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Talking Sense about Learning Strategies

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Abstract ■ Judicious training in the use of learning strategies can be very valuable for language students. However, the notion of 'strategy' is not always well defined in the literature. For pedagogic purposes strategies need to meet certain criteria: they should be problem-oriented, subject to choice among alternatives, under conscious control, clearly describable and plausibly effective. The teaching of reading skills, in particular, commonly involves strategies which are of doubtful value; this is especially the case for training in 'guessing unknown words'. Classification of strategies is notoriously problematic: taxonomies tend to be based on questionable psycholinguistic analyses and not well targeted pedagogically. While training in strategy use can contribute usefully to learner independence, this can be taken to unconstructive extremes; and such training is no substitute for basic language teaching.

Keywords ■ language learning, language teaching, learning strategies, reading skills, strategies.

Introduction

Learning a foreign language is difficult, complicated and time-consuming. Any procedure that might make it a little easier, faster or more successful therefore needs to be taken seriously. Hence the explosion of interest in learning strategies over the last three decades or so, and the presence of titles such as Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Macaro (2001) on teacher trainees' reading lists.

However, as with many other key concepts in our field (e.g. *skill*, *pragmatics*, *task*, *process*), there are substantial problems of definition, scope and applicability (Macaro 2006). How can we best delimit the notion of 'strategy' so that it will serve our purposes? What are the criteria

for deciding that a strategy can usefully be taught? Is it helpful to classify strategies; and if so, into what categories should we divide them?

Defining Strategies

Perhaps a good starting point is to look at how the word 'strategy' is deployed in ordinary usage. A key element is that of problem-solving. A strategy is not simply what you do to obtain a result; rather, it is the way you choose to deal with questions that arise on the way to obtaining that result. For instance, if your purpose is to go to work in the morning, getting up is not what one would normally call a 'strategy'; it is just what you have to do if you are going to get to work at all. But if you have problems getting to work on time, the notion of strategy becomes relevant. Should you take the car, leaving early to miss rush hour; or go by bike and dodge the traffic; or go by rail and hope that the trains are running normally? To take another example: if you are going away on holiday, packing is not a strategy—it is a normal part of holiday travel. But there are all sorts of strategies *for* packing, depending on the circumstances, the packer's fussiness and his/her individual preferences. Fold all your clothes carefully and put them in with the biggest at the bottom; just throw things in as they come to hand; make a list; rely on your memory; do your packing the night before you travel; get up early and do it just before you leave; get your partner to do it, and so on.

Inherent in this everyday idea of strategy is that of alternatives. A strategy is one of several possible ways of solving a problem: the way that you think will work best, or that you are most comfortable with. Surprisingly, however, in discussions of language-learning strategies the choice-of-solution element is not always prominent. It does not occur even by implication in four of the five definitions cited by Macaro in his book on the subject (2001: 17). It seems to me, however, that this criterion is crucial for language learning as for other activities; without it, the notion of 'strategy' becomes too heterogeneous and all-inclusive to be useful. In a recent paper (Griffiths 2007) on teachers' and students' perceptions of strategies, the author includes the following in the list of 32 'strategies' that she selects for examination:

- spending time studying English,
- learning from the teacher,
- doing homework,
- revising regularly,
- using a dictionary,

- learning from mistakes,
- studying English grammar,
- consciously learning new vocabulary.

But it is hard to see these as approaches that learners might choose to follow (or not) after weighing the alternatives. What would such alternatives be? Not spending time studying English? Not learning from the teacher? Not learning from mistakes? Not studying vocabulary or grammar? Apart perhaps from one or two small tribes living in the more remote mountain fastnesses of second language acquisition theory, people involved in language instruction surely take it for granted that learning from the teacher, revising, studying vocabulary and so on are necessary parts of the business. The same goes for activities such as practising and paying attention (Oxford 1990: 19-20). But then it is not, I think, useful to call these things 'strategies'. If everything that one does in order to learn a language is brought under the umbrella of 'strategy', there is nothing that is not a strategy, and the concept becomes vacuous.

If we limit learning strategies to types of behaviour that learners can choose or not to engage in, as seems reasonable, then we must surely exclude mental processes that are automatic and cannot be 'switched off'. Macaro (2001: 21) argues for a conscious-unconscious continuum in the analysis of strategies, and this may well be reasonable in the light of his view that strategies can be automatized. However, it is hard to see how an intrinsically unconscious procedure (such as some types of inferencing) can usefully be included in a pedagogic programme. A number of the items included in Oxford's strategy lists and in her associated questionnaire for investigating strategy use, the 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning' (1990), seem to me to be susceptible to this criticism. For example, one of her strategies (1990: 295) is, while engaged in conversation, to try to guess what one's interlocutor will say next. It seems highly likely, however, that this is a normal and automatic part of the mental processing of spoken interchanges, not under conscious control, or subject to teaching or learning. Another of Oxford's strategies, listed also by O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 45), is deductive reasoning. As an imaginary example of successful use of the strategy Oxford offers the following:

> Julio, who is learning English, hears his friend say, 'Would you like to go to the library with me at five o'clock?' Julio correctly understands that he is being asked a question to which he must respond, because he recognizes that part of the verb comes before the subject (a general rule he has learned) (1990: 82).

But identifying a sentence as interrogative, in a language of which one knows the basic grammar, is a relatively automatic business. Whatever processing is involved in Julio's recognizing that he is being asked a question, and in his appreciation that the question requires an answer, it is hard to see a case for saying that he is deliberately operating a strategy of 'deductive reasoning', any more than deductive reasoning is involved in his identification of the word 'library' as the name of a place where books are kept.

Selecting Strategies for Teaching

For pedagogic purposes, then, I suggest that strategies need to be problem-oriented and subject to conscious selection from a range of alternatives. They also need, obviously, to involve procedures that not all learners would automatically engage in without teaching. One might wonder for instance whether Oxford's 'Pascual', presented as an example of a student engaging in 'scanning', really owes his effective behaviour as a traveller to strategy training:

> Waiting in the Köln train station, Pascual (a learner of German) is worried about his late train, and therefore he listens closely for an announcement of its estimated arrival time and scans the schedule board periodically (1990: 81).

Strategies also need to be effective; or—given the poverty of empirical evidence in this respect (Macaro 2006)—they should at least offer solutions that look plausible. It is hard, for example, to imagine a Chinese student of English getting very far with strategies such as coining words or switching to the mother tongue (Macaro 2001: 201; Oxford 1990: 295); nor does 'avoiding communication' (Oxford 1990: 48) seem obviously to qualify as an effective language-learning strategy.

Most importantly, perhaps, as Rees-Miller stresses (1993: 681, cited in Macaro 2006: 322), specific strategies need to be defined in terms which make it clear what exactly one is talking about. Simply suggesting that a learner 'use the English words I know in different ways' or 'try to find out how to be a better learner of English' (Oxford 1990: 295) is likely to result in bafflement rather than improved learning. Again, it may well make sense to encourage a strategy of 'trying to think in English' (Griffiths 2007: 96), but if so, we need at least to decide just what this means. Arguably, much thinking is not verbal. Some is, certainly; but just what kinds of thinking? For the instruction to be useful, the focus needs to be

narrowed to something the learner can get hold of. For instance: 'Mentally explain to somebody in English how to cook something', or 'Mentally draft a letter to your partner in English'. Similarly, it does not seem very constructive to encourage a strategy of trying 'to talk like native English speakers' (Oxford 1990: 295) without further specification. Students might well wish to do exactly this; but they must be told how to get closer to doing it, not just told to do it. What exactly are they being instructed to imitate—intonation, rhythm, articulatory setting, specific sounds…? The whole lot all at once? Surely not.

Oxford's book includes a number of activities designed to get teachers thinking about learning strategies and relating their use to concrete situations. This is a welcome feature, but here again there are places where the focus seems somewhat unclear:

> ON TOUR: You are an Australian tourist in Greece. You have never been here before, and your study of Greek has been limited to skimming the Berlitz phrasebook. You managed to find your hotel with the help of a taxi driver. You went out for a walk on your own and got lost. Nobody around you seems to speak English. Your task is to find out where you are and get back to your hotel before it gets dark. You have two hours to do this. You are getting a little worried! Which language learning strategies do you need to use? (Oxford 1990: 32).

Language *learning* strategies? I think I've failed.

Reading Skills

The issues discussed above surface strikingly in discussions of strategies for improving 'reading skills'. This area is something of a conceptual morass, and it is often quite unclear precisely what effect a given teaching approach can realistically be expected to produce. Much of the teaching of reading skills is predicated on the assumption that learners do not already possess them: that a student who understands the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign-language text needs to learn something else in addition in order to 'comprehend' what he or she is reading. Hence the standard battery of exercises designed to train students in 'skimming', 'scanning', 'predicting', 'inferring' and so forth, that one finds in textbook after textbook. But this needs to be questioned. Certainly, there are learners who are poor readers in their mother tongue, and who for one reason or another need to acquire enhanced reading skills in another language. However, such students are something of a special case. I think a reasonable default

position is that most literate foreign-language learners simply need to be able to access the processing skills that they are already able to deploy in other areas: for instance, when reading mother-tongue texts; and that accessing these skills is largely a function of increased proficiency. On this view, 'comprehension' difficulty, where it is not simply caused by un-familiar language, is likely to result from temporary processing overload, with too much of working memory taken up with low-level decoding and not enough left available for the higher-level mental structure-building which underlies effective text comprehension. With increased experience of the foreign language, decoding becomes more automatic and the learner is better able to access his or her higher-level processing skills. (See Walter 2007 for detailed discussion.) If this is the case, it can be argued that much of the work that is done in classrooms in order to 'teach' read-ing skills or strategies is more or less a waste of time.

One of the standard 'reading skills' lessons involves trying to train students to guess the meanings of unknown words that they encounter while reading. Recommended strategies include decomposing compound words ('*de–compose–ing*'), looking for cognates ('*encounter = incon-trare*'), looking for clues in the context ('John was angry, so *he growled* may mean that he made an angry noise'), and various others (see, for example, O'Malley and Chamot 1990: 178-79; Oxford 1990: 90-94; Macaro 2001: 190). The question is: what exactly is the purpose of all this? Certainly not to help students to learn vocabulary—this kind of guessing is a compensatory strategy, not a learning strategy. If you want to learn what a new word actually means, reference to a dictionary or an informant is far more efficient and reliable than guesswork. In a study by Parry (1991), students were able to guess the meaning of unknown words in text only about 50% of the time.

Maybe the purpose, then, is to help students to understand texts better? Perhaps—but the ultimate purpose of language teaching is to give students the language they need in order to read texts, not to teach them to manage as well as they can without that language. Research has shown that for efficient reading, skilled readers need to be able to recognize rapidly 95% or more of the words in a text (Grabe and Stoller 2002: 186). And in any case, if a student is seriously held up while reading by a difficult word, looking the word up beats guessing; words that cause less trouble can be skipped. (Now there *is* a useful strategy.)

A practical example may help to clarify the issues, while enabling us at the same time to put ourselves in the same position as an intermediate

language learner. Readers are invited to look through the following text (Garioch 1980: 33) and examine their approach to understanding it. It is written in Lallans, a literary Lowland Scottish dialect of which readers are likely, by virtue of their knowledge of standard English, to have inter-mediate-level comprehension. In the text Robert Garioch offers an original view of Sisyphus, the character in Greek mythology who was condemned by the gods to spend eternity pushing a large boulder up a mountain, only to find that every time he got it to the top it rolled down again.

Sisyphus

Bumpity doun in the corrie gaed whuddran the pitiless whun stane.
Sisyphus, pechan and sweitan, disjaskit, forfeuchan and broun'd-aff,
sat on the heather a hanlawhile, houpan the Boss didna spy him,
seein the terms of his contract includit nae mention of tea-breaks,
syne at the muckle big scunnersom boulder he trauchlit aince mair.
Ach! hou kenspeckle it was, that he ken'd ilka spreckle and blotch on't.
Heavin awa at its wecht, he manhaunnlit the bruitt up the brae-face,
takkan the easiest gait he had fand in a fudder of dour years,
haudan awa frae the craigs had affrichtit him maist in his youth-heid,
feelin his years aa the same, he gaed cannily, tenty of slipped discs.
Eftir an hour and a quarter he warslit his wey to the brae's heid,
hystit his boulder richt up on the tap of the cairn—and it stude there!
streikit his length on the chuckie-stanes, houpan the Boss wadna spy him,
    had a wee look at the scenery, feenisht a pie and a cheese-piece.
Whit was he thinking about, that he just gied the boulder a wee shove?
Bumpity doun in the corrie gaed whuddran the pitiless whun stane,
Sisyphus dodderan eftir it, shair of his cheque at the month's end.

First of all, let us consider what stands between the average reader and a complete understanding of the text. Not 'reading skills', surely? Few readers will have exclaimed, on reaching the end of the poem, 'Oh, dear! I wish I was better at skimming/predicting/inferring/…' The problem is, of course, vocabulary, as it generally is for intermediate language learners grappling with difficult texts. About a third of the words in *Sisyphus* do not occur in standard English. On the plus side, however, readers will have quickly spotted that many of these (about half of the difficult words) are cognates, similar to standard English words but spelt differently—for example *doun*, *stane*, *seein*. Identification of cognates is certainly a useful strategy for learners who speak the few languages that are closely related to English, and worth teaching to such of those learners (probably a minority) who do not operate the strategy automatically. Cognates are,

however, not always easy to identify: perhaps not all readers will have spotted that *manhaunlit the bruitt* corresponds to 'manhandled the brute'. And students need, of course, to bear in mind that cognates are often misleading, especially as between English and Romance languages. (Even in the present example there is at least one false cognate: a *cheese-piece* is a cheese sandwich, not a piece of cheese.)

If we discount the cognates, there are still over 20 difficult words in the poem. How far can we get towards understanding these by applying the standard 'guessing unknown words' strategies? Not very far, I think. A few words or expressions can be decomposed into parts at least one of which is familiar. *A hanlawhile* (given the context) must have something to do with 'a while'; *fricht* in *affrichtit* looks like 'fright', so the word probably means 'frightened'; *youth-head* is probably just 'youth'; *chuckie-stanes* will be some kind of stones. For the other 20 or so words, the only recourse is to look at the context and guess. If you have identified *sweitan* as 'sweating', then *pechan* perhaps means 'puffing' or 'gasping'; *disjaskit* and *forfeuchan* may also refer to uncomfortable physical or mental states. It is not that hard to deduce that *takkan the easiest gait he had fand in a fudder of dour years* means something like 'taking the easiest route he had found in a lot (?) / long period (?) of hard (?) / sad (?) years'. And so on. However, we need to remember that this kind of speculation, even when successful, is a one-way process: our belief that *gait* means something like 'route', for instance, came from the text in the first place, so adds nothing further to our overall understanding: taking information from the text does not put additional information back into it. It would have made no difference, in fact, if the word *gait* had not been there, and the line had read 'takkan the easiest—he had fand…'

Readers probably finished the exercise with a reasonable understanding of Garioch's wonderful poem. (And for those who would like to get closer to the exact meaning, there is a rough translation into standard English at the end of this paper.) But—to repeat my earlier point—I would argue that this understanding arises mainly from readers' possession of normal reading skills, rather than from any training they might have received in the kind of strategies that it is conventional to teach to foreign-language learners (most of whom also have normal reading skills). And the exercise should also have made it clear, if this was necessary, that strategies for 'guessing unknown words' have very limited effectiveness. It is worth asking, in fact, under what circumstances language learners really find themselves needing to understand, as well as they can, unknown words in

a difficult text, without having recourse to a dictionary. Mainly, perhaps, in language examinations, and in the classroom during lessons where they are being prepared for such examinations. Is it possible, then, that the whole 'guessing unknown words' business is nothing more than a solution to an artificial and self-inflicted problem; simply another example of the way we can be forced to spend valuable teaching time training students to jump through the hoops that our examinations set up for them?

Classifying Strategies

Categorizing and labelling are perhaps the most fundamental of all intellectual strategies: they are our basis for understanding and managing our infinitely complex world. However, category systems can take on a life of their own, with the danger that they may obscure the real nature of the phenomena that we are classifying. This can, I think, be the case in discussions of learning strategies. Taxonomies such as O'Malley and Chamot's (1990: 46) or Oxford's (1990: 14-22) are quite elaborate, distinguishing several general types of strategy—in Oxford's case 'memory', 'cognitive', 'compensation', 'metacognitive', 'affective' and 'social'— each with numerous subcategories. Oxford's categorization in particular, with its several levels of subdivision, is somewhat daunting, and it is hard to share her belief that teachers and students can internalize and work from the scheme (1990: 24-25). There are inevitable problems of classification and overlap between categories, as Oxford herself recognizes (1990: 16-17). And it is not, in fact, always easy to see the rationale underlying the classifications. Oxford's 'cognitive strategies' (1990: 19), for example, fall into four oddly disparate groups: (A) 'Practicing', (B) 'Receiving and sending messages', (C) 'Analyzing and reasoning' and (D) 'Creating structure for input and output'. Group B has two subdivisions: (1) 'Getting the idea quickly', and (2) 'Using resources for receiving and sending messages'. This style of categorization seems to owe more to brainstorming than to a reasoned analysis of the processes involved.

Macaro (2001: 24) adopts a rather different classification system involving a number of related continua (e.g. cognitive—metacognitive/ social/affective; subconscious—conscious; direct—indirect). This is also quite elaborate, but Macaro in fact questions whether, for pedagogic purposes at least, it is actually important to come up with a 'definitive and clear classification'.

It certainly seems possible that, for teachers and learners, it would be more transparent and useful to list strategies by target, rather than on the basis of mental processes which risk being ill-defined and impressionistically subcategorized. So that instead of schemes like 'cognitive strategies' >'practicing' >'recognizing and using formulas and patterns' (Oxford 1990: 44), with the subsequent problem of relating these procedures to specific aspects of learning or skills use, one's strategy inventory might simply read: 'ways of memorising vocabulary', 'ways of internalising difficult grammar rules', 'ways of becoming better at perceiving weak forms or vowel contrasts', 'ways of getting information from dictionaries', and so on. Such an approach, by pinning discussion down to specifics, might also put a brake on the enormous proliferation of strategies that is a disturbing feature of some of the literature.

Conclusion: The Value and Limitations of Strategy Training

Despite the generally critical tone of this paper, and the concerns raised by many scholars and well summarized by Macaro (2006), I do not, of course, wish to question the value of a judicious concern with well-defined learning strategies. Sensitizing students to the role of strategies and giving them training in their use is obviously a constructive thing to do, provided such strategies are genuinely teachable, clearly targeted and plausibly effective. In particular, training in the 'metacognitive strategies' that can help students to organize and assess their learning is widely recognized as contributing to success in all fields of study. And while recent work may not have added as much to the traditional strategy inventory as some writers might suggest, it is certainly helpful for language teachers to be provided with accessible accounts of the different ways in which their students can be helped (or can help themselves) to learn. To the extent that research provides reliable information about the effectiveness or otherwise of specific strategy use and training, this too is valuable.

Valuable approaches to language teaching can, however, be counter-productive if taken to extremes. This has happened often enough in the history of our discipline—one thinks of structure drilling and the language lab, the banning of the mother tongue, the exclusive use of functional/notional syllabuses, the insistence that all student activity be 'communicative', or the rush to bring corpora into the classroom. Strategy training, too, can cause trouble if it is given too much importance. Encouraging students to try out a limited range of well-focused approaches to specific

learning problems is one thing; swamping them with multifarious and complex inventories of ill-defined strategies is quite another. And given the current vogue for self-directed learning, and the evangelistic tone of some of the writing in the field, there is a further danger that training in strategy use may be seen by inexperienced teachers as a replacement for traditional teacher-directed learning. Nobody would dispute the value, up to a point, of learner independence. But learners are not necessarily themselves the best judges of what learning strategies are appropriate for them. We have all known students who believed the key to success in language learning was simply to learn grammar rules by heart. I was at school with a boy who was convinced that he could pass a Latin exam solely by memorizing the contents of a dictionary. Learner independence needs to be guided. And, of course, teaching strategies does not remove the need to teach language. It is of limited value, for instance, to train students to handle aural comprehension difficulties by deploying broad-spectrum 'listening skills' (scanning, asking for repetition or whatever), if they are not also trained to overcome the specific phonological problems, such as difficulty in perceiving weak forms, vowel contrasts or complex consonant clusters, which cause the aural comprehension difficulties in the first place. Macaro (2001: 146) reports the case of an English girl (whose use of writing strategies he was investigating) who, in her fourth year of French studies, did not know the French equivalent of *he had*. Whatever the quality of the student's writing strategies, these seem less immediately relevant to her situation than her disturbing failure to learn the basic French verb forms. Well-designed strategy training is undoubtedly very valuable in its place, but it is simply one of the many resources available to language teachers. It must not be allowed to fill the horizon.

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Robert Garioch's Sisyphus: A Literal Translation Into Standard English

Bumpity down in the gully went thundering the pitiless boulder.
Sisyphus, panting and sweating, worn out, exhausted and fed up
sat on the heather for a short while, hoping the Boss didn't spy him,
seeing the terms of his contract included no mention of tea-breaks,
then at the great big horrible boulder he struggled once more.
Oh, how familiar it was, that he knew every glint and blotch on it.
Heaving away at its weight, he manhandled the brute up the hillside,
taking the easiest route he had found in a burden of hard years,
keeping away from the crags that had frightened him most in his youth,
feeling his years all the same, he went cautiously, careful of slipped discs.
After an hour and a quarter he wrestled his way to the hilltop,
hoisted his boulder right up on the top of the cairn - and it stayed there!
stretched his length on the pebbles, hoping the Boss wouldn't spy him,
had a little look at the scenery, finished a pie and a cheese sandwich.
What was he thinking about, that he just gave the boulder a little shove?
Bumpity down in the gully went thundering the pitiless boulder,
Sisyphus doddering after it, sure of his cheque at the month's end.