear distinction between their purposes and those of the teacher, and thus have developed strategies to manage – and distant – the demands of self-evaluation.

This interpretation and explanation is further borne out by the students' additional comments, quoted above. Remarks such as *'It's nerd stuff'*, suggest that the self-evaluation form belongs to the 'teacher's world' and not the pupil's world, as they define it - 'nerd' being a derogatory label applied to someone who identifies closely with processes of schooling, and who thus does not share the mainstream attitudes and practices of peers. Similarly, comments such as '*It's not natural to write about it'* reveal entrenched views about what it *is* natural to do in school and what, in the students' view, teachers can legitimately call upon them to do. The self-evaluation form seems to cross the line of acceptability and thus is viewed with suspicion. In any case, they suspect a hidden agenda here, which stipulates the type of answers that are or are not expected: *'My goal was to get into the basketball team. I can't write that.'*

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the three boys have effectively sabotaged the intentions of the teacher, and have gained very little – if anything – from an attempt to get them to self-evaluate. My early comment about opportunity cost is thus relevant here – they would probably have got more from some language practice activity which they are more likely to have understood as a part of the process of learning a language. The important point to bear in mind here is that I am not suggesting that it is some wilful act on the part of the students to dismiss the teacher's set task (a fate which even conventional language practice activities can certainly suffer), but rather the outcome when two different sets of perspectives and cultures in teaching and learning come together. Simply put, the students are not prepared to accept this way of thinking about what they do in school. They do not have the *disposition* for this, something to which I now turn in the final section of this paper.

Learner disposition

The term *disposition* which I am using here refers to a pre-existing readiness for something, a readiness to act in a particular way. Disposition is the key factor in determining the acceptability of something. It is, in other words, upon the ground of disposition that any change or intervention succeeds or fails. To put it in the jargon of the management of innovation, a key requirement for successful, enduring innovation is that what is introduced at time ***t*** can be only marginally different from what occurred at time ***t-1***.

In strategy training, therefore, disposition is a key factor. If the learners are not already disposed towards making changes to their way of going about learning, then strategy training is unlikely to bring about any substantive change. It is not surprising therefore that most teachers who have used strategy training materials in the classroom (and this is anecdotally reported as there is little research on this) find that this rarely if ever translates into changes in their students' habits of learning. The public, social nature of learning, makes it rare to find open rejection of any innovation in classroom activities, particularly in the case of school aged learners, where the consequence of non-compliance can be daunting. Thus, if no disposition towards the introduction of strategy training exists, surface compliance or a short-term change in behaviour is more likely. To take the example of the self-evaluation form once again, we can see that the absence of a disposition towards the use of such tools led to the students' attempts to find ways to 'get the form completed', rather than actually engage in the reflection that the teacher intended.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the possibilities for effectively introducing new learning strategies are significantly curtailed by the prior experiences of the students, by their disposition. But where does this disposition come from? We know that attitudes, beliefs and conceptualisations of learning start very early in life, and develop very slowly. Research in reading, for example, has found that the greatest single predictor for success in reading, and therefore going on to establish an identity as *a reader* (rather than simply being a person who knows how to read), is the extent to which children are *read to* in their early years (Commission on Reading, 1985). It seems that the formative experience of being read to, and the socio-emotional warmth which often accompanies

this (for example, the bedtime story) is a major factor in shaping a child's attitude and approach to reading in later life.

The realisation that disposition plays a significant factor in determining whether strategy training will 'stick', even assuming that the very idea is conceptually valid, suggests that there are likely to be no shortcuts to modifying learners' approaches to learning. We are thus faced with the notion of opportunity cost once again, and to ask if time spent on strategy work in the classroom can be better spent on something else. It also suggests that, as professionals in language teaching, we need to take a longer range view on our work and seek out the links and threads, particularly from educational psychology, that run right through shaping of educational experience, from the earliest moments in primary education to the later experiences of tertiary education. Such a perspective needs to emphasize the gradual development of attitudes to learning, and use any realisations about later 'successful' approaches to language learning to inform the development primary school activities and materials. It will also need to see the teaching of strategies not as *objects* of learning (something to learn *about*) which are presented and practiced, but as 'ways of working' which are built into the design of classroom tasks and specified in task instructions. A disposition develops through experience over time, and it is the *gradual* shaping of this that we need to address.

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