Applied Linguistic Approach to Language Learning Strategies (A Critical Review)

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Abstract
From applied linguistic point of view, the fundamental question facing the language teachers, methodologists and course designers is which procedure is more effective in FL/SL: learning to use or using to learn? Definitely, in order to be a competent language user, knowledge of language system is necessary, but it is not sufficient to be a successful language user. That is why there was a gradual shift of attention from the teacher and method towards the language learner. Thus, there were changes in the conceptualizations of language competence and the mechanisms and strategies involved in the process of language learning. In this paper, the nature and specifications of language learning strategies, i.e., cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic strategies have been discussed; and the crucial role of metacognitive strategies has been emphasized in strategy-based instruction.
Keywords: language learning strategy, cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, linguistic strategy, sociolinguistic strategy, strategy-based instruction.

Introduction
The fundamental questions that language researchers and methodologists face with are: 1) what is the nature of language strategy, 2) What constitutes language learning strategic behavior and 3) what is the mutual relationship of proficiency in language and appropriate strategy/strategies applied by the language learner? 4) The next hypothetical question concerns whether language learners develop high proficiency because of the strategies they use, or is it because of learner's proficiency that determines their choice of strategies?

In the present paper, after discussing learner strategies in general, and putting special emphasis on metacognitive strategies in particular, important and effective elements in strategy-based instruction have been discussed.

Strategy and strategic approaches to language learning
In applied linguistics, strategies are techniques used by FL/SL learners for remembering and organizing samples of the second language. These strategies reflect the learner's active contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of his or her own learning. In fact, learners relate linguistic input to their pre-existing knowledge. From psycholinguistic point of view, they may use their general cognitive strategies that are part of their procedural knowledge which are used in other forms of learning. These cognitive strategies are often referred to as learner strategies. In fact they are approaches and mental processes, conscious or otherwise, used by FL/L2 learners for learning and communication, often relying on theories from psychology and linguistics.

The commonly used term 'learning strategy', in applied linguistics, has been variously labeled: behaviors, tactics and techniques. Generally, the term refers to behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable. In practice, a learning strategy is a device or procedure used by learners of FL/L2 to enhance their interlanguages. Learning strategies account for how learners acquire and internalize FL/L2 knowledge. Learning

strategies contrast with communication and production strategies, both of which account for how learners *use* rather than acquire FL/L2 competence. Weinstein and Mayer (1986, p.315) as quoted in Chastain (1988) define learning strategies as:

> behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in, during learning and that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process. Thus, the goal of any particular learning strategy may be to affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes or integrates new knowledge (p. 164).

Definitely, all students have overwhelming materials of *what* to learn in their classes; but a few of them know exactly *how* to learn. Chastain quotes Norman as saying: "it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them about learning." According to Chastain:

> teachers have two equally important obligations in class: one is teach students *what* to learn, that is, the subject matter; another is to teach students *how* to learn, that is learning strategies that will enhance learning in the subject for someone with their particular learning style. In general, teachers are much more attentive to the *product* of learning than the *process* of learning. Unfortunately, students struggling to learn the material need help first with mastering the process if they are to acquire the designated product (Chastain, 1988, p.164).

Interest in learning strategies appears to have first emerged from a desire to understand the characteristics of the "good language learner." The earliest suggestions about learning strategies of successful language learners came from Selinker (1992), who believed that specifically in L2 learning, dynamic interlanguages developed partly through learners adapting puzzle-solving techniques to make sense of the differences between the target and the home languages.

In the history of research in FL and L2 teaching, two lines of development seem to be noticeable: the first line concerned with

methodological and theoretical attitude towards analizing the process of teaching and the components of FL/L2. The second line concerned a gradual shift of attention from the teacher and method towards the language learner; and there were changes in the conceptualizations of language competence and language learning.

> This shift of attention occurred because there developed disillusionment with the potential of teacher-focused or method-focused research to provide answers to why some learners learnt languages better than others. Thus, if the answer was not in the behavior of the teacher, not the method that s/he was using, an answer might reside in the learners themselves (Cook & Wei, 2009, p.11).

Now, from applied linguistic point of view, the fundamental question is which procedure is more effective and important in language learning: learning to use or using to learn? Considering the tenets of many methodological proposals over the last decades, there have been a conflict of beliefs in the approaches of language teachers as to whether learners should learn the language system and how to use it, i.e., learn in order to use as in Grammar Translation and Direct Methods, or use the language in order to learn it as in Audio-lingual method and Communicative Approach to language teaching. From the point of view of strategy application, the question can be posed in the following way: which course of language presentation is more effective: code-breaking (learning) followed by decoding (performance) or decoding (performance) followed by learning (code-breaking). The first pathway seems to be more logical and has long been pursued by course designers and teachers. But there are practical and theoretical reasons to consider that the second pathway that is basically learning from doing is more effective in language learning. In fact, knowledge of the language system is a necessary element in language learning, but it is not sufficient for language use.

The nature and specifications of language learning strategy

The basic question in language learning strategy is what constitutes a language learning strategy and what are the specifications of such strategic behavior? Here, we face with several fundamental and theoretical questions in relation to language learning : is it really possible to have mental behavior (cognitive and metacognitive) and physical action (motor behavior) simultaneously in language learning? What is the practical size of a language learning strategy? Are note-taking in a lecture, writing down important key words, or summary writing language strategies? According to Cook & Wei (2009, p, 15): "the unit of analysis should be as small as is practically achievable and that a strategy's description should be effected at the lowest relevant level of articulation within the boundaries of conscious cognition. With these small strategy units we can build larger but flexible 'clusters of strategies' which in combination can be seen to be achieving a particular learning goal in a specific task or learning situation." Definitely, the type of task required against FL/L2 text is the crucial element in deciding on a comprehension oriented cluster of language learning strategies. Ellis (2012, p.705) considers language learning strategies within the framework of a set of linguistic, non-linguistic and mental specifications. He thinks that strategies can be general in nature or specific attempts or techniques to learn; they are problem-oriented to deal with communicative problems in social interactions; some of them are linguistic with overt linguistic manifestation (e.g., asking to clarify something) or non-linguistic (e.g., pointing to a certain object for its name); while some strategies have clear, observable and behavioral manifestations, others are mental, deployed in learning or in communicative event.

The next fundamental question is: what behaviors should be considered as 'good strategies' and what behaviors should be considered as 'bad strategies'? Do the good language learners use only good strategies, and poor language learners either use bad strategies or very limited number of strategies? What would non-strategic behaviors look like? Some language researchers have presumed that behaviors like

'giving up', 'not bothering to' etc., may be considered as non-strategic behaviors; and in comprehension tasks 'top-down' strategies may be considered as good strategies, while 'bottom-up' strategies and behaviors like translating into L1 in e.g., listening comprehension may be considered as bad strategies. In applied terms, these beliefs cannot be verified in all language learning situations. As Ellis (2012, p.716) believes: "a general problem with many of the correlational studies is that it is not really possible to determine what cause is and what the effect is. Do learners develop high proficiency because of the strategies they use, or is it learners' proficiency that determines their choice of strategies? ... There are no absolutely 'good' or 'bad' strategies." Generally speaking, the learning strategies that a learner adopts reflect his/her achievement level in FL/L2. Thus, e.g., proficient learners adopt frequent and qualitatively different strategies than the less proficient learners; and advanced learners depend on metacognitive strategies in their language learning. For example, in deciding on a goal, planning and monitoring, rehearsal and evaluation, advanced learners use more frequent and in quality more sophisticated strategies than less proficient learners. In recent decades, for the practical purposes, the language learning researchers and methodologists have proposed a combination of strategies or 'clusters *of strategies* '. For example, the good language learners may apply the right combination of strategies at the right linguistic situations. Actually, in language learning process, the appropriateness of the strategies are much more important than how frequently they are used or even the type of strategy being applied.

Learner strategies
From theoretical point of view, there has not been comprehensive and critical examination of the theoretical soundness of the concept 'learning strategy'. In fact, the definitions and conceptualizations of the scholars and researchers have been rather inconsistent and somehow elusive. Thus, different taxonomies and categorizations of language strategies have been proposed using similar or more or less the same essential points with

different terminology. For example, a distinction is often made between learning, production and communication strategies. Tarone (1980), as cited in Ellis (2012, p.704), defines 'learning strategy' as a deliberate "attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language" (e.g., memorization, initiation of conversation and inferences.) Production strategy, according to Tarone, includes using the language efficiently, appropriately and in a clear way. Communication strategies, according to him, are attempts to deal, successfully, with the problems of communication whenever there is a hiatus in meaning negotiation during the act of verbal interaction. The methodological problem in Tarone's distinction of learning strategies is that sometimes during the interaction, it is not clear whether a strategy is essentially motivated by a desire to learn or a desire to communicate a message.

Considering the scholars' and researchers' definitions and approaches to language learning strategies and essential strategic components, four main types of strategies in language learning can be specified, that are general in nature and practically mediate between the linguistic input and the language learner produces.

1) _Cognitive strategies_ which in language learning cover many of the processes or mental manipulations that learners go through in both learning and using the target language. For example, analysis, synthesis of learning materials, and transformations. Actually, these cognitive strategies refer to processes and behaviors deliberately learners use to master and use the target language. For example, cognitive strategies which language learners may use to help them in reading or listening comprehension activities can include cases like repetition of keywords, summary writing, paraphrasing and creating visual images to help the learner remember new linguistic materials. Moreover, conscious ways of learning activities, such as note-taking, resourcing (e.g., using dictionaries, internet and other sources) and elaboration (i.e., relating new-coming information to the pre-existing schema) can be considered as instances of cognitive strategies. These strategies, as a whole, may be subdivided into three categories:

 1.A. *Learning strategies* used to internalize new FL/SL information and knowledge. These strategies refer to the conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of the target language. Thus, the learner processes FL/SL incoming input in order to develop linguistic knowledge. These learning strategies may be conscious and behavioral (e.g., memorization of a linguistic element or repetition in order to remember), or they can be psycholinguistic and subconscious (e.g., overgeneralization or inference). In fact, these strategies determine the personal involvement in the learning process (these are behavioral strategies: seeking learning opportunities, setting aside regular practice times, etc.). Seliger (1984) focused on the conscious/unconscious distinction and proposed that consciously used techniques are in fact 'tactics'(e.g., looking for learning opportunities, conscious rehearsing of FL/L2 patterns) whereas unconscious modes of sorting and organizing FL/L2 data are strategies proper in the strict sense of the word (e.g., the unconscious over-generalizing of irregular verbs in English language in cases like 'Daddy goed there' , 'I did not brought it' that are instances of the application of such unconscious strategies). O'Malley and Chamot (1990), have divided strategies into metacognitive and cognitive (corresponding to mental states, but disregarding conscious and unconscious distinction) and social/affective (corresponding to behavior) strategies.

 1.B. *Production strategies,* that are used to utilize learner's existing FL/SL knowledge (e.g., rehearsal of L2 patterns, discourse planning and mental planning of utterances). These strategies, that are mainly *language use strategies* refer to strategies for using the language that has been learned, however incompletely, including (a) *retrieval* (i.e., strategies used to retrieve and call up language material from mental storage, e.g., calling up the correct verb in its appropriate tense or retrieving the precise meaning of a lexical item). (b) *rehearsal* strategies that are mainly strategies for applying target language structures.

1.C. *Communication strategies* used whenever there are problems in verbal interaction caused by the immediate need to communicate a message for which the FL/SL learner lacks adequate resources. Similar to production strategies, communication strategies are strategies of use rather than of learning. Practically, then, communication strategies are linguistic behaviors to negotiate meanings for which the learners lack necessary linguistic knowledge. In fact, communication strategies are used to convey meaningful and informative message for the listener or reader, for example, when we want to explain a technical point for which we do not have precise and specialized vocabulary. Communication strategies, that have received the most focus in language learning research, may be verbal (or non-verbal) first aid devices to deal with problems or breakdowns in negotiating meanings. These problem solving strategies, definitely, include conversational interaction strategies and strategies for maintaining the floor. These strategies include behaviors like a) *avoidance* or *reduction* strategies (e.g., avoiding discussing or continuing difficult topics or concepts; or leaving the explanation or discussion unfinished), b) *achievement* or *compensatory* strategies (e.g., circumlocution, description, using 'empty' words like ' thing ' word coinage etc.), c) *stalling* or *time-gaining* strategies (e.g., using filling words like: well, in fact etc.), d) *interactional strategies* (e.g., calling for help, asking for repetition, etc.). It is important to note that communication strategies may or may not play any effective role in language learning.

2) *Metacognitive strategies in language learning* involve active planning and deciding about learning, monitoring one's own spoken or written language, and evaluating how well he/she has been successful in negotiating the meanings; or checking performance against that of native speakers. Thus, in fact, metacognitive strategies are processes which learners consciously use in order to supervise or manage their own cognition by planning what they will do, checking how it is going and then evaluating how it went. In other words, metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the mental processes used during the learning

process, monitoring learning while learning is taking place and evaluating after the learning activity.

3) *Linguistic strategies in language learning*. In the first language acquisition and FL/SL learning, the strategies involved in language differ radically. Actually, in first language acquisition linguistic strategies include processes that involve universal principles of grammar with which the language learner is innately endowed with. These strategies provide the learner with a starting point. The task is, then, to scan the environmental language input do discover which rules of the target language are universal and which are specific. But in FL/SL learning there are skill-related strategy categories for four basic language skill categories: listening and reading (as two receptive language skills) and speaking and writing (as two productive language skills).

3.A. In *listening strategies,* increasing language learners' attentive exposure to the new language forms, distinguishing exact segmental phonemes in FL/SL , paying due attention to suprasegmentals and being an active listener (e.g., making logical and educated guesses based on appropriate presuppositions) are important aspects of listening strategies.

3.B. In *reading strategy use*, finding appropriate reading material, planning how to read, monitoring the reading process, checking the quantity and quality of understood reading material, making suitable summaries, making logical guesses of unknown words and structures, using suitable dictionary and so on can be effective components of reading strategy use.

3.C. In *speaking strategy use*, practicing new grammatical structures in different socio-linguistic situations in order to consolidate the relevant structures in FL/SL, initiating conversational activities in target language as often as possible, looking for different ways of self expression and so on are prolific elements in speaking strategy use.

3.D. In *writing strategy use,* planning the right steps of writing in different kinds of texts, whether academic or otherwise, monitoring the whole process of writing, reviewing in proper intervals, revising the written material, getting the feedback from several readers and final

editing of the written material are considered to be the important elements in writing strategy use.

3.E. In *vocabulary strategies*, memorizing new words and lexical items with due attention to their contexts in sentences, morphological analyzing of new and unknown words, making logical guesses of unknown words with reference to their contexts, practicing in different contexts and sentences, reviewing and recalling the newly learnt words can be considered as important aspects of vocabulary strategies.

3.F. In *translation strategies,* using the normal language forms of the receptor language, conveying, as much as possible, to the receptor language speakers the same meanings that were understood by the speakers of the source language, and maintaining the dynamics of the original source language i.e., producing the translation in such a way that it will engender the same response as the source language intended to engender are some of the most effective and important translation strategies.

4) *Sociolinguistic strategies* involve strategies learnt through interacting with others as using appropriate language forms according to the social situation and socio-cultural context as working with fellow students or asking the teacher's help. Through these strategies, learners appropriately use their knowledge of the social significance of the choices among the alternative forms of the language. For example, each of the utterances: 'Hey!', 'Excuse me!', and 'Sir!' or 'Ma'am!' is, definitely, both grammatical and meaningful, but only one of them satisfies societal expectations and the speaker's preferred presentation of self and his/her approach towards and evaluation of the social situation.

Developments in strategy-based instruction

In applied terms, 'learner training', 'strategy training' and 'strategy instruction', were used in the literature to teach language learners how to learn. But as there were inconsistencies and differences about the comprehensive definition of the term 'strategy' and what are its constitutive components, the researchers could not reliably determine which learning behaviors constitute strategies and which do not; and how

these strategies relate to the psycholinguistic processes involved in language learning. Despite this theoretical shortcomings, language researchers believe that metacognition is a very important aspect in any strategy- based instruction; because through goal identification, planning, reflection, monitoring and evaluation, the learners take full responsibility for their own learning. Accepting the vital role of the metacognition, Ernest Macaro (cited in Cook & Wei, 2009, p.26) discusses the practical steps in language learning strategies and presumes that " most of strategy-based instruction now have five recognizable steps: 1) initial awareness raising of the extent and types of language learning strategies available to the learners; 2) a phase during which the teacher or peers model the strategies they use; 3) opportunities for the learners to practice using the strategies with the teacher/researcher's support (sometimes referred to as 'scaffolding'); 4) removal of the support; and 5) evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy-based instruction." Macaro (2006) emphasized the practical importance of 'clusters of strategies ', having metacognition play a central role in determining which clusters to implement in order to achieve designated learning goals.

Summary
In the present paper, we have observed that the language learning strategies and strategy-based instruction came about because the focus of interest became the language learner; and because researchers became more attentive to the process of language learning than the product of it. We pointed out that there are definite inconsistencies in taxonomy and conceptualizations of language learning strategies in the literature; but we tried to give a comprehensive and inclusive definitions and classifications of language learning strategic-types; and after defining and specifying the nature of language learning strategy and its determining components, four main types of language learning strategies i.e., cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic strategies were discussed. We discussed, further, that metacognitive strategies within the framework of 'clusters of strategies' constitute the most important aspect in any strategy-based instruction, because through the application of such strategies, it is practically possible to identify the precise goal, plan, monitor and evaluate the language learning process.

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