

Exploring reading and listening strategies in foreign language learning

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on conducting bibliographical research regarding language learning strategies and more specifically, reading strategies and listening strategies within the context of foreign language learning. The paper delves into the definitions, and the typical characteristics of these strategies, as well as the classification of them. The bibliographical research seeks to illustrate the teaching implications that surface, and provides guidance on explicit and implicit strategy instruction concerning the curriculum, the teaching resources, the teachers and the learners. Through their facilitative and counselling role educators are encouraged to endorse the strategy-based instruction, which can yield diverse educational benefits, that can motivate, and assist learners to become active, strategic, autonomous, and self-evaluative in order for their reading and listening skills to be enhanced.

Key words: language learning strategies, reading strategies, listening strategies

Introduction

Researchers and theorists have defined the term of language learning strategies in various ways over the years (Cohen, 1998, 2003, 2011; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Griffiths, 2008; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford 1990, 2011). Cohen (2011) defines them as learners' conscious thoughts and actions, that they assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks during every stage of their L2 learning, from the very onset to the most advanced levels. Similarly, Rost (2002) concludes that language learning strategies are the steps or actions that learners adopt consciously in order to guide and evaluate their own comprehension and learning. Oxford (2011: 12) states that "self-regulated L2 learning strategies are defined as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2. These strategies are broad, teachable actions that learners choose from among alternatives and employ for L2 learning purposes". Finally, Kantaridou (2015) mentions that language learning strategies are particular actions, behaviors, or techniques that learners intentionally employ so as to be voluntarily involved into the language learning process and enhance their progress in it. Through the utilisation of strategies learners can internalise, store, retrieve, or use the new language input.

The detailed literature review on language learning strategies can summarize the common features that the different approaches to this concept share. Firstly, strategies are actions that learners actively control. Secondly, they are purposeful, and goal-directed activities. Thirdly, learners use strategies to facilitate the learning situation and language use across all skills. Fourthly, strategies are consciously practised to learning, and, the more experienced learners are, the more automated strategies can become. Moreover, the employment of strategies presupposes learners' control of the learning process. Additionally, learners' choice of strategies is determined by their individual traits as well as by the needs of tasks. Finally, strategies orchestration can increase better learning outcomes (Kantaridou, 2015).

Language learning strategies

In her classification of language learning strategies Oxford (1990) describes two main clusters, direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies aim at the language use, and are sub-divided into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies promote language learning but they do not directly aim at language use (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). They are sub-divided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Direct

strategies provide the appropriate intellectual tools while metacognitive strategies contribute to learners' coordination of their mental processes. Affective and social strategies can encourage learners to maintain their emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal balance. In 2011 Oxford modifies her classification of strategies and suggests a more coherent framework, the Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) model. This model consists of strategies and metastrategies in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive. The cognitive dimension deals with the construction, application, and transformation of L2 knowledge. The affective dimension revolves around attitudes, beliefs, emotions and motivation, while sociocultural-interactive strategies are associated with communication, context, and culture in foreign language learning (Karousou et al., 2011).

More specifically, memory strategies, also called mnemonics, assist learners' internalisation, storage, and retrieval of new information. Grouping, using imagery, semantic mapping, rhyming, structured reviewing, and using physical response can be useful memory strategies in language learning (Oxford, 1990). Cognitive strategies are more task-specific and can be effective tools for learners in order to manipulate and transform the linguistic input and the learning material itself, to develop their interlanguage and produce their own L2 utterances (Brown, 2000). Cognitive strategies include practicing with sounds and writing systems, receiving and sending messages, analysing, reasoning, transferring, note-taking, and summarising (Oxford, 1990).

Compensation strategies enable learners to make determined efforts to successfully cope with limited knowledge in L2. These strategies include inferencing by using clues, guessing meaning from the context, getting help, using mime and gestures, adjusting the message to the available means, and using synonyms (Oxford 1990).

Metacognitive strategies assist learners to deal with the new information, to organise both the demands of their tasks and their long-term goals as well as to evaluate their progress (Oxford, 1990). O' Malley et al. (1985) claim that the function of metacognitive strategies "involves planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring...and evaluating learning". Examples of metacognitive strategies are paying attention, organising, setting goals, identifying the purpose of tasks, planning for language tasks, seeking practice opportunities, self-monitoring, and self-evaluating.

Affective strategies concern learners' regulation of their emotions, attitudes and motivation towards foreign language learning. The implementation of affective strategies presupposes a suitable classroom environment that can support the awareness of learners' emotions, the reduction of their anxiety, as well as the development of their self-esteem. Therefore, these strategies can involve the use of soft music, humour, tolerance of ambiguity, wise risk-taking, self-reward, and reinforcement (Oxford, 1990).

Social strategies concern the ultimate aim of language learning, that is communicative competence along with the initiatives undertaken by learners in order to practise the target language in class or outside (Oxford, 1990). The implementation of social strategies is directly related with learners' communication with their peers and teachers and facilitates learner autonomy (O'Malley et al., 1985). Some social strategies are requesting for clarification, verification, or correction, cooperating with peers, or native speakers, and developing empathy and cultural understanding (Oxford, 2002).

Strategy instruction

Regarding teaching implications, strategy instruction should be integrated into the curriculum in a natural and explicit way, providing learners with ample opportunities to practice strategies and transfer them to new tasks. Teachers should train learners to orchestrate strategies by asking them to systematically combine and utilise them in relation to their communicative needs, age, the particular situation, and tasks (Vrettou, 2015). Moreover, reflection tasks should be incorporated in the lesson plans, as these promote skills in self-checking, monitoring, and evaluation, and thus, assist learners to become strategic and

independent. In this way learning can be transformed into an easier, quicker, more effective, and more fun process. More specifically, in explicit strategy instruction teachers can clearly name the strategy, demonstrate its implementation and describe its usefulness while learners can practice the strategy, evaluate it and transfer it to new tasks (Chamot, 2004; Chamot et al., 1999; Oxford, 1990; Vrettou, 2015). Finally, teachers should be familiar with the techniques of interview, group discussion, diary, journal, survey, and think-aloud protocol, which they can employ to assess learners' L2 strategies. Observational methods are not suggested because they are hard to be implemented owing to the internal and invisible character of many learning strategies (Psaltou-Joycey, 2010; Kantaridou, 2015).

The integration of strategy use into the teaching practices can have various educational benefits. Learners' motivation can be increased and, in turn, their performance (Griffiths, 2013). Learner autonomy, that is the capacity for "critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1991: 4), both in language use as well as language learning can be significantly enhanced. Therefore, strategy use can empower learners' active, purposeful and reflective role and can urge them to take charge of their own learning by creating learning opportunities, setting objectives, monitoring and evaluating their performance (Wolters, 2010). Finally, teachers' role can be upgraded and change into the interactive facilitator of the learning process, which is not restricted into the exposure to the language system.

Oxford (1990) comments that although the influence of all the strategies in the learning process is not equal, their importance in relation to the expected learning outcomes is the same. Moreover, she emphasises that a range of factors, such as teachers' expectations, learners' level of proficiency, age, learning styles, preferences and, motivation, are key determiners of L2 strategy choice. For instance, as regards learning styles, learners with a visual learning style prefer strategies such as word grouping, and listing, while learners with an auditory style like practising aloud with sounds. Analytically oriented learners tend to use strategies such as dissecting words and phrases, contrastive analysis, and rule learning, whereas globally oriented learners employ guessing, scanning, paraphrasing, and gesturing (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990).

Learners and teachers' preference of strategies is extensively depicted in the study conducted as part of THALES research project (Petrogiannis & Gavriilidou, 2016) into strategic profile of EFL learners of primary and secondary education in Greece. A significant number of Greek EFL learners report that their most preferred strategies are, in descending order, metacognitive, affective, cognitive, social, compensation, and memory strategies (Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2015), while teachers answer that they most frequently use, in descending order, metacognitive, cognitive, compensation, social, memory and affective strategies (Papadopoulou et al, 2011). Finally, research reveals the most frequent preference of university students to compensation strategies (Chen & Jonas, 2009; Liu, 2013; Psaltou-Joycey & Kantaridou, 2009).

Reading strategies

Regarding the reading skill, reading strategies are plans or a series of actions adopted intentionally by readers in order to achieve particular goals, to complete given activities (Paris, 1992) or to solve problems encountered in constructing meaning (Janzen, 2002). Relevant literature refers to a great number of reading strategies. Among them, the most usually mentioned strategies are the memory strategy of visualisation, the cognitive strategies of highlighting, clarifying, summarising, making connections, the anticipation guide strategy, predicting, questioning and the compensation strategy of inferencing.

To begin with, the memory strategy of visualisation relates with the process of constructing mental images that depict reading content (Šamo, 2009). These images represent readers' interpretation of the text and are stored in their memory (Adler, 2001). Visualisation can facilitate reading comprehension through the use of imagery and can assist learners to spot important text information more quickly and easily. Moreover, the strategy of visualisation

can help learners transform words into higher level concepts, and increase their attention to detail, and autonomy (Kartika et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the cognitive strategies of highlighting, clarifying, and summarising can be implemented in reading instruction. In highlighting learners focus attention on the main ideas and supporting details of texts in order to improve their knowledge about the organisation of reading (Okasha, 2020). By implementing the strategy of clarifying readers simplify and make the meaning of texts more comprehensible via rereading, asking questions, paraphrasing, restating, and using dictionaries (Janzen, 2002). In summarizing readers distinguish the main information and ideas of texts from the insignificant ones even in the long reading passages, organise them, and restate all the necessary information of reading passages in written form in their own words in order to indicate their comprehension (Adler, 2001; Okasha, 2020).

The strategy of making connections urge learners to activate their mental schemata and connect the text information to their own experiences, beliefs, and the real world (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In this case readers can make text-to-text connections, which can be illustrated through drawing, making charts, graphic organisers, and writing in order to make reading meaningful, and purposeful. Text-to-text connections can be based upon the relationships of characters in a story, or the relationship of story elements between stories (Teele, 2004). The activation of readers' background knowledge about the topic can be further accomplished through the utilisation of the anticipation guide strategy. Before reading texts, in groups or individually, learners can process some statements that are related to the topic in order to shed light on their thoughts, and knowledge about it. Therefore, their motivation and interest in the topic can be greatly stimulated (Kartika et al., 2020).

In addition, the improvement of reading comprehension can be achieved through the strategy of predicting. By making predictions readers not solely specify a purpose for their reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2011), use their experiences and knowledge, and formulate and share ideas (Block & Israel, 2005), but they also interact positively with the reading passages and with their peers in pairs or groups, and increase their motivation and interest (Oczkus, 2003). Concentrating on the title, table of contents, pictures, key words or specific points through the text, readers can predict the topic, and the main ideas of texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011), they can consciously or unconsciously guess the plot in a story, or they can evaluate, and revise their predictions (Teele, 2004). Predictions, and confirmations along with the emphasis on meaning of texts and learners' experiences are fundamental elements of the whole language approach (Duke & Pearson, 2005).

Questioning and inferring are two other important reading strategies that can contribute to learners' better reading comprehension. Readers or teachers can employ the questioning process aiming at meaning construction, comprehension enhancement, problem solutions, information inquiry and discovery (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Duke & Pearson, 2005). Prereading questioning can take the form of brainstorming and can involve collection of information as well as readers' encouragement to interact with reading passages. During reading the particular strategy can increase learners' positive involvement with texts, predictions, confirmations, avoidance of misunderstandings or ambiguity. Finally, in post reading tasks questioning can deal with readers' actual level of comprehension, readers' personal opinions or experiences, and the relation of the topics of texts with other topics, ideas or information (Okasha, 2020). Inferring is the compensation strategy that refers to readers' attempt to deduce information and draw conclusions combining clues, evidence and reasoning along with their own knowledge (Serafini, 2004). Clues and evidence can be found through illustrations, pictures, graphs, numbers, dates, vocabulary and titles accompanying reading passages. The process of inferring involves readers in prediction making, identifying of underlying themes, meaning creation from texts, and pictures (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Duke & Pearson, 2005).

Finally, with regard to the digital storytelling and tablet-based e-book reading, Tseng et al. (2012) propose the dialogic reading approach, which has been proven to be beneficial for child-parent cooperative learning and can be another means of improving learners' reading comprehension. This approach is a shared picture book reading intervention for children at the age of five, during which parents are involved in a dialogue with their children when reading a book together (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The PEER (Prompt, Evaluate, Expand, and Repeat) model (Tseng et al., 2012) is one of the dialogic reading strategies, that parents can utilise with preschoolers. In this case, parents assist and encourage young readers to follow the storyline, employ relevant clues and evidence to understand, evaluate their children's comprehension, expand their ideas as well as repeat the final conclusions drawn from stories. Taking advantage of the benefits of this approach, teachers could adopt it in their daily reading practices.

Teaching implications

Readers' intentional employment of the abovementioned strategies demands a sound approach of strategy instruction in reading. Such an approach should aim at assisting learners to become expert and autonomous readers and realising the lifelong learning and joyful character of literacy (Okasha, 2020). Therefore, within this framework learners are enabled to choose the appropriate reading strategies and the most effective combinations of them, depending on various reading purposes, tasks, and occasions (Grabe, 2002). This can be accomplished in case teachers have in mind that "good readers must develop the ability to understand new words from the context, the main versus supporting ideas and make inferences and predictions from the written text" (Okasha, 2009: 5).

Practically, in their strategy instruction teachers should teach strategies in an explicit way by firstly, naming, and directly explaining them, modeling through the think-aloud process, then, providing opportunities for learners to practise them in groups, pairs or individually, and finally, providing feedback (Grabe, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2005). Furthermore, instructors can urge readers to visualise actions, heroes, and settings in a story by asking them to make relevant drawings or talk about the images that come to their minds. Additionally, in picture book reading, teachers can take advantage of the available pictures by pointing to, labeling, commenting on, or asking questions about them (Tseng et al., 2012). Finally, instructors should keep in mind that the teaching of strategies should be contextualised, and constantly recycled over new texts and tasks, as well as that it is a time-consuming process that lasts a long period of time (Janzen, 2002).

Listening strategies

As far as the listening skill is concerned, listening strategies are techniques that aim at the enhancement of listening comprehension, encompassing the recall, the processing, and the critical analysis of listening input. The employment of listening strategies can positively affect the development of listeners' more automatic listening comprehension skills in the foreign language (Azevedo & Buchweitz, 2015). Similar to the literature about reading strategies, numerous listening strategies are cited by many theorists. For the purposes of the present paper a focus on the bottom-up, top-down and metacognitive listening strategies is made.

More particularly, bottom-up listening strategies depend on speech as the construction of meaning is based on the combination of sounds, words, phrases, and grammar. Hedge (2007) points out that the placement of stress on meaningful words, knowledge of vocabulary and syntactic structures can be possible cues on which listeners can rely on to deduce meaning from the continuous stream of speech. Bottom-up strategies include listening for specific details, recognising cognates, and word-order patterns, and spotting noun phrases as agents or objects as well as verb phrases as actions (Azevedo & Buchweitz, 2015).

Top-down listening strategies are based on listeners who need to recall schematic knowledge of the language, the topic, the context or situation, and the type of listening text.

This type of knowledge concerns listeners' mental framework which relies on their knowledge, memories, and opinions (Nunan, 2002). Hedge (2007) claims that in top-down listening listeners use contextual clues to infer meaning as well as they make connections between the stream of speech and their background knowledge. Moreover, he adds that the activation of schematic knowledge creates a set of expectations that significantly assist listeners' anticipation of the upcoming information and the interpretation of the listening input. Some top-down strategies are listening for the gist, listening for different purposes, predicting, visual support, inferencing, summarising, and personalising (Nunan, 2002). Finally, the cognitive strategies of discourse organisation, summation, and elaboration can be effective for more advanced learners in teaching listening (Rost, 2002).

Among these top-down listening strategies predicting is considered to be of extreme importance. Listeners can predict topics, lexis, possible answers, or reactions before and while they listen to the auditory input by monitoring the incoming message, and processing it for deviations from their expectations in order to minimise their cognitive and memory load (Sheerin, 1987). Listeners' predictions and interpretation of the listening input is based on a wide variety of stereotyped expectations of particular situations, places, people, and text-types which they can retrieve and compare and contrast with the incoming message. Consequently, the contextualisation of listening materials for foreign language learners is crucial. On the contrary, listeners' active process of every single phoneme, syllable, word, or phrase of the aural message is needless (Mendelsohn, 1995).

Furthermore, the strategy of visual support can positively reinforce the comprehension of the auditory input or, as part of a listening activity, can urge listeners to concentrate on the main parts of the listening input and instruct them to listen for specific information. Additionally, visuals, such as pictures, diagrams, graphs, and maps, can activate listeners' accurate predictions and deliver them contextual along with explanatory cultural information (Vandergrift, 2004). Visual support is regarded vitally important especially in CD listening courses, where materials are deprived of the necessary visual elements, that are present in real life spoken communication (Sheerin, 1987). According to Jones and Plass' study (2002) listening comprehension and vocabulary retention can be crucially assisted more by pictorial annotations rather than written annotations, as the former has a longer-lasting and stronger effect. In similar vein, showing pictures to listeners is proved more beneficial than providing them with word bubbles in the pre-listening stage because they can give more correct written answers to listening comprehension questions (Balaban, 2015).

Except for the bottom-up and the top-down strategies listening comprehension can be significantly benefited from the metacognitive strategies. Metacognition is defined as "knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (Flavell, 1976: 232), and is simply viewed as cognition about cognition or thinking about thinking (Anderson, 2002). Metacognitive strategies are a series of actions that aim at the utilisation of planning, monitoring, and evaluating during the processing of listening messages (Mendelsohn, 1995). Key metacognitive strategies are planning for listening, comprehension monitoring, hypothesis monitoring, double-check monitoring, problem solving, evaluating comprehension, and identifying comprehension difficulties (Rost, 2005).

Teaching implications

A strategies-based approach to listening instruction has numerous benefits (Carrier, 2003; Goh, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Holden, 2004; Rost, 2005; Vandergrift, 2002, 2003b, 2004; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). It can raise awareness of the listening process, generate strategic learners who are trained to employ effective combinations of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to comprehend auditory input in real time, and increase the speed of learners' cognitive engagement with the stream of speech. Therefore, learners can strengthen their confidence, remove their hesitation and anxiety, ask for help from their environment, successfully adjust in and tackle new situations, and utilise tactics matching

listening activities (Yang, 2013). The abovementioned benefits reveal that the strategy-based instruction as a process-based approach can greatly enhance listening comprehension (Goh, 2008, 2010).

Besides, metacognitive instruction refers to “pedagogical procedures that enable learners to increase awareness of listening process by developing richer metacognitive knowledge about themselves as listeners, the nature and demands of listening, and strategies for listening” (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012: 97). Moreover, the strategy-based approach serves the main goal of formal instruction as it “teaches learners how to listen by instructing them in the use of strategies” (Mendelsohn, 1995: 52). A great number of empirical studies (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011; Bozorgian, 2012, 2014; Coşkun, 2010; Fahim & Fakhri, 2014; Goh & Hu, 2013; Rahimi & Katal, 2013) prove the beneficial role of metacognitive instruction in the listening process. Above all, it can potentially support learners to regulate their own learning (Wenden, 1998). In addition, it has a substantial impact not solely on the process and the outcome of their learning (Goh, 2008) but also on facilitating the convenient and easy process and storage of information (Vandergrift, et al. 2006). Last but not least, it can assist learners in recognising and addressing their comprehension challenges while processing the listening input (Goh, 2002a).

Consequently, teachers are advised to formulate productive listening tasks that assist students to develop strategies, to recognise and use the signals provided in the spoken foreign language in order to make guesses, predictions, and inferences. Tasks should align with the purpose of the discourse type, that is the establishment of personal relationships, and focus on speakers’ attitudes, intentions, moods, and relationships and should not only demand exact recall of verbal detail (Sheerin, 1987). Strategies should be woven into the content teaching, so that students can realise their value to the development of successful learning (Azevedo & Buchweitz, 2015). Moreover, teachers should keep in mind that novice students, who possess a narrower linguistic base, are inclined towards interpreting individual words and relying on their schematic knowledge (Vogely, 1995). Conversely, more advanced students, benefiting from their larger information processing capacity, have the ability to employ metacognitive strategies to a greater extent (Vandergrift, 1998; Graham et al., 2008). Thus, teachers may opt to utilise written transcripts as a source of support especially for beginner learners so that they avoid anxiety and panic in case they do not understand every single word. Lastly, the teaching of listening skills should incorporate elements, such as positive feedback and reinforcement, error analysis and subsequent remedial action.

Conclusion

All in all, the utilisation of strategy-based instruction has the potential to substantially improve foreign language learners’ reading and listening skills provided that it is embodied in the curriculum and is appropriately incorporated in the learning process by the well-trained educators. Therefore, having taken into account learners’ linguistic, cognitive, metacognitive, and social needs, educators are encouraged to design the pedagogically suitable tasks and lessons. The objectives of these tasks can be the learners’ familiarisation, the practice, and the continuous adoption of reading strategies and listening strategies. Through the strategy-based approach learners are involved in an effective and productive learning process, that allows them to appreciate its fruitful advantages, such as, intrinsic motivation, self-reflection, independence, and the commitment to lifelong learning. Last but not least, in addition to focusing on the receptive skills, foreign language instructors need to be informed and acquainted with the strategies of the productive skills of writing and speaking. It is essential for them to comprehend the teaching implications that arise so as to incorporate them into their daily instructional practice.

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