

A Case Study: What Learning Strategies does a Shy Adult Learner Apply? ¹

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Introduction

The study of language learning strategies can provide language teachers with insights into the ways in which different students learn. In one of the courses at my university, Phonetics and Phonology I of which I work as a teacher assistant, I noticed that one student happened to be particularly shy and suspected that her reluctance to participate in the class might well result from unawareness and inadequate use of learning strategies. I therefore decided to conduct an action research project to determine what, if any, relationship there was between this student's learning strategies and her behaviour in class. As I was limiting myself to one learner in particular the method applied in this research project was a case-study approach. Moreover, in order to collect relevant data I decided to use the SILL questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) and a semi-structured interview so as to complement the information. The findings seem to indicate that there was indeed a connection between the shy behaviour of the student and an inadequate knowledge and use of effective learning strategies.

Literature Review

Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

Among all the various and complex factors that affect language learning, motivation, aptitude, and learning styles, researchers have paid particular attention to learning strategies (Ellis 1994). The initial phase of strategy research started with the studies of "the Good Language Learner" (e.g., Naiman 1978; Rubin 1975; Stern 1975) which tried to find correlations between strategy use and L2 proficiency. As expected, the results indicated that "it was not merely a high degree of language aptitude and motivation that caused some learners to excel but also the students' own active and creative participation in the learning process through the application of individualised learning techniques (Dörnyei and Skehan 2001, 17)."

In the 1990s O'Malley and Chamot and Oxford, among other researchers, attempted to define learning strategies. According to Oxford, "language learning strategies are particular forms of learning behaviour, employed more or less

¹ This is a refereed article.

consciously by the learner to make language learning easier, faster and enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (1990, 8).” Similarly, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) define strategies as “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information (1990, 1).”

Bearing in mind these definitions, I claim that these authors seem to assume that the use of learning strategies facilitates language learning. However, they are not consistent in the way they classify them. While O’Malley and Chamot divide learning strategies into metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective ones, Oxford provides a more detailed framework. To be more precise, she establishes a distinction between direct and indirect strategies within which O’Malley and Chamot’s categories, as well as the novel memory and compensation strategies, are included.

In my view, these new techniques are worth considering, since research (Rubin 1975; Rubin 1981; Reiss 1985) has demonstrated that learners frequently use them. Hence I will base my analysis of the evidence for this case study on Oxford’s more complete model.

Oxford’s Taxonomy of Learning Strategies

This framework draws a distinction between direct and indirect strategies (Appendix A). The former types imply direct learning and require mental processing of the target language, while the latter are in charge of supporting and managing language learning without directly involving the target language.

In the direct group are three kinds of strategies: Memory, Cognitive and Compensation strategies, and the indirect set, comprises Metacognitive, Affective and Social ones. Each of these categories is broken down into two more levels which will be detailed in the following section.

Direct Group

Memory Strategies:

The specific function of memory strategies is to help learners to store and retrieve information. They fall into four sets *Creating mental linkages*, *Applying images and sounds*, *Reviewing well* and *Employing action* (See Appendix B).

In the first set, *Creating mental linkages*, are: *Grouping* (e.g., classifying language material into type of word, topic, similarity, etc), *Associating/elaborating* (e.g., associating two pieces of information like *bread and butter*) and *Placing new words into a context* (e.g. a story) (Oxford, 1990: 41).

Four strategies are included in the second set, *Applying images and sounds*. They are: *Using imagery* (e.g., a mental image of the word itself), *Semantic mapping* (e.g., relating words linked to a key concept), *Using keywords* (e.g. a combination of sounds and images) and *Representing sounds in memory* (e.g., rhyming) (Oxford, 2001: 364).

The category *Reviewing well* contains one strategy, *Structured reviewing* which consists in overlearning by means of reviewing in spaced intervals. In the group *Employing action* there are two strategies: *Using physical response or sensation* which has to do with acting out a new expression (e.g., open the door) and *Using mechanical techniques* (e.g., flashcards) (Oxford, 1990: 42).

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are beneficial to learners' understanding, manipulation and production of the target language. As shown in Appendix C, four main sets exist: *Practising*, *Receiving and sending messages*, *Analysing and reasoning* and *Creating structure for input and output*.

There are five *Practising* strategies: *Repeating* (e.g., imitating a native speaker), *Formally practising with sounds and writing systems* (e.g., pronunciation, intonation, register, etc), *Recognising and using formulas and patterns* (e.g., "Nice to meet you"), *Recombining* (e.g., linking phrases) and *Practising naturalistically* (e.g., conversations, reading a book, listening to a lecture) (Oxford, 1990: 45).

The two strategies for *Receiving and sending messages* are: *Getting the idea quickly* (e.g. skimming and scanning) and *Using resources for receiving and sending messages* (e.g., e-mail) (Oxford, 1990: 46).

The set *Analysing and reasoning* comprises five strategies: *Reasoning deductively* which consists of using general rules and applying them to new situations, *Analysing expressions* i.e., breaking down an expression into parts to determine its meaning, *Analysing contrastively* i.e., comparing vocabulary, sounds, grammar of the new language with elements of our L1, *Translating* which has to do with using one language as the basis for understanding or producing another and *Transferring* i.e., applying knowledge of words, concepts, structures from one language to another (Oxford, 1990: 46).

The category *Creating structure for input and output* contains three strategies: *Taking notes* (e.g., writing down the main ideas of a text) *Summarising* (e.g., making a summary of a long passage) and *Highlighting* (e.g., underlining) (Oxford, 1990: 47).

Compensation Strategies

The purpose of Compensation strategies is to allow students to make up for missing knowledge. There are ten categories that are divided into two sets: *Guessing intelligently in listening and reading* and *Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing* (See Appendix D).

The two strategies that contribute to *Guessing intelligently in listening and reading* are: *Using linguistic clues* i.e., using language-based clues to guess the meaning of what is heard or read and *Using other clues* (e.g., context, text, structure, etc) (Oxford, 1990: 49).

The second set *Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing* contains eight strategies: *Switching to the mother tongue* i.e., using the mother tongue for an expression without translating it, *Getting help* which denotes asking the person to provide the missing information, *Using mime or gesture* (e.g. physical motion to indicate meaning), *Avoiding communication partially or totally* (e.g. avoiding certain topics when difficulties are anticipated), *Selecting the topic* (e.g., choosing the topic of conversation according to one's own interests), *Adjusting or approximating the message* (e.g., making ideas simpler), *Coining words* (e.g., combining new words) and *Using a circumlocution or synonym* i.e., describing the concept or using a word that means the same thing (Oxford, 1990: 50).

Indirect Group

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies aid students in controlling and coordinating their learning process by planning, arranging and evaluating. As shown in Appendix E they include three strategy sets: *Centering your learning*, *Arranging and planning your learning* and *Evaluating your learning*.

The first group is made up of *Overviewing and linking with already known material* which has to do with associating new material with what is already known, *Paying attention* so as to ignore distractors and *Delaying speech production to focus on listening* i.e., until the listening skill is better developed (Oxford, 1990: 138).

Six strategies form the second set, *Arranging and planning your learning*. They are: *Finding out about language learning* (e.g., reading books to improve one's own learning process), *Organising* (e.g. a schedule, notebook), *Setting goals and objectives* (e.g. short-term objectives and long-term goals), *Identifying the purpose of a language task* (e.g., purposeful listening/reading/speaking/writing), *Planning for a language task* (e.g.,

resources, aids) and *Seeking practice opportunities* i.e., in a naturalistic situation for example: joining an international social club (Oxford, 1990: 139).

The last set, *Evaluating your learning*, comprises *Self-monitoring* which involves identifying errors and trying to eliminate them and *Self-evaluating* i.e., evaluating one's own progress in the new language (Oxford, 1990: 140).

Affective Strategies

The role of affective strategies is to help learners regulate and control emotions, motivations and attitudes. There are three sets: *Lowering your anxiety*, *Encouraging yourself* and *Taking your emotional temperature* (Appendix F). Techniques that are effective anxiety reducers can be found in the first group. They are: *Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation*, *Using music* (e.g. soothing music to relax) and *Using laughter* (e.g. watching a funny film, reading a humorous book, etc) (Oxford, 1990: 143).

The second set, *Encouraging yourself*, includes the following strategies: *Making positive statements* i.e., saying or writing a positive statement to oneself such as "I'm a good listener", *Taking risks wisely* in spite of possible mistakes and *Rewarding yourself* (e.g. buying an interesting book as a reward for a good performance) (Oxford, 1990: 144).

The last group, *Taking your emotional temperature*, comprises: *Listening to your body* (physical sensations like sweating), *Using a checklist* to discover feelings, attitudes, and motivations, *Writing a language learning diary* in order to keep track of events and feelings in the learning process and *Discussing your feelings with someone else* (e.g., talking with a friend, teacher, relative, about one's own feelings concerning language learning) (Oxford, 1990: 144).

Social Strategies

The last group, the social strategies, attempts to foster students' learning through interaction with others. Examples of these strategies are: *Asking questions*, *Cooperating with others* and *Empathising with others* as shown in Appendix G.

The former set aids understanding and correction and it is made up of *Asking for clarification or verification* (e.g., asking the speaker to repeat, paraphrase, etc) and *Asking for correction* (e.g., asking someone for correction in a conversation) (Oxford, 1990: 147).

The second set, *Cooperating with others*, involves *Cooperating with peers* i.e., working with other language learners and *Cooperating with proficient users*

of the new language i.e., working with native speakers usually outside of the classroom (Oxford, 1990: 147).

The last group, *Empathising with others*, is composed of the following strategies: *Developing cultural understanding* (e.g. trying to understand the other person's relation to that culture) and *Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings* i.e., observing others' behaviour as well as their expression of thoughts and feelings (Oxford, 1990: 147).

As shown in the description above there is a variety of strategies in Oxford's inventory. Needless to say, any learner will probably not apply them all. In fact, his/her strategy choice will be affected by other factors such as motivation, learning style and aptitude; among others (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, these variables will be mentioned in this study if they appear in the data.

The Study

The Participant and Action Research Questions

The three students who were asked to participate in this study were in their second year of the Teacher Training Program and they were all attending Phonetics and Phonology I, the subject I am an assistant of. The main reason for selecting them, rather than the other fifteen students who were part of the group, was that they were all reluctant to participate during lessons. However of the three learners invited to collaborate in this study, two of them withdrew. The only subject remaining was Laura (a false name).

At the time when I carried out this investigation, she was 22 years old. She had been studying English for 11 years and had reached an upper-intermediate level in the target language. During the lessons she was attentive and behaved in a responsible way which might indicate that she was eager to learn. However, she showed a certain reluctance to participate in class; she even blushed and sweated whenever she had to speak. This occurred not only in my oral practice lessons which focused mainly on fluency tasks, but also in the theory classes taught by the teacher in charge of the subject.

This shy attitude made me suspect that she was not fully aware of learning strategies and that she probably did not use the most appropriate ones. Considering her situation I posed the following research questions: *What learning strategies did this adult learner make use of? How often did she use strategies for learning English? Which group of strategies did this student employ the most and the least? Was there any possible connection between the kinds of learning strategies that were most and least frequently applied by this learner and her behaviour in class?*

Techniques for Data Collection

The primary source of data to answer the research questions addressed above came from a questionnaire designed by Oxford (1990) called SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, the version for speakers of other languages learning English 7.0), that links strategies to specific language tasks (speaking, reading, writing and listening). This tool intended to cover all the strategies that are present in the framework of this study.

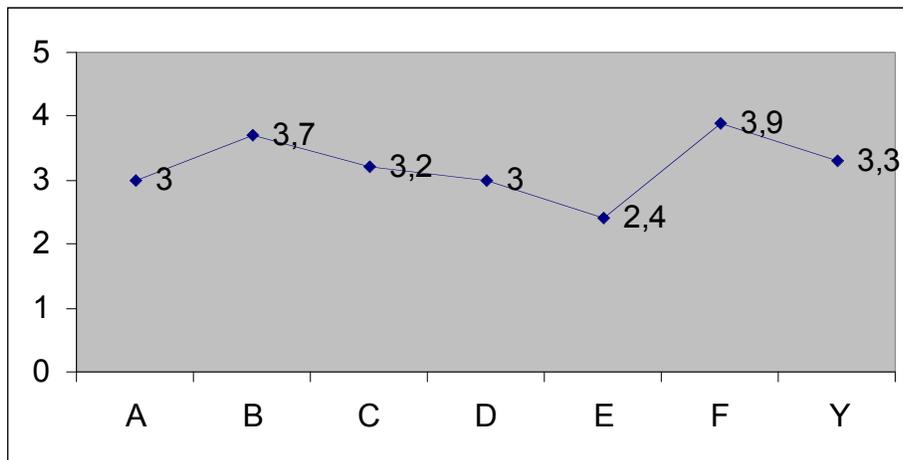
However, the reliability of the information gathered through this method needed to be checked and explored more thoroughly by being compared with data generated through a complementary elicitation technique. I therefore decided to use a semi-structured interview. This procedure contained open-ended questions and prompts that attempted to encourage the interviewee to give more detailed responses (Wallace 1998).

Analysis of the SILL

The graph inserted at the end of this section contains the information about Laura's learning strategy use obtained from the questionnaire. The averages above the macrocategories A, B, C, D, E and F in the SILL tells us how often she used each group of strategies, while the overall average (macrocategory Y) indicates how often she employed strategies for learning English. In order to understand these averages Oxford provides the scale located just below the graph. This scale, which ranges from 1.0 to 5.0, aims at indicating whether the subject was a high, medium or low user of language learning strategies (Oxford 1990).

According to the information gathered, Laura was a medium user of strategies since her overall average is 3.3, macrocategory Y (medium, sometimes used, from 2.5 to 3.4). The indirect social strategies, represented by the macrocategory F, learning with others, assume a predominant role by accounting for a 3.9 average. Within this category, Developing cultural understanding (5.0) and Asking for clarification (4.0) emerge as dominant strategies. The direct cognitive strategies, macrocategory B, using your mental processes, were usually put into practice by this learner (high, from 3.5 to 4.4). The main specific strategies applied were: Repeating (5.0), Formally practising with sounds (4.0), Practising naturalistically (5.0), Getting the idea quickly (5.0), Using resources for receiving and sending messages (4.0), Reasoning deductively (4.0), Analysing contrastively (4.0) and Summarising (5.0). The medium level use of the direct compensation strategies (3.2), macrocategory C, compensating for missing knowledge, suggests that these strategies were only sometimes used, compared to the social and cognitive ones. As regards specific strategies, the data reveal that Using mime or gesture (4.0) and Using a circumlocution or synonym (4.0)

were the most frequently employed. The pattern of use for the direct memory strategies, macrocategory A, remembering more effectively, and the indirect metacognitive ones, macrocategory D, organising and evaluating your learning, appear to be highly similar as both of them presented a 3.0 medium average. The most exploited strategies in these respects were: Placing new words into a context (5.0), Using keywords (4.0), Using imagery (4.0), Structured reviewing (5.0); Self-monitoring (5.0), Paying attention (4.0) and Self-evaluating (5.0). As to affective strategies, macrocategory E managing your emotions, the evidence manifests a low level of use (2.4), with Listening to your body (5.0) and Discussing your feelings with somebody else (4.0) being the only types of specific strategies highly utilised.



A	Remembering more effectively (Memory Strategies)
B	Using all your mental processes (Cognitive Strategies)
C	Compensating for missing knowledge (Compensation Strategies)
D	Organising and evaluating your learning (Metacognitive Strategies)
E	Managing your emotions (Emotional Strategies)
F	Learning with others (Social Strategies)
Y	Your overall average

Key to Understanding the Averages

High	Always or almost always used	4,5 to 5,0
	Usually used	3,5 to 4,4
Medium	Sometimes used	2,5 to 3,4
	Generally not used	1,5 to 2,4
Low	Never or almost never used	1,0 to 1,4

Analysis of the Interview

The day I interviewed Laura, I gave her the opportunity to speak either in English or Spanish. She preferred to answer in English so as to practise the target language. I recorded the information on audiotape, and for the analysis of the data, I selected the excerpts I wished to quote in this study. At this point, I transcribed and edited them minimally so as to preserve the learner's view.

Remembering More Effectively (Memory Strategies)**Data**

At the beginning of the interview she talked mostly about how she usually coped with vocabulary.

'It's very hard to remember words. Most of the time I use them in sentences or I include them in my writings. Another thing that I do, but not very often, is to draw pictures or to group words in my computer, for example ways of crying, smiling, etc. I usually write the new words on cards, you know, not to forget them, then, I stick them on the wall, and once I've learnt them I move them. In fact, to remember vocabulary, structures and to learn from my mistakes, I re-read all the material I have, including my written assignments.'

'What about connecting words with sounds?'

'To be honest, the other day I was browsing through the English dictionary and I found that there are words connected to sounds for example the verb *crack*, that's very interesting, but that is something I've just realised.'

Comments

Memory Strategies

- ◆ Placing new words into a meaningful context
- ◆ Structured reviewing
- ◆ Using mechanical techniques

Language aptitude

Learning-styles

As soon as Laura got the meaning of a word, she sought out opportunities to use it in a meaningful way. Such behaviour is representative of the direct memory strategy of *Placing new words into a meaningful context* which seems to correlate with success in language learning, according to John Carroll's (1981) views on language **aptitude**² (in Ellis 1997). This variable as well as learning styles, motivation, personality, and life-experience, among others, affects the way in which learners approach and learn the target language.

Additionally, my learner appears to be aware of the fact that she made use of *Structured reviewing* strategies, not only to remember words and structures, but also to eradicate errors. *Using mechanical techniques* were usually put into practice by this student, as she wrote new vocabulary on flashcards, and moved them once the vocabulary was learnt. However, she claimed that only sometimes did she group words under common topics, she did not associate lexical items with images very often and she was not accustomed to relating sounds with words. This means that *Grouping* and *Using imagery* were not frequently applied by this learner whereas *Representing sounds in memory* was relatively unknown to her.

All in all, the strategies this learner employed to remember vocabulary and her learning style were closely related (Schmeck 1988). In a nutshell, she did not seem to naturally create a relationship between words and pictures (visual links) or words and sounds (auditory links). Her imagery was visceral or emotional or kinaesthetic or something other than visual (Stevick 1989). This is evidence that supports the existence of a strong connection between learning styles and learning strategies.

² Natural ability related in part to general intelligence for learning an L2.

Using all your Mental Processes (Cognitive Strategies)

Data

Some minutes later, she started to mention the activities she did to improve her English performance.

'Well....in fact it is very difficult for me to improve my oral performance, because I become very nervous whenever I have to talk. I don't have conversations with my friends, but I speak to myself. You might be thinking I'm crazy, but sometimes I repeat to myself /s/ /z/ to better my pronunciation, because I know I have difficulty with those sounds. First I want to have a good pronunciation, well more than good, and then I'll focus on intonation, not now.' She was silent for a moment, and then she added the following comment. 'What else, I usually read books about Celtic culture and Monarchy, Elizabeth I, you know, all that, I'm really interested in English culture... I really admire it and that is the main reason why I'm studying English... I usually watch English TV programmes. Whenever I have the chance I watch English films and I try to understand without looking at the subtitles. I also listen to English music all day long. Well...apart from this, sometimes I write postcards or messages to my best friend and classmate Rocío, but I find it very difficult because I don't feel sure, I don't know whether I'm writing properly or not, this is a fear I have.'

Comments

Cognitive Strategies

- ◆ Practising naturalistically
- ◆ Using resources for receiving and sending messages
- ◆ Repeating
- ◆ Formally practising with sounds and writing systems

Motivation

Motivation is another variable that influences the learners' preferences in language learning strategies. For example, Laura sounded as if she had a deep integrative feeling when she reported being an admirer of British culture. Moreover, this inner motive is typified by her comments about her devotion to English books, music and films. Consequently, affected by motivation, this integrative oriented learner³ happened to choose the cognitive strategy *Practising*

³ According to Gardner (1985) integrated oriented learners are interested in the people and the culture where the target language is spoken. They are more likely to achieve their goals because they are apparently more psychologically motivated than the instrumentally oriented learners who want to learn the language because it is a useful tool for them to get a job, to pass an examination, etc (in Dörnyei and Skehan 2001)

naturalistically in particular rather than others. In addition to learning a new language, Laura was learning a new culture. Specifically, she was becoming familiar with a range of meanings and concepts that might not exist in her native culture and that British people might want to convey.

For her, improving her oral performance was a hard task, because of her insecurities about her abilities. In spite of her fears, and perhaps driven by the belief that pronunciation played an important role, she was willing to polish her sounds as long as she was not heard by her classmates. To achieve this aim, she profited from hearing herself repeating sounds. The names for these cognitive strategies are: *Repeating* and *Formally practising with sounds and writing systems*.

The information gathered seems to reveal that her sense of insecurity inhibited her from writing messages more frequently. As a result, she employed the strategy *Using resources for receiving and sending messages* only sporadically.

Some Cognitive and Compensation Strategies

Data

Then, the respondent and I began to talk about how to compensate for missing knowledge in a reading or listening activity.

'I usually try to infer, to guess the meaning of the word from context. I try to understand the function of the word or the sentence, if it is a question or a statement. Then, when I have my dictionary available, I look it up in the dictionary. But, as a matter of fact, the first thing I try to do is to get the main ideas of a text, I take down notes, I write a summary with the main ideas. Because it's impossible for me to study something that is not summarised. I always highlight the main ideas with different colours.'

Comments

Cognitive Strategies

- ◆ Reasoning deductively
- ◆ Getting the idea quickly
- ◆ Taking notes
- ◆ Highlighting
- ◆ Summarising

Compensation Strategies

- ◆ Using linguistic clues
- ◆ Using other clues

Laura's way of accounting for missing knowledge implied mainly inferences and guesses. This learner stressed the importance of meaning as well as getting the main ideas of a written and oral text. For this reason, she relied on the following cognitive strategies: *Reasoning deductively*, *Getting the idea quickly*, *Taking notes*, *Summarising*, and *Highlighting*, which illustrate a top-down approach to comprehension. However, she also applied a bottom-up approach when she paid attention to linguistic and non-linguistic clues, such as context, function, word-order and the like. In this case, she exploited some of the direct compensation strategies *Using linguistic clues* and *Using other clues*. To sum up, she alternated top-down and bottom-up approaches to achieve an understanding of a text.

Compensating for Missing Knowledge (Compensation Strategies)

Data

My next questions made reference to how she managed to communicate the desired idea effectively when speaking and writing.

'Whenever a word doesn't come to my mind I use a synonym or I ask my teacher or I look it up in the dictionary' she paused and then went on: 'Well today a friend of mine and I were having a conversation in English, and I used a Spanish word, though I know it's wrong, you know I did this, because I couldn't find the English word. This is something that I don't do very often, just in an informal talk. What I always try to avoid is translating words. Because I don't trust my L1, many times it may mislead you. Another thing that I do... is to use gestures or mimics to make myself understood, but not very often. Sometimes I have good ideas to tell, but if I don't find simple structures or a way to express them, I don't say a word. Definitely, I'm not the icebreaker in the classroom.' 'What about writing?' I asked.

'Well, whenever I have to write a composition, I start with a draft copy, I write more or less ten, this is a way of practising. I look words up in the dictionary to use new structures and to be sure about what I'm writing. I'm not used to using Spanish structures, but I think it's unconscious.

Comments

Compensation Strategies

- ◆ Using a circumlocution or synonym
- ◆ Getting help
- ◆ Avoiding communication partially or totally
- ◆ Using mime or gesture

Laura was aware of her use of paraphrasing to overcome difficulties when speaking. This is one of the direct compensation strategies called *Using a circumlocution or synonym*. She also made use of the compensation strategy *Getting help*, because whenever she had a doubt she resorted to her teacher to ask for the missing information. If she could not apply the compensation strategy of *Adjusting or approximating the message* by finding a simple way of expressing her opinion, she remained quiet. Again her insecurity prevented her from participating in an oral task and she used *Avoiding communication partially or totally* – totally in this case. When she ran out of words, she sometimes employed physical actions. In other words, she exploited *Using mime or gesture* to make herself understood.

When the subject of my study claimed 'What I always try to avoid is translating words. Because I don't trust my L1, many times it may mislead you.' she meant that word-for-word translation from her L1 could interfere and be the cause of errors when using the target language. She viewed *Translating* and *transferring* (cognitive strategies) as being negative influences. In keeping with this train of thought, she neither employed these strategies nor the compensation strategy *Switching to the mother tongue*. It seems that Laura would probably make use of these strategies if she had more linguistic awareness of both languages which would allow her to improve her lexical processing abilities.

Organising and Evaluating your Learning (Metacognitive Strategies)

Data

I then managed to lead the interview to other topics such as organisation, planning and evaluation.

'In the cover of my notebook I have notes to remember things, but I don't have timetables to study. But I try to organise my notebook by dividing it into common errors, grammar, and I have another notebook for articles and novels. When an exam is near, I organise myself by making a schedule, but not always. Sometimes I plan the manner to encounter a task or activity, I start with the most difficult steps and I leave the easiest for the end. What I began to do this year is to compare my progress. For example, I compare my writings of a year ago, with the ones of this year. What I always do is to pay attention to my mistakes. I learn from them, I look the words up in the dictionary or I read grammar books. By means of remembering what I did wrong, I can eradicate them.'

Comments

Metacognitive Strategies

- ◆ Organising
- ◆ Paying attention
- ◆ Planning for a language task
- ◆ Self-monitoring
- ◆ Self-evaluating

The organisation of Laura's notebook indicates the employment of the indirect metacognitive strategy of *Organising*. The other metacognitive strategies that she made use of are: *Paying attention* and *Planning for a language task*.

Their exploitation can be inferred from this learner's description of her approach to handling a task. The fact that she planned how to deal with tasks is favourable to language learning, as this strategy might probably allow her to produce and have access to more advanced and complex language (Ellis 1994).

Laura sounded as if she had the capacity to evaluate and give direction to her own learning, when she claimed to be able to self-evaluate her learning progress and to learn from her errors too. This suggests that she exploited Self-monitoring and Self-evaluating metacognitive strategies which, according to the results of Good Language Learners research studies, appear to be closely related to success (Ellis 1994).

Managing your Emotions (Emotional Strategies)

Data

In spite of her range of strengths, Laura did show a real weakness in this area.

'I usually get nervous when I have to talk in front of my classmates. I'm afraid of what they can say about me, if I can't produce a grammatically correct sentence, or about my pronunciation, I'm afraid of making mistakes.'

'I guess you are afraid of what the other students may feel about you.'

'Yeah, that's right,' she replied. 'For instance, I'm not afraid of my teachers, I know they will not tell me anything wrong to me, they are so patient, but I'm afraid of my partners, though they are very sympathetic. Your partner is at the same level as you are, so there is always a comparison between two

students. Your classmates may say ...“She is pronouncing well and she isn’t”. She paused and then she went on ‘My problem is speaking. I think it’s because of my personality, I’m shy, I lack self-esteem and that makes me feel unsure about what I do. Whenever I have to talk I feel a revolution in my stomach, as if I had butterflies, but unfortunately this is not a sign of being in love.’ She laughed. ‘I don’t know what to do with my hands. I move them all the time. I feel all my body hot, and it sweats.’

‘Do you do anything to control your body?’

‘No, I don’t. The worst thing is that just sometimes I risk myself by making some comments or by starting a conversation. But I never say to myself, “Well Laura you are doing well, you are excellent.”’

Comments

Emotional/Affective Strategies ♦ Listening to your body
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Laura’s body expressed its nervousness by moving and sweating, and she was aware of these signs. This affective strategy of Listening to your body appears to be the only one she was acquainted with. By saying ‘I’m afraid of what my classmates can say about me’, she confirmed my guess that the language itself did not frighten her; rather the task of learning in the classroom did. Perhaps, she felt that she would not be able to fulfil people’s expectations about her progress in language learning. In spite of this, she did not blame her classmates; she blamed herself, her personality, by saying ‘I’m shy’, and ‘I lack self-esteem’, etc.

Learning with Others (Social Strategies)

Data

Towards the end of the interview, Laura talked about her social relationship with native speakers, the teacher and her classmates.

‘I’d really like to travel to learn more about British culture by being there, not here just through books. I have just met two native speakers in my life’. Laura went on to tell me about an experience that had taken place five years ago. ‘I remember that one day an Australian girl got into my shop,’ she said... ‘and she couldn’t communicate in Spanish, so I said to myself “this is my chance”, but I didn’t have the courage to start the conversation, and I talked to

her just a little bit in English.' Then she retold another anecdote. 'A month ago I met an Irish priest in a meeting in the church, and he asked me if I wanted to speak with him, but I refused to do so, because I was pretty nervous.'

'Have you ever shared this feeling of nervousness with your classmates?' I asked.

'Only once, my classmates and I shared these feelings of fear, and pressure, and I ...really care about what they feel and I think that we have common emotions. I trust my partners, but whenever I have a doubt, I prefer asking my teacher. A thing that really worries me is that I don't practise the language with friends. I think that this afternoon, before coming here, it was the first time my best friend Rocio and I spoke in English. That questionnaire you gave me to fill in made me react.'

Comments

Social Strategies

- ◆ Developing cultural understanding
- ◆ Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings
- ◆ Asking for clarification or verification

The information collected reveals Laura was very interested in understanding the native speakers' culture, and that she cared about her classmates' feelings. This attitude towards English culture and the other students in the same classroom indicates that she applied the social strategies of Developing cultural understanding and Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings. Besides, considering her comments, I may suppose that she profited from asking her teacher whenever she had a doubt, which clearly shows the exploitation of the social strategy Asking for clarification or verification.

Despite the benefits⁴ offered by having a conversation in the target language, this learner was unable to take advantage of interacting with her classmates or native speakers (Ellis 1997). However, that afternoon, having done the SILL questionnaire and become aware of the importance of interaction, Laura and a friend had a conversation in English.

Comparing the Two Methods and the Results

The results obtained through these two methods (the SILL questionnaire and the follow-up interview) were quite similar, even though I detected a small number of differences.

⁴ the collaborative endeavours of the learners and their interlocutors "scaffold" knowledge

With reference to memory strategies, Laura considered Using keywords one of her most frequently employed strategies, whereas in the interview she reported that she had just become aware of the existence of a connection between sounds and words. There is a cognitive strategy that appeared to be rejected in the interview, but was widely accepted and used in the questionnaire; that is Analysing contrastively. In spite of this, there is a correlation between the other cognitive strategies that arose from the data collected through the two methods. As to the affective strategies, Discussing your feelings with somebody else assumed an important role in the questionnaire. On the contrary, it was not mentioned in the interview. Additionally, the interview permitted me to elicit a greater number of highly exploited metacognitive strategies that were not mentioned in the questionnaire, such as Adjusting the message, Avoiding communication totally or partially, etc.

Having compared the results, I am in a position to claim that the combination of these two procedures was a good choice. I was able to elicit factual, more manageable and reliable data by using the questionnaire, yet I could go deeper, get to know my learner's attitudes, experiences and feelings more thoroughly through the unexpected answers yielded by the open-ended questions of the interview (Wallace 1998). The latter technique gave me access to my learner's life, which allowed me to establish a connection with other determining factors, such as motivation, aptitude, learning styles and personality traits. Its flexibility let me clarify the respondent's misunderstandings or problems with further inquiries and if the interviewee said something intriguing a follow-up question was asked.

Answers to my Action Research Questions

By comparing the results and the two methods utilised in this study, I will now try to answer the research questions that were posed at the beginning of this investigation.

1. *What learning strategies did this adult learner make use of?*

She made effective use of the following macro strategies and specific strategies:

- Memory strategies: *Grouping, Placing new words into a context, Using imagery, Using keywords, Structured reviewing and Using mechanical techniques.*
- Cognitive strategies: *Repeating, Formally practising with sounds, Practising naturalistically, Getting the idea quickly, Using resources for receiving and sending messages, Reasoning deductively, Analysing contrastively, Taking notes, Summarising and Highlighting.*
- Compensation strategies: *Using linguistic clues, Using other clues, Getting help, Using mime or gesture, Avoiding communication*

partially or totally, Adjusting or approximating the message and Using a circumlocution or synonym.

- Metacognitive strategies: *Paying attention, Organising, Planning for a language task, Self-monitoring, and Self-evaluating.*
- Affective strategies: *Listening to your body and Discussing your feelings with somebody else. Only two of the ten strategies listed (Appendix F)*
- Social strategies: *Asking for clarification or verification, Developing cultural understanding and Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.*

2. *How often did she use strategies for learning English?*

- Laura's overall average (3.3) reveals that she was a medium user of strategies. This result seems to justify the inference drawn at the outset that she was not a high user of strategies, that she was not aware of many of them and as a result, that she did not know which ones could possibly be more effective for her.

3. *Which group of strategies did this student use the most and the least?*

- Evidence supports the view that social and cognitive strategies were the ones she used the most, and affective strategies were the ones she used the least.

4. *Was there any possible connection between the kinds of learning strategies that were most and least frequently applied by this learner and her behaviour in class?*

- The dominant social strategies were Developing cultural understanding and Asking for clarification or verification. The former strategy accounts for her eagerness to understand the native speakers' culture, which reveals that she was an integrative oriented learner who was psychologically motivated and likely to attain her goals. This inner motivation gave her the necessary strength to be an attentive learner who asked her teachers whenever she had a doubt (the latter strategy).
- Cognitive strategies, which are the least trainable because of their association with language learning and cognitive processes, were also highly employed by this learner (Skehan 1989). This finding indicates she had a good level of cognitive maturity. The high exploitation of these strategies and her attitude towards learning helped her understand and produce language.
- However, her shy personality and her low self-esteem were likely to be posing a threat to her conscious predisposition to take risks in learning and using the L2. These factors are a negative force, at least for second language pronunciation performance, because they

discourage risk-taking which is necessary for progress in language learning (Guiora 1972 in Lightbown & Spada 1999). Alternatively, she should gain self-confidence so as to overcome her fear of having to speak in English in the classroom and therefore make opportunities to use the language by interacting with her classmates and any native speakers she might meet. One way of doing so is to use affective strategies to a higher degree. Laura only exploited two of the ten affective strategies. This low frequency of use of this kind of strategies and her behaviour in class might well be connected. To my mind, if she had greater awareness of affective strategies and had more practice, she would probably take the risk of participating in class more often and would eventually advance her speaking ability. This hypothesis is supported by Oxford's observation that language learners' control over emotions can result from having a good command of affective strategies. For example, anxiety-reducing strategies and self-encouragement (A and B under Appendix F) can help learners to lower their inhibitions and take risks (Oxford 1990). Thus, these kinds of strategies seem to be the keys to helping Laura.

- Another way of boosting her self-confidence is to provide a broader scope of learning strategies. A more frequent use of learning strategies would probably lead her to enjoy a higher level of self-efficacy, i.e., a perception of being effective as learner (Oxford, 2001).

Proposal for Further Action

It is not possible to generalise these findings and claim every shy learner uses the same learning strategies as Laura. But after assessing her management of these techniques, I have arrived at the conclusion that I should implement a course of action to serve the following purposes:

- to broaden my learners' scope of learning strategies by means of explicit strategy instruction in everyday teaching
- to help students learn how to use learning strategies and how to evaluate them
- to demonstrate when a given strategy can be useful and relevant
- to help learners monitor their own use of effective learning strategies and discourage the use of ineffective ones (All Wright and Bailey 1991)
- to aid students in learning how to transfer strategies to other related tasks and situations (Oxford 2001)

The first step to take would consist of specifying all the language learning strategies that link to the different tasks learners would deal with. The purpose of

this is twofold: to raise students' awareness of the kinds of strategies they would be practising and to help them understand how they are used in a meaningful context. For example if they carried out a listening activity in fluency lessons, students could be asked to get the main idea of the oral text. In this way they would be exploiting the cognitive strategy Getting the idea quickly (Appendix C). If the teacher told them to monitor their own production, sounds, rhythm, division into tone units while retelling what they have heard, they would be practising the metacognitive strategy Self-monitoring (Appendix D). If she/he asked them to complete a checklist to keep tabs on their feelings with the language task they have just carried out, they would be making use of the affective strategy Using a checklist (Appendix F).

The second part of this course of action would focus on discussing the strategies they have experimented with as well as on their usefulness and efficacy. Of course some students would find them effective while some others would not. At that point learners would be asked to use the ones they have found helpful and transfer them to new tasks. Moreover, learners would be encouraged to try other sets of strategies beyond their comfort zone or outside of their preferences so as to actively help them stretch their learning styles (Oxford 2001). One way to do this is to offer a short planned program on strategies in addition to the strategy instruction interwoven into the phonology course.

Eventually, the subject of this study and her classmates alike would be better acquainted with the benefits of strategy use. Equipped with learning strategies, they would know what to practise and how to practise, they would hopefully feel more highly-motivated by new opportunities to learn, and as a consequence, they would become more autonomous, more self-confident and successful learners.

However, I consider it to be of great importance to test this hypothesis and this course of action in a further study. It is time to apply what I have discovered in this study to my professional practice, and further reflect on this topic.

Conclusion

After carrying out this case study, I believe there is a need for integrating both language skills and a systematic development and refinement of students' language learning strategies. This reflection results from the knowledge I have gained through this detailed investigation of one specific student, and its findings will probably serve as the backbone of the Phonetics and Phonology I course in the near future. Assessing the strategy use of this learner contributed to a greater understanding of strategies and it will consequently lead to a strategy instruction program interwoven with phonology.

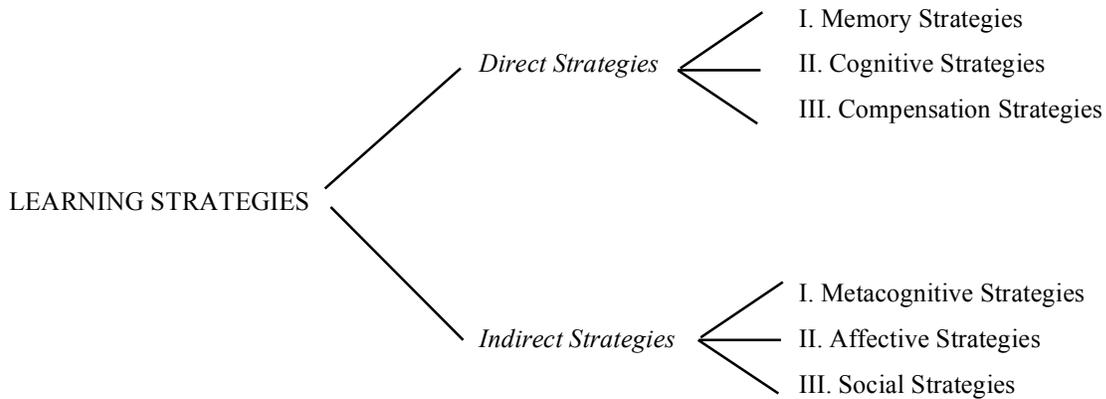
From this paper, it is clear that researching language learning strategies as well as other variables such as learners' interests, aptitude, motivations and learning styles paves the way for understanding how learners learn a target language. Needless to say, low achievers may not become successful in language learning merely by using good learning strategies, as the factors mentioned above also affect success. Therefore, language teachers aiming at implementing strategy use instruction in the classroom should also become acquainted with other individual student differences.

Even though learning strategies are not the solutions to all the problems that teachers and learners are likely to face, they can be powerful tools for overcoming difficulties. Conducting research on language learning strategies provides teachers with clues about how their learners plan and choose appropriate skills when approaching tasks in the classroom. For that reason, we teachers around the world should ponder on the usefulness of learning strategies by carrying out studies in our own teaching environments.

Social Strategies

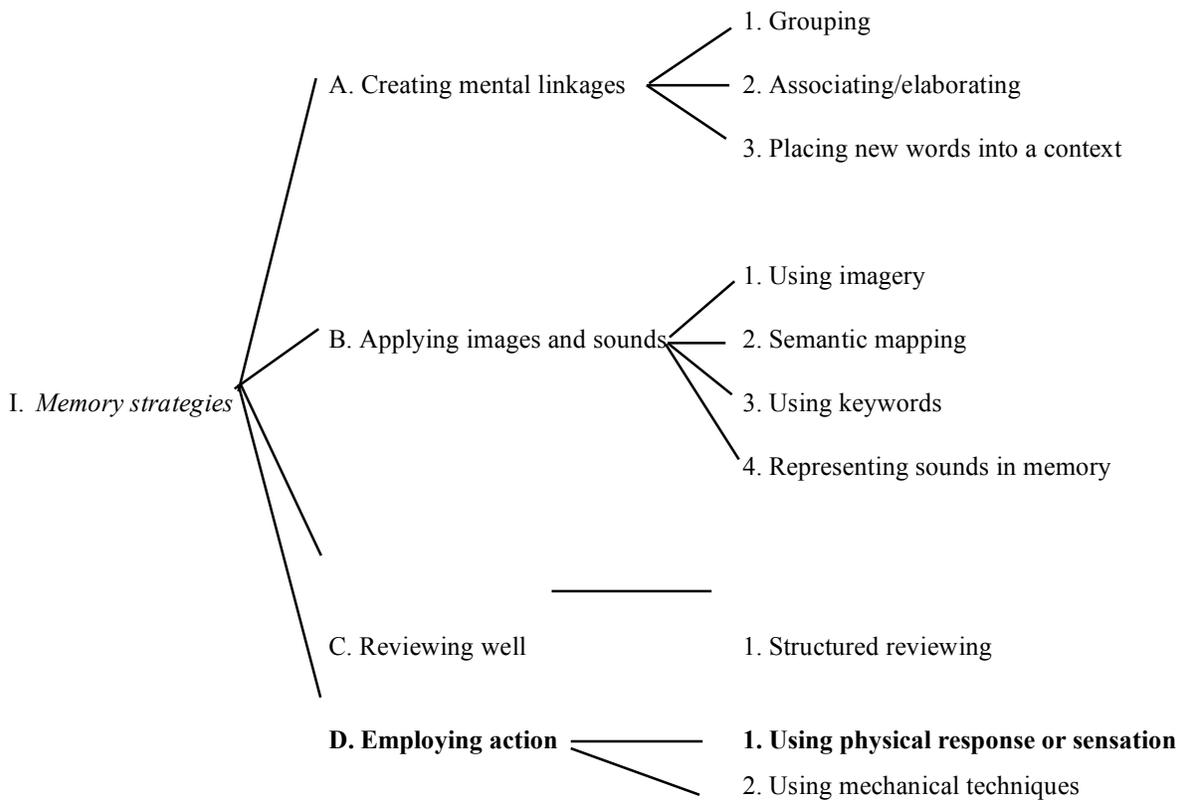
- ◆Developing cultural understanding
- ◆Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings
- ◆Asking for clarification or verification

APPENDIX A: Oxford’s Model of Learning Strategies



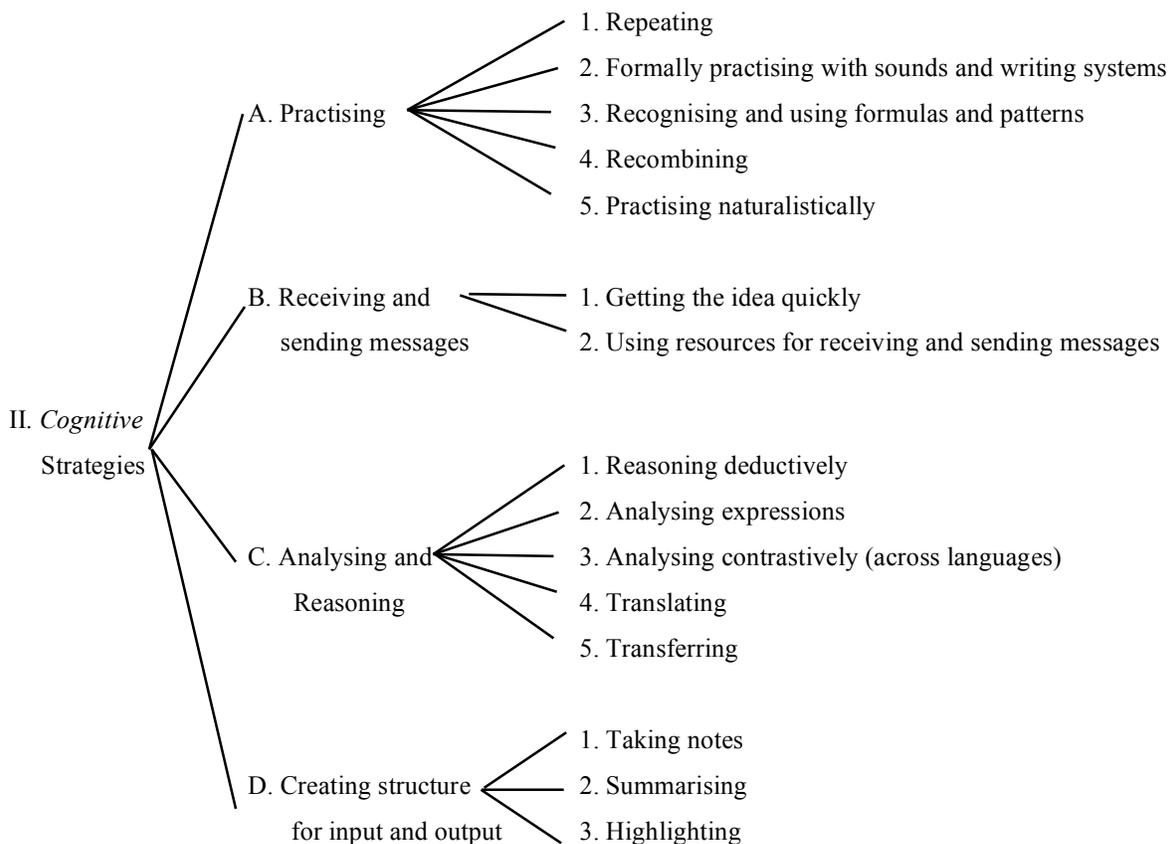
(Oxford, R. 1990: 16)

APPENDIX B: Memory Strategies



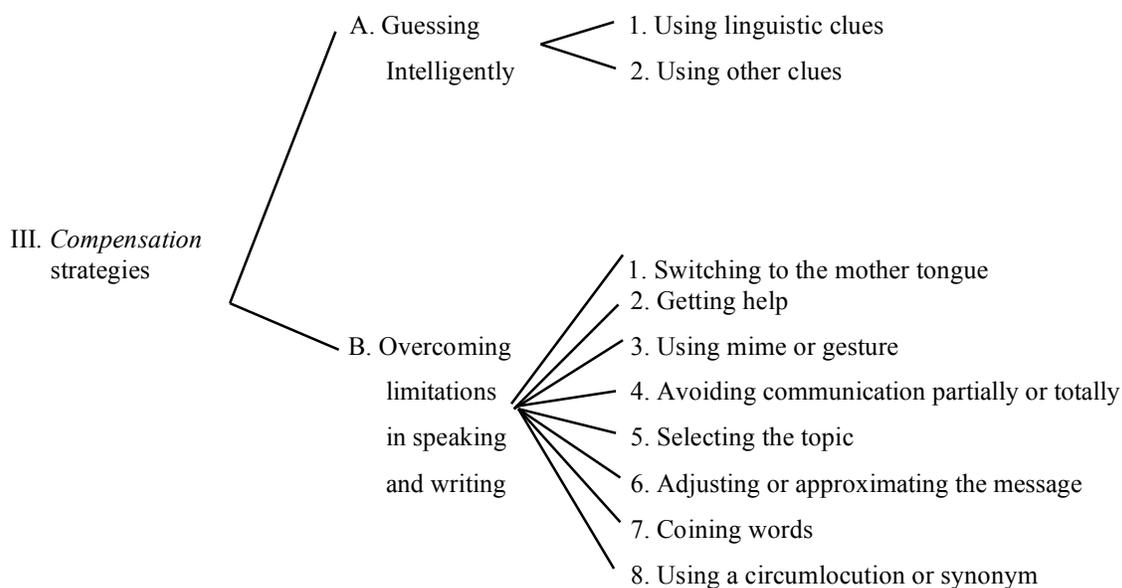
(Oxford, R. 1990: 39)

APPENDIX C: Cognitive Strategies



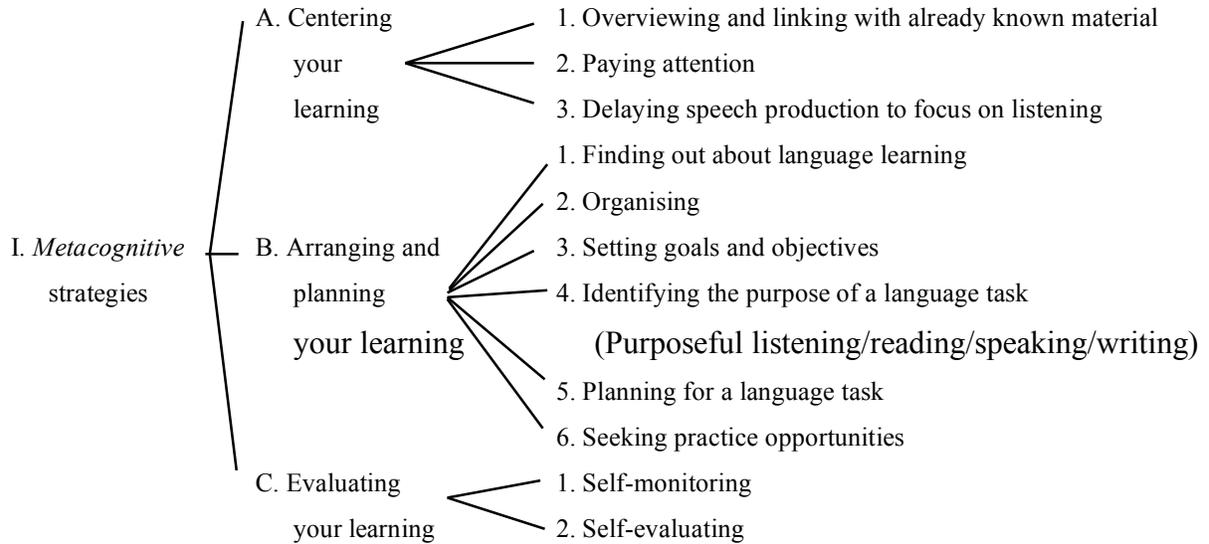
(Oxford, R. 1990: 44)

APPENDIX D: Compensation Strategies



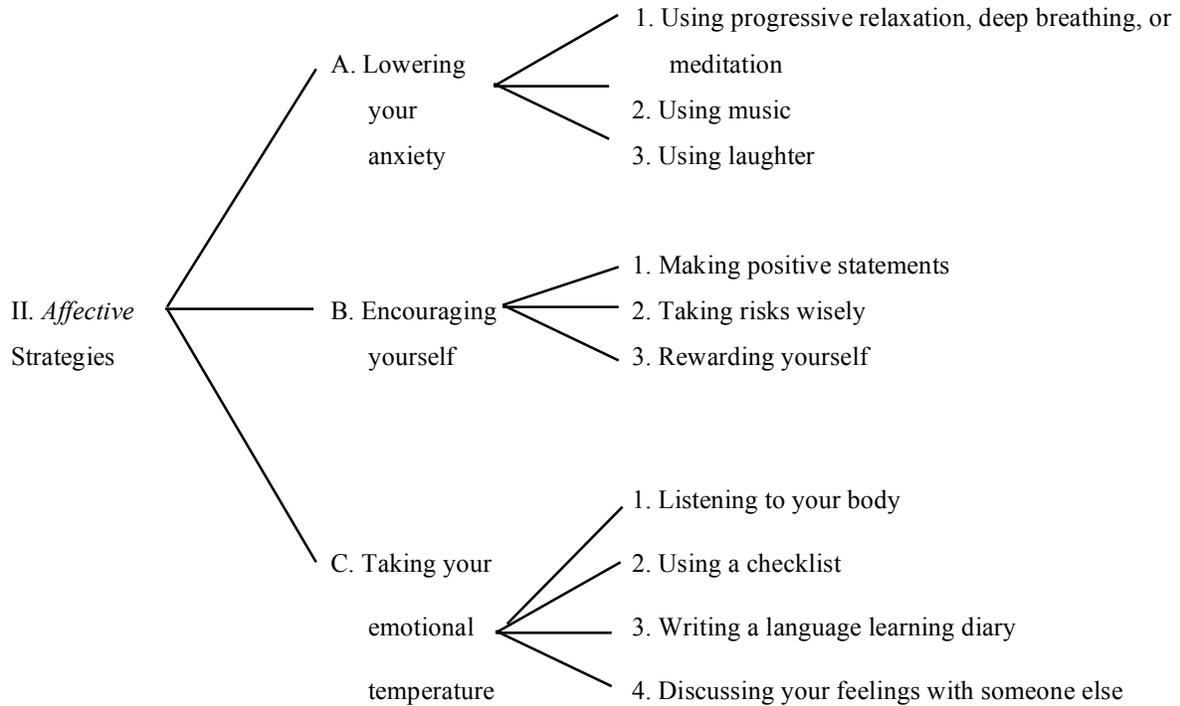
(Oxford, R. 1990: 48)

APPENDIX E: Metacognitive Strategies



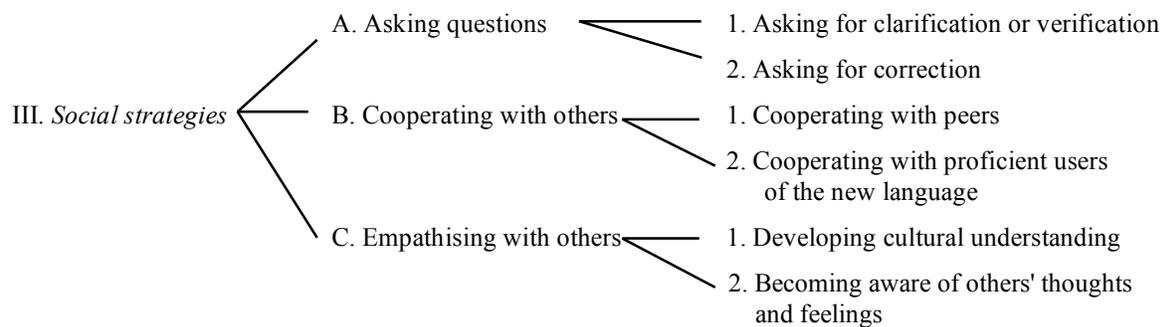
(Oxford, R. 1990: 137)

APPENDIX F: Affective Strategies



(Oxford, R. 1990: 141)

APPENDIX G: Social Strategies



(Oxford, R. 1990: 145)

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