

**‘ELT for a Global World’**



**FSA  
2015**

# Individual differences

A seminar course for TEFL students

**Ágnes Albert, Kata Csizér**  
Department of English Applied Linguistics

Supported by the Higher Education Restructuring Fund allocated to ELTE by the Hungarian Government

# Language Learning Strategies

# Various definitions

- Language learning strategies are ‘specific actions, **behaviours**, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language’ (Oxford, 1999, p. 518)
- ‘Language learning strategies include strategies for **identifying** the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material if need be, **grouping** it for easier learning, having **repeated contact** with the material, and formally committing the material to **memory** when it does not seem to be acquired naturally’ (Cohen, 2011, p. 12)

# Key features of learning strategies

- Conscious activities;
- Working memory plays a key role;
- Tied to explicit learning goals;
- Appropriate to particular tasks;
- Transferable across learning contexts.

(based on Macaro, 2006)

# Oxford's (1990, 2003) taxonomy (1)

Based on experience and intuition

Oxford (2003, pp. 13-14) defines strategies as follows:

**Cognitive strategies** enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, and synthesising.

**Metacognitive strategies** (e.g., identifying one's own preferences and needs, planning, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success) are used to manage the learning process overall. (Oxford, 2003, p. 13)

# Oxford's (1990, 2003) taxonomy (2)

**Memory-related strategies** (e.g., acronyms, sound similarities, images, key words) help learners link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding.

**Compensatory strategies** (e.g., guessing from the context; circumlocution; gestures and pause words) help make up for missing knowledge. (Oxford, 2003, p. 13)

# Oxford's (1990, 2003) taxonomy (3)

**Affective strategies**, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, help learners manage their emotions and motivation level.

**Social strategies** (e.g., asking questions, asking for clarification, asking for help, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) enable the learner to learn via interaction with others and understand the target culture. (Oxford, 2003, p. 14)

- What strategies do you use when preparing for an exam? Give examples.

# An alternative taxonomy

- O'Malley and Chamot (1990) in a similar taxonomy included similar categories, except for having combined social and affective strategies, and cognitive and memory-related strategies. Their taxonomy was based on empirical data from foreigners learning English as a Second Language and Americans learning foreign languages.
- Compensation strategies were left out as they pertain more to language use than language learning.
- O'Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasise
  - Helping learners to find adequate strategies to use and then gradually give more control over to the student in choosing their strategies and monitoring their strategy use.

# Instruments

- Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991)
- Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990)

# Variation in strategy use

- Cultural variation
- Gender variation
- Variation based on other background factors (e.g., discipline areas, number of languages learnt)

(Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015)

# Research findings (1)

A strategy is useful if:

- (a) the strategy is relevant to the L2 task;
- (b) the strategy is in sync with the learner's learning style;
- (c) the strategy is used in an effective manner and is connected to other relevant strategies. (Dörnyei, 2005; Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003)

Such strategies “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations”. (Oxford, 1990, p. 8)

# Research findings (2)

- Unsuccessful learners tend to use strategies randomly (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003).
- The use of relevant, effective learning strategies that comply with students' learning style 'enable more independent, autonomous, lifelong learning (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991)' (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003, p. 315).
- Increase in strategy use → increase in motivation
- Increase in strategy use → increase in self-efficacy
- Quality vs. quantity

# Pedagogical implications

- Learning strategy training: Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction (Cohen, 2011);
- Learning strategy training cycle (Macaro, 2001)

# Future research directions

## Issues:

- Lack of theoretical clarification: validity of constructs? What do scores of strategy inventories tell us?
- Account for learners employing out-of-style strategies or a random selection of strategies (typical of less successful learners).
- ‘Strategies as analyzing, synthesizing, and making associations cannot typically be observed, though their products may be visible’ (Ehrman & Leaver, 2002, p. 315)
- Self-regulation (Rubin, 2005): link between learning and cognitive and behavioural processes (shift of emphasis from product to process)

# References

- Cohen, A. D. (2011). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ehrman, M. E., Leaver, B. L., & Oxford, R. L. (2003). A brief overview of individual differences in second language learning. *System*, 31, 313–330.
- Macaro, E. (2001). *Learning strategies in foreign and second language classrooms*. London: Continuum.

# References

- Macaro, E. (2006). Strategies for language learning and for language use: Revising the theoretical framework. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(3), 320–337.
- O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York, NY: Newbury House.
- Oxford, R. L. (1999). Learning strategies. In B. Spolsky (Ed.), *Concise encyclopedia of educational linguistics* (pp. 518–522). Oxford: Elsevier.

# References

- Oxford, R. (2003). Language learning styles and strategies: An overview. *Proceedings of GALA (Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition) Conference*, 1-25.
- Pintrich, P. R., Smith, D. A. F., Garcia, T., & McKeachie, W. J. (1991). *A manual for the use of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)*. Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (NCRIP TAL), School of Education, University of Michigan.
- Rubin, J. (2005). The expert language learner: A review of good language learner studies and learner strategies. In K. Johnson (Ed.), *Expertise in second language learning and teaching* (pp. 37-63). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.