

# The Significance of Language Learning Strategies in Efl Class

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**ABSTRACT.** *This paper, first of all, emphasizes the significance of language learning strategies in the English language learning class. It not only reviews the background of LLS but also defines and classifies it. The authors then take into account the strategies “good language learners” used frequently to help inform teachers and students alike of how to teach and learn languages more effectively in EFL Class.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Lls; Definition; Empirical studies; Efl class*

## 1. Introduction

Learning strategy refers to (in language learning) a way in which a learner attempts to work out the meanings and uses of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of a language, for example, by the use of generalization and inferencing (Jack C. Richards, John Platt & Heidi Platt 2002: 260).

Language learning strategies is a term referring to the processes and actions that are consciously deployed by language learners to help them to learn or use a language more effectively. They have also been defined as “thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very outset of learning to the most advanced levels of target language performance”.

In second language learning, studying, reading, etc., intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn or remember new information. These may include focusing on certain aspects of new information, analyzing and organizing information during learning to increase comprehension, evaluating learning when it is completed to see if further action is needed. Learning strategies may be applied to simple tasks such

as learning a list of new words, or more complex tasks involving language comprehension and production. The effectiveness of second language learning is thought to be improved by teaching learners more effective learning strategies (Jack C. Richards, John Platt & Heidi Platt 2002: 260).

## **2. Core Theories**

The development of LLS research is rapid, however, this field is still lacking ‘consensus on a unified theory’ (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007:30). In this part, a variety of definitions, classifications of LLS will be introduced. And then, the value of language learning strategies will be briefly summarized.

### **2.1 Definition of Lls**

Language learning strategies were first introduced to the second language literature in 1975, with research on good language learners. At the time it was thought that a better understanding of strategies deployed by successful learners could help inform teachers and students alike of how to teach and learn languages more effectively. Initial studies aimed to document the strategies of good language learners. In the 80s the emphasis moved to the classification of language learning strategies. Strategies were first classified according to whether they were direct or indirect, and later they were divided into cognitive, metacognitive or affective/social categories.

In 1990, Rebecca Oxford published her landmark book *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know* which included the “Strategy Inventory for Language Learning” or “SILL”, a questionnaire which was used in a great deal of research in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Controversy over basic issues such as definition grew stronger in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, with some researchers giving up trying to define the concept in favor of listing essential characteristics. Others abandoned the strategy term in favor of “self-regulation”. Oxford (2001) summarized the features of LLS which are “control, goal-directedness, autonomy, and self-efficacy”.

When coming to language learning strategies (LLS), both Cohen’s and Ellis’s (Cohen, 1998: 68 and Ellis, 1994: 529) definitions pointed out the two perspectives of LLS: mental and behavioral activities. They defined language learning strategies as the mental or behavioral activities adopted by learners with the explicit goal to enhance their language learning. With the development of LLS, the definition has been specified. For instance, Oxford (1999: 518) took the learning of English as a second or foreign language into account (ESL/EFL). She defined ESL/EFL learning strategies as being a specific plan, action, behavior, process, or technique that learners used consciously to assist their ESL/EFL learning. To clarify this definition, she used a series of realistic examples in another book. According to her statement, watching TV soap operas from the United States, arranging an appointment with English-speaking friends several times a week, labeling

everything in the dorm by English and singing English songs are all considered as learning strategies of ESL/EFL.

Due to a majority of previous research in this field tended to simply draw a decontextualized and static picture of language learning strategies (Parks & Raymond, 2004; Macaro, 2006), some researchers claimed that the LLS research is supposed to move from the description of LLS towards the investigation of the underlying processes (Tseng, Dornyei & Schmitt, 2006). For this reason, a new definition was put forward by Macaro (as cited in Gao, 2007:618) "LLS is conceived 'in terms of a goal, a situation, and a mental action' as 'the raw material of conscious cognitive processing'".

It is apparent that more emphasis was placed on context and cognition in the above definition. In order to match with the context of this research, the definition of ESL/EFL learning strategies will be applied.

## ***2.2 Classification of Lls***

O'malley and Chamot (1990) proposed a primary distinction among strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and social. Metacognitive is related to planning, monitoring cognitive processes, the cognitive refers to the actual processing of knowledge, and the social strategies deal with the learning context. The three classifications stated above seem not influential in the LLS research field. On the other hand, Oxford's (1990) systematical classification of LLS obtained prevalence immediately since its emergence. One reason is the classification itself is relatively comprehensive and detailed than earlier ones (Jones, 1998: 121). Another reason might be that this classification is manifested by SILL, and which is widely used by researchers around the world. This widely accepted LLS measurement instrument will be discussed in the following part, thus it is high time to take a close look at Oxford's classification of LLS.

Oxford divided language learning strategies into two major categories: direct and indirect. For her, direct strategies are involved in the process of learning a language, and indirect strategies can facilitate language learning in many ways but exclude language learning itself (as cited in Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). Direct strategies included memory, cognitive, and compensatory strategies; indirect strategies comprised metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Although the definitions of LLS were not consistent until now, an agreement was reached on the value of learning strategies. It is unreasonable to label language learning strategies as 'good' or 'bad'; the acceptable adjectives to modify them are 'effective' or 'ineffective' (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Based on this statement, the following claim seems to be undebatable that is the 'appropriate use' of LLS can improve L2 proficiency overall, or in specific language skill (Oxford, 2002: 126). Another point is also worth mentioning that the value of LLS also lies in its long-standing effectiveness both in and outside of the classroom (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007:14). Especially nowadays, autonomous learning was highlighted in language teaching and learning, LLS serves as one of the efficient ways to realize it.

### **3. Empirical Studies of Lls**

As stated above, a rich body of empirical studies of LLS has been undertaken. Research studies have been mainly classified into three areas according to their different focuses. These three areas are the ‘good language learner’, strategy instruction research and influences on strategy choice (Oxford, 2001). This section will focus on the review of research methods and some empirical studies related to this present research.

#### ***3.1 Research Methods***

The research method is an inherent issue in LLS research. The research methods variously adopted by researchers associated with their specific research goals. Till now, oral interviews, questionnaires, observation, verbal reports, diaries, journals, and recollection studies have been involved in the strategies investigation (White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007: 94). Among the variety of research methods, the questionnaire has an absolutely high frequency in LLS research. The surface reason for this fact is that researchers’ time, energy as well as financial resources can be saved by using a questionnaire (Dornyei, 2003:9). The deeper reason for the popularity of questionnaires is its potential to present quantitative data in a research field. Oppositely, some researchers argued that observation was more accurate than a self-report questionnaire because they concerned that respondents’ truthfulness or misunderstanding sometimes lead to unreliable data collection (Arnold & Brown, 1999:11; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Gillette, 1987: 165). White et al.’s (2007) put forward comments on the observation method that might be a strong correspondence to the above argument. They believed that learning strategies are not only internal but also change in correspondence with the task and learning context. For this reason, the observation method is not capable to fulfill the research work.

Although the above argument is still ongoing, the questionnaire instrument seems to obtain manipulation in LLS research in the past decades. Before the 1990s, researchers made great efforts to design their own LLS questionnaire which summarized by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995:3) afterwards. Based on objective analysis of both previous questionnaires and SILL, the reason for the manipulation of Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL) in LLS research was found that was the lack of ‘published reliability or validity data’ of the questionnaire instruments before SILL (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995:4). This reason might sound not adequately convincing, but there is no better explanation until now. In the present research, the ESL/EFL version of SILL will be adopted.

#### ***3.2 Strategies of ‘Good Language Learners’***

At the beginning of LLS research, researchers mainly concentrated on identifying the common characteristics of ‘good language learners’ (GLL). It was presumed that less successful learners would benefit from the adoption of the strategies which “good language learners” used frequently. Rubin’s (1975) work is

regarded as a pathbreaking study on this subject. Based on observation, a list of strategies considered to be essential for all “good language learner” was summarized by Rubin:

- a. willingly and accurately guess
- b. want to communicate
- c. are uninhibited about mistakes
- d. focus on both structure and meaning
- e. take advantage of all practice opportunities
- f. monitor their own speech and that of others (as cited in Oxford, 2002: 125)

This list covered a wide range of learning strategies, while Naiman et al. (1975) supplemented the above list. They claimed that a “good language learner” still learns how to think in the target language and places weight on affective factors in the learning process.

Besides the works above, other researchers also worked along similar lines with different emphases. For instance, Stern (1975) put forward good language learners’ top-ten strategies. He, in particular, offered this list without an empirical study but relied on his own experience as a teacher and some relevant literature (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007:12). However, this fact has not weakened the reliability of this summative conception. There is one point deserves extra mentioning that is learners’ attitudes towards language learning were emphasized in his list, such as ‘constantly searching for meaning’ and have “critical sensitivity to language use”.

Different from Stern, the emphasis of Nisbet and Shucksmith’s (1986:25) description of good language learners’ learning strategies was laid on contextualization. They believed that a good language learner was capable to choose strategies appropriately and adapt flexibly in correspondence with the specific situation. Accompanied by the development of LLS research on influential factors in strategy choice, an insightful conclusion about GLL was generated in terms of individual learner’s difference. Oxford and Nyikos (1989:291) pointed out that GLL generally uses “the strategies which appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, the purpose for learning the language, and type of language”.

Additionally, they further indicated that a good language learner usually employs a wide variety of language learning strategies instead of simplex strategies. Generally speaking, it is not an easy work to explore the common strategies used by good language learners, because of the complicated interactive variables which can influence the strategies choice.

#### **4. Influences on Strategy Choice**

Along with the development of LLS research, an increasing number of researchers have acknowledged that specific learning contexts led to different choices of language learning strategies. For this reason, various researchers have conducted research studies on the factors which were relevant to the choice of LLS.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989: 291) offered a comprehensive list of these factors:

a) language being learned; b) level of language learning, proficiency, or course; c) degree of metacognitive awareness; d) sex; e) affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, and language learning goals; f) specific personality traits; g) overall personality type; h) learning style; i) career orientation or field of specialization; j) national origin; k) aptitude; l) language teaching methods; m) task requirements; n) strategy training.

These factors were further divided into two groups according to the extent of their relationship with language learners' choice of learning strategies. The factors which definitely influence the choice were regarded as strong factors, such as 'b, j, i, and l' in the above list (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989: 291). This classification sounds not very persuasive, due to it was claimed thirty years ago. At that time, the researcher stated that the other factors, such as motivation and gender, were not comprised of a strong factor group, because of the lack of research studies. Thirty years past, a considerable number of research studies have been done on this subject and many firm conclusions have been drawn out. Now, it is well-founded to add factors like motivation, gender, and proficiency into the strong factor group.

Another classification of these factors was provided in 2007, compared with Oxford and Nyikos' (1989), which was relatively updated and reasonable (Takeuchi, Griffiths & Coyle, 2007: 69). In this classification, the factors were categorized as individual variables, group variables, and situational variables. To correspond with the present research goal, only the relevant empirical studies on age, gender, motivation, and career orientation will be presented here.

Griffiths (2003) conducted research in New Zealand which aimed to examine the influence of age on LLS. The sample in this research is 348 students aged from 14 to 64. Surprisingly, no significant relationship had been found in this research. Oppositely, other researchers' studies displayed that the age did influence the choice of language learning strategies (Peacock & Ho, 2003; Victori & Tragant, 2003 as cited in Takeuchi, Griffiths & Coyle, 2007). The possible explanations for the above controversial research results might be that the range of the samples' age variation was excessively large in Griffiths' research, while the age variation ranges for the other two research studies were small (samples in Peacock and Ho research aged 23-29; in Victori and Tragant's research aged 18-22). Studies on this subject are problematic because it is hard to justify age or study years which is the determining factor caused differences in learning strategies choice. There was research found that differences in learning years resulted in different choices of LLS (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). In this present research, both age and study years will be discussed.

Research on the relationship between gender and LLS came to an agreement that gender affected the choice of LLS. Furthermore, the majority of research studies revealed that the preferred strategies of females and males were different; on the other hand, they concluded that females adopted learning strategies more frequently (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Yuan, Liu & Xu, 2006). A study, exceptionally, reported that men used learning strategies with higher frequency (Wharton, 2000 as cited in Takeuchi, Griffiths & Coyle, 2007). These mixed findings might reflect the social

context in which research was carried out, for example, the roles of females and males in social life.

Motivation and career orientation, without any disputes, has a strong relationship with the choice of LLS. Oxford and Nyikos (1989:294) even believed that motivation is the 'single most powerful' influence on the LLS choice. A bunch of research studies supported the above claim to certain extents (Mochizuki, 1999; Oxford & Abo, 1996; Griffiths, 2001; Peacock & Ho, 2003). In a word, learners with high motivation seemed to employ LLS frequently and variously. Also, career orientation has fundamental effects on LLS choice. Several comparative studies have been conducted between English majors and non-English majors (Mochizuki, 1999; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Yuan, Liu & Zhang, 2006). Obviously, students in different majors carry different career orientations which directly influence their motivation towards language learning and then cause different choices of LLS.

It will be a tough work to assess that to what extent the individual influence will affect the learning strategies choice, because of the complicated interactions between these influences (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989:194). For this reason, one of the important premises of designing a research study on an individual variable of LLS choice is to control other variables that might influence the research results. This present research will follow this conception. To highlight the washback effects of English tests on LLS choice, other variables such as age, learning level, learning institution will be controlled.

## **5. Conclusions**

In the 1970s of the 20th century, some western countries began to study language learning strategies of second languages, while the study of LLS in China was relatively late. At present, there are few kinds of research on LLS in China, especially for the English language learning strategies of domestic college students. There are two main reasons: first, the content of LLS research is more complicated; second, some experts and scholars believe that LLS is not scientific enough. The theories related to LLS are related to information processing technology. Based on the relevant theories of cognitive psychology, the essence of LLS is procedural learning knowledge, which consists of a set of systems or skills, and is a simple combination of learning skills. In short, LLS should be related to the second language learning strategies of Chinese college students. College educators and researchers should actively adopt and apply advanced LLS and methods to the language teaching of Chinese college students. It helps to improve the comprehensive quality of our students.

When we move LLS to the classroom, our traditional teaching model should also be adjusted accordingly. Teachers, as leaders of teaching activities, have important responsibilities in the actual process.

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