BOOK REVIEW


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The interest in language learning strategies has been aroused and enhanced since the research area was established firmly in TESL at the time when Rubin and Stern attempted to identify and describe characteristics of ‘the good language learner’ in 1975, respectively in her paper “What the ‘Good Language Learner’ Can Teach Us” and in his paper “What Can We Learn from the Good Language Learner?”. The last decade has seen a remarkable development in the area of study, and in the last few years the interest in language learning strategies has gained an exciting momentum as found in the publications of Wenden and Rubin’s Learner Strategies in Language Learning (1987), Ellis and Sinclair’s Learning to Learn English: A Course in Learner Training (1989), O’Malley and Chamot’s Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition (1990), and Oxford’s Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know (1990). This article is a review of the volume by Oxford.

Oxford states succinctly that “at this stage in the short history of language learning strategy research, there is no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many strategies exist; how they should be defined, demarcated, and categorized; and
whether it is — or ever will be — possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies" (p. 17), and continues to say that "despite problems in classifying strategies, research continues to prove that strategies help learners take control of their learning and become more proficient, . . ." (p. 22). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know* is intended in Oxford’s terms to answer the very exact questions of what language learning strategies are; how many strategies there are; how they could be categorized; what their key features are; what a comprehensive strategy scheme is like; and how learning strategies can be taught.

Oxford defines language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8), and in her description of their key features, posits that language learning strategies:

1. Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
2. Allow learners to become more self-directed.
3. Expand the role of teachers.
5. Are specific actions taken by the learner.
6. Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
7. Support learning both directly and indirectly.
8. Are not always observable.
9. Are often conscious.
10. Can be taught.
11. Are flexible.
12. Are influenced by a variety of factors" (p. 9).
As shown above, we can discern somewhat of terminological confusion between the definition and features and also somewhat of prescriptive nature in Oxford's presentation of the key features of language learning strategies. The last five features signify the differentiation between learning strategies and learning style; the latter is described as "broad, generalized approach to learning, problem solving, or understanding oneself or the situation" (p. 11).

With her intention to avoid the implication of "a clear set of hierarchical relationships" (p. 239), Oxford uses the term 'system' rather than 'taxonomy,' and her strategy classification system consists of two major categories — 'direct strategies' and 'indirect strategies.' She states that "by definition, direct strategies involve the new language directly, whereas indirect strategies provide indirect support for language learning ..." (p. 151). Direct strategies are divided into memory, cognitive, and 'compensation' strategy groups, and indirect strategies into metacognitive, affective, and social strategy groups; the six strategy groups support, assist, and interact with each other (p. 14). Oxford's description of the six strategy groups is as follows:

Direct Strategies:

"Memory strategies, such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information" (p. 37).

"Cognitive strategies are unified by a common function: manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (p. 43).

"Compensation strategies enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limi-
tations in knowledge” (p. 47).

Indirect Strategies:

“Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition — that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating” (p. 135).

“Affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes” (p. 135).

“Social strategies help students learn through interaction with others” (p. 135).

These six strategy groups are subdivided into a total of 19 strategy sets, and further into a total of 62 specific strategies (pp. 16-21).

With regard to Oxford’s strategy classification system, it may be true that “the experience of many teachers indicates that the strategy system shown above is a very useful way to examine such strategies” (p. 22) on the one hand. On the other hand, however, O’Malley and Chamot (1990:103) comment that “the problem with this approach, . . . , is that this extended listing is far removed from any underlying cognitive theory, fails to prioritize which strategies are most important to learning, and generates subcategories that appear to overlap.” One example of removal in Oxford’s system from other cognitive-theory-based classification schemes (see O’Malley et al. 1985ab; Rubin 1987) is shown in her classification of guessing/inferring under ‘compensation’ strategies. She states that “amazingly enough, guessing strategies — which compensate for a limited language repertoire in listening and reading — have never before been linked in any way with compensation strategies for speaking or writing, despite the obvious similarity in compensatory
function" (p. 243). In her classification system the term 'compensation strategies' is employed rather than communication strategies, the term used more prevalently in the literature, in her attempt "to avoid the false split between communication strategies and learning strategies, as well as the overly narrow (one-skill) interpretation of communication embodied in most uses of the term communication strategies" (p. 243). Another attempt which she makes in her system is to place more emphasis on the well-balanced importance of affective and social strategies in proportion to cognitive and metacognitive strategies treated fairly extensively in the literature.

Following her theoretical examination and explanation of direct strategies in Chapter 2 and indirect strategies in Chapter 4, Oxford illustrates a wide scope of learners' actual use of these strategies on an individual basis and also provides "a large number of ready-to-use-or-adapt strategy training exercises covering all four language skills" (p. xi), as for the application of direct strategies in Chapter 3 and for that of indirect strategies in Chapter 5, respectively. These exercises are all geared to communicative tasks and activities, in accordance with her explicit contention that "all appropriate language learning strategies are oriented toward the broad goal of communicative competence" (p. 8). Her view on communicative competence is based on a model offered by Canale and Swain (1980), further developed by Canale (1983) (p. 238), which consists of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (p. 7). According to Oxford, "as the learner's competence grows, strategies can act in specific ways to foster particular aspects of that competence" (p. 9). Yet the problem with her view on strategy teachability/training is that "the causal role and intervention potential of strategies could
be disputed" (Skehan 1989:98). More precisely, "the use of learner strategies, ... may not lead to higher accomplishments — instead one of the benefits of higher proficiency may be the capacity to use a wider range of strategies" (Skehan 1989:97). It is somewhat of a disappointment that Oxford has not explicitly touched upon and delved into this critical issue, while she has provided a large number of strategy training excercises and a wide range of concrete examples of L2 learning strategy use for varied tasks and activities in different situations. Nevertheless, the last two chapters are valuable and informative, especially for those who intend to investigate learning strategies; Chapter 6 describes strategy assessment techniques and presents an eight-step model for strategy training, and Chapter 7 informs us how varied types of strategy training have been implemented actually in diverse settings and programs around the world.

A major contribution which Oxford makes in Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know is her sincere effort to make language learning strategies understood extensively by second/foreign language teachers, as indicated in the subtitle of the volume, and to discuss the diverse use of learning strategies for the efficient development of L2 learners' communicative competence. Oxford herself states clearly that "this book has a very practical slant" (p. 237) and that "the major purpose of this book is to make learning strategies understandable to teachers of second and foreign languages, so they can enable students to become better learners" (p. 2). The "hands-on nature of the book" (p. 2) naturally makes the way of Oxford's writing fairly prescriptive, yet it is my overall impression that she has succeeded in accomplishing her purpose. As mentioned in the course of writing this review, the
causal role and the teachability of language learning strategies have not yet been taken up and answered technically; however, Oxford is modest and wise enough to say at the very end of the volume that "much more remains to be discovered about how people learn languages and exactly how conscious use of learning strategies aids the process" (p. 236). Certainly Oxford’s book will stimulate further inquiry and exploration into language learning strategies.

REFERENCES


