

Language Learning Styles and Strategies

I. Language Learning Styles

Learning styles are the general approaches- for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual- that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. These styles are “the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behaviour” (Cornett, 1983, p. 9).

They are the way(s) that particular learners prefer to learn. Some language learners have a preference for hearing the language (auditory learners), some for seeing it written down (visual learners), some for learning it in discrete bits (analytic learners), some for experiencing it in large chunks (global or holistic or experiential learners), and many prefer to do something physical while experiencing the language (kinaesthetic learners). Learning styles are variable and people often have different preferences in different learning contexts (Tomlinson, 2013). That is, “Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others” (Dunn & Griggs, 1988, p. 3).

II. Language Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are steps taken by learners to enhance their learning. An active use of language learning strategies helps learners to develop language skills, increase confidence and motivation in learning process. The more strategies a learner uses, the more he/she feels confident, motivated and self-efficacious. Teachers are encouraged to choose appropriate teaching techniques and learning strategies for students and teach them how to understand learning strategies to enhance levels of self-directed learning.

Oxford (1989) defines language learning strategies as “the often-conscious steps of behaviours used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information” (p. 4). Cohen (1998) defines language learning strategies as the processes the learners consciously select that may lead to action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language.

1. Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies

Learners employ different learning strategies when they are faced with different problems, so learning strategies are problem-oriented. Oxford (1990) identified twelve key features of language learning strategies as follows:

1. Contribute the main goal, communicative competence;
2. Allow learners to become more self-directed;
3. Expand the role of the teachers;
4. Are problem oriented;
5. Are specific actions taken by the learners;
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. (Oxford, 1990, p. 9).

Though these features seem to be obvious from first glance, we can say that almost all of them characterize the learner’s learning experience (features 2.4.5.6.7.9.11.12), while others characterize the programmed learning courses (1.3.4.8.10) and show that educational decisions can contribute by involving more people (teachers) in the development of learning strategies, and by designing specific aims (goals) and activities (problem-oriented). We can add that features 5 and 8 are somehow contradictory because one wonders how “specific actions taken by the learners” can “not be observed”. The only explanation to this contradiction is that scholars attempt to explain learners’ actions by inferring from, and relating learners’ choice of a given strategy to, abstract cognitive styles (Hammada, 2007).

2. Classification of Language Learning Strategies

In the classification of language learning strategies, many researchers have focused on how successful or good language learners try to learn and tried to identify what strategies worked for them to find which strategies are effective for language learning. The assumption is that once successful learning strategies were identified, they can be taught and learned by less successful learners to improve their language learning.

3. Oxford's Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) proposed a more detailed classification model of language learning strategies based on the synthesis of the previous work on good language learning strategies and her classification is "the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies" (Ellis, 1994, p. 539). She divided language learning strategies into direct and indirect strategies.

A. Direct strategies: involve direct learning and require mental processing of the language (Oxford, 1990), which include:

- **Memory strategies:** help learners to store and retrieve information, such as grouping, creating mental linkages, applying images and sound, reviewing, and employing action.
Eg. Creating a mental linkage: grouping and classifying.
- **Cognitive strategies:** enable learners to understand and produce new language, such as reasoning, practising, receiving and sending messages, analysing and summarizing.
Eg. Practising with sounds of words that end with "ough" and it sounds differently such as through, though, tough, and trough. To understand them better, the learner may give his own phonetic spelling "throo, thow, truff, and troff.
- **Compensation strategies:** allow learners to use the new language for comprehension or production despite limited knowledge, and they are used to make up for "an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, especially, of vocabulary" (Oxford, 1990, p. 17). The strategies include guessing meanings from context or using gestures when the learners do not know the precise expression.
Eg. Guessing from the context that the meaning of the word "shovel", when it comes with the following words: grass, mower, and lawn in a conversation is about gardening.

B. Indirect strategies support learning indirectly but are powerful to learning process (Oxford, 1990), which include:

- **Metacognitive strategies** help learners to regulate their learning, such as paying attention, planning, self-evaluating and monitoring one's errors or the learning process.
Eg. A learner who wants to listen to the news in the target language can plan the task by:
 - Determining what topics might be covered in the program
 - Most of the times, topics on politics and economy are debated
 - In this case, in this case, the learner might prepare and look up for the vocabulary related to those topics before listening to the news. This would prepare the learner for the new learning.
- **Effective strategies** help learners to deal with their own emotions, motivation, and attitudes, such as lowering anxiety, self-rewards, self-encouragement.
- **Social strategies** refers to ways in which learners learn the language through interactions with native speakers or the target language, such as asking questions, cooperating with peers and improving cultural understandings.
Asking questions is proved to be the most helpful in conversation by generating response from the partner and shows interest and involvement.