

## PLANS, LEARNER STRATEGIES AND SELF DIRECTION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The concept of learner strategy is discussed. A taxonomy of learning methodology is proposed within which the highest category is *Learning Style*: this produces certain kinds of *Work Habits*, which in turn issue in conscious *Plans*; finally *Plans* are realised as specific *Learner Strategies*. It is proposed that learner strategies can be subdivided into (a) strategies for coping with target language rules, (b) strategies for receiving performance, (c) strategies for producing performance, (d) strategies for organising learning. Examples are given of these subdivisions. It is argued that the growth of learner strategies is of positive advantage in language learning, and that the teacher can help the learner in this respect by encouraging him/her to formulate conscious *Plans* for dealing with the task of learning. An increased awareness of one's own plan as a learner will help one to generate specific strategies, and will contribute to the self directed state of mind on the part of the learner which is seen as one of the goals of language teaching. A possible format for a learner plan is outlined.

One of the earlier moves towards the present interest in the learner of foreign languages was the work of Selinker (1972) in setting up a taxonomy of the causes of error. It will be recalled that among Selinker's five central processes which help to account for error are:

strategies of second language learning

strategies of second language communication

Selinker does not deal at all extensively with these categories. He instances a preference for *chanting* as a culturally determined learning strategy, and he proposes *simplification* as a widespread learning strategy; *cue-copying* he cites as an example of an unconscious learning strategy. He does not make a very clear distinction between *learning* strategies and *communication* strategies, observing that a common tendency among learners of English to suppress articles, plural forms, and past tense forms, could be the result of the learning strategy of simplification, or could be attributed to a communication strategy of ignoring formal elements while concentrating on content elements.

Tarone (1978, 1980) identifies a number of *communication* strategies:

topic avoidance

message abandonment

approximation

word coinage

circumlocution

literal translation

language switch

appeal for assistance

mime

self correction

restructuring

Rubin (1981) proposes a rather more complex taxonomy, which is outlined below:

- A. *Processes which may contribute directly to learning*
  - 1. clarification/verification
  - 2. monitoring
  - 3. memorisation
  - 4. guessing/inductive inferencing
  - 5. deductive reasoning
  - 6. practice
- B. *Processes which may contribute indirectly to learning*
  - 1. creating opportunities for practice
  - 2. production tricks (corresponding largely to Tarone's communication strategies).

This paper proposes a view of learner strategies which places them within a taxonomy modelled on Anthony's taxonomy of language teaching methodology (Anthony 1963). Anthony proposes the categories of *Approach*, containing the teacher's basic assumptions about the nature of language, and the nature of language learning, *Method*, which is his overall strategy for implementing his approach, and *Techniques*, which are operational devices for carrying out portions of the strategy. I would like to modify the Anthony model slightly by incorporating the category *Plan*, which I regard as the category concerned with relating the strategy to the timetabled segments of teaching. A *Plan* in this sense is realised as an ordered sequence of Techniques.

Corresponding to this modified taxonomy, is the following sketch for a language learning methodology. The highest category is that of *Learning Style*. This category is concerned with the learner's preferences for ways of organising his learning, and with the interaction between his personality and his situation as a learner.

Papalia (1976) offers an instrument for observing students' classroom behaviour as a means of individualising learning programmes. From this instrument one could extract certain features to characterise learning styles, for example:

- (a) *Cognitive style*, which is concerned with variables such as whether the student is an inductive or deductive learner, and whether he/she is an abstract or a concrete conceptualiser.
- (b) *Sensory mode*, which is concerned with whether the student learns best by seeing, hearing, touching, etc.
- (c) *Interactive mode*, which is concerned with whether the student learns best alone or with others.
- (d) *Personal and intellectual characteristics*, which is concerned with whether the student is competitive or co-operative; whether the student requires external control and direction; whether the student is inflexible in his/her approach; whether the student is nervous or confident; etc.

In this summary I have collapsed together Papalia's last three categories—*Personal characteristics*, *Intellectual Dependence*, and *Intellectual Independence and Originality*, and I have reserved his fourth category, *Work Habits* for the second level of the proposed hierarchy.

*Learning Style* produces certain kinds of *Work Habits*. For example, the tendency to leave work until the last moment, to work through the night, to consult colleagues, to work alone, to watch out for clues from the teacher, etc., etc. The learner's *Plan* is an element which is frequently absent, or present only in a shadowy half-realised fashion. It is submitted that part of the function of a self directed approach to language learning is to enable the learner to formulate his own learning-plan on a reasoned basis. I return to this theme below. Finally, I suggest that learner *Strategies* are the overt or covert behaviour, conscious or unconscious, arising from these higher level categories. Commonly, learner strategies arise directly from learning styles and work habits, and so tend to be adventitious and unplanned. When learning styles and work habits are mediated through conscious *Plans*, it is suggested that the outcome in the form of learner strategies may be more effective and more satisfying for the learner.

Here I would like to propose, very tentatively, a taxonomy of learner strategies. In outline this is:

1. Strategies for coping with TL rules (neutral with regard to production or reception).
2. Strategies for receiving performance.
3. Strategies for producing performance.
4. Strategies for organising learning.

If we regard one set of learner strategies as concerned with *coping with TL* then other processes mentioned by Selinker and others come under the heading of *strategy*, namely:

generalisation  
transfer from L1  
simplification  
reinterpretation  
hypercorrection  
elimination of register differences (Jain 1974).

These strategies are neutral with regard to reception or production.

It is suggested that a second group of strategies could be identified, quite distinct from the first set, concerned with coping with the *reception of language performance*. These sets would include such devices as:

inferring  
checking  
predicting  
identifying key terms.

Some of these categories might be usefully subdivided, for example:

inferring—from probability and knowledge of the world  
and  
predicting—from contextual clues  
checking—by rereading/replaying/asking for repetition  
—by asking for confirmation of one's own interpretation  
—by asking for simplification  
identifying key terms—from frequency  
—from knowledge of context  
—from chance.

Different again I suggest are a set of strategies for *producing language performance*. In addition to the strategies listed by Tarone, one might propose:

- repeating oneself
- labelling discourse elements
- lifting elements of interlocutor's language
- rehearsing before production
- monitoring reception of message
- using routines (i.e. holophrases appropriate to the context).

Possible subcategories are:

repeating	—sentences
	—key elements
	—phatic elements
labelling	—by enumeration (the first point is . . .)
	—by function (I want to explain to you . . .)
lifting	—of sentences
	—of expressions
	—of ideas
monitoring reception	—by question tags, and other feedback devices
	—by requesting comment or reply.

A fourth set of strategies is related to the learner's *organisation* of the learning task. Here we might include such familiar concepts as:

- repetition
- cognition
- whole or part learning
- concentrated or spaced learning

together with others such as:

- peer group contact
- contact with teacher
- 'cheating'
- revision
- using reference material
- trying out and practising.

Figure 1 summarises the model which is proposed.

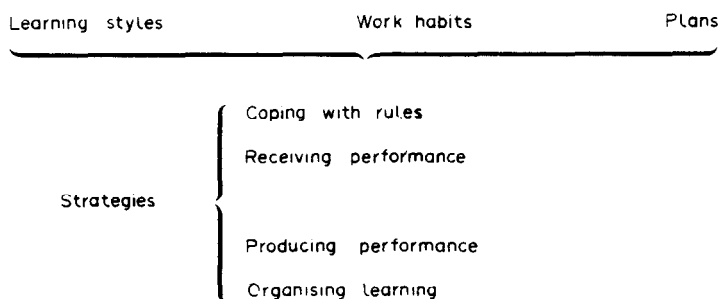


Fig. 1. Relationship of components of learner methodology.

We know very little about the preference of learners for different techniques, and still less about the relative effectiveness of preferred techniques. Stern (1976) in a well known study hypothesises about the practice of the good learner.

Attempts by Naiman *et al.* (1975) to investigate these hypotheses were largely inconclusive. Bialystok (1981) reports a number of interesting findings in a study of four strategies—functional practice, monitoring, formal practice, inferencing. Briefly, she reports:

- (a) Monitoring was most beneficial for tasks requiring attention to form.
- (b) Any of the strategies exercised for oral language improved performance on oral tasks; likewise, written strategies facilitated performance on written tasks.
- (c) Functional practice proved to be critical for achievement on all tasks.
- (d) Use of strategies is related primarily to the *attitude* of the learners, and is unrelated to their *aptitude*. "Thus language learners who are particularly motivated to master the language engage in these strategies".
- (e) It remains to be demonstrated that learners can be taught to use strategies in systematic ways.
- (f) It remains to be demonstrated that such formal learning of strategies has the desired effects on second language proficiency.

Three questions seem to emerge from the above considerations:

- (a) Do learner-strategies contribute to the development of language competence?
- (b) Is it possible or desirable to make qualitative distinctions between learner strategies?
- (c) Is there anything that the teacher can do to control or promote the growth of learner strategies?

One should say at once that at this stage of our knowledge, any attempt to answer these questions is either of a speculative nature, or it rests on the unproven, but unshakeable premises of basic belief that Anthony (1963) calls an Approach.

My own attempt to answer these questions is very much dependent on some basic assumptions about the role of self-direction and autonomy in language learning. In answer to (a) it is proposed that *any* strategy sincerely adopted by a learner as a way of coping is more likely to help than not, on the grounds that the personal assumption by the learner of responsibility for his own learning as a fundamental prerequisite for success in language learning. It has been argued elsewhere (Dickinson and Carver 1980) that there are some reasons for this assumption. Briefly, they relate to the belief that a language is not, or is not only, a body of teachable objective public knowledge, but is also an infinitely variable set of individual performances, such that each learner has to cope with the problem of mastering his own performative role.

Answers to question (b) are perhaps more interesting, in that they are in principle more susceptible to experimental validation. One possible view is that while *any* learner strategy is likely to be beneficial, yet it is still the case that some techniques have a potential for a greater pay off than others. For instance, while a learner may genuinely improve his lexical competence by a self elected technique of writing down lists of new words with mother-tongue equivalents, it is possible that his competence will improve faster, or in more useful ways, if he can be persuaded to adopt more sophisticated strategies such as guessing/

skipping/grouping words on a topic basis/recognising idioms (Carver 1971) as multi-word units of vocabulary, etc. In other words, while any learner strategy is very much better than no learner strategy at all, some learner strategies are better than others. However, we are talking about learner-strategies, not teaching-techniques. If a technique proposed, recommended or prescribed by a teacher is followed by a learner, does it thereby become a learner-technique? I suggest not. A learner technique is not only any behaviour consistently manifested by a learner as a way of coping with the learning task; it is also such behaviour which realises part of the learner's underlying belief system.

The attempt to answer the third question lies largely in the area of self-direction in language learning. It can be argued that there are specific steps that the teacher can take to teach the learner to be more self-directed, and therefore make greater use of learner-strategies, and these proposals elsewhere have been detailed (Dickinson and Carver 1980).

Here I should like to advance the argument further by proposing that the teacher can help the learners to become more self-directed by getting them to generate their own plans for learning. These then in turn become the sources of further strategies. In other words, developing self-direction at the *Plan* level has greater creative power than doing so at the strategy level.

It is not clear what a learner-plan would look like. It is suggested that it would at least contain the following components:

- (a) A statement of objectives.
- (b) A time scale.
- (c) A list of materials to be used.
- (d) A list of techniques to be employed.
- (e) A list of techniques for monitoring and evaluating progress.

Statements of objectives have become commonplace in language teaching. It is perhaps still not yet accepted practice to make these available to the learner, and still less to frame objectives *in consultation* with the learner. Clearly there are practical difficulties about taking this last course of action, in the shape of predetermined syllabuses and examination requirements, the fact that the teacher knows a lot more than the learner, the linear nature of books, etc. Even so, it still seems feasible to involve the learners in some process whereby they might at least express views about their own objectives, and so contribute to an agreed plan for the work to be undertaken.

Again, the time-scale is normally predetermined within an institutional setting. Nevertheless, learners could at least be made aware of what the time scale is, and how it relates to the objectives to be attained. Better, they could reach agreement with the teacher on this relation; particularly important is the need for learners to reach agreement with the teacher on the amount of practice they will do out of class. It is not always clearly appreciated that this is a vital element in successful language learning; it is suggested that learners can greatly profit from being led to appreciate this fact, and from using this understanding to arrive at some realistic allocation of time to out of class practice.

Material to be used may turn out to be one single text book. The learner may be unfamiliar

with the layout and arrangement of the book, and so will be handicapped in attempting to use it for revision, self-study, and remediation. Some brief training in using the book in a non-linear way is likely to be of great value to any learner.

If instead of one single book, we are talking about a bank of materials, preferably organised on a self-access basis, then clearly the learners will need some kind of guide to the contents of the bank, and to ways of using it. The preparation of the guide would be a somewhat tedious task of indexing and cross-referring.

The techniques to be used seem to be at the heart of the problem. We do not know what techniques successful learners use; nor whether some techniques are better than others. In this area we are using guess-work, intuition, and the light of experience. One possible approach could be for the teacher to make learners aware of learner strategies, through discussion and comment, as a means of helping the learners to decide which strategies they personally find most helpful in working towards the objectives within the given timescale and with the available materials. Allwright (1980) proposes a formalisation of this approach to planning. He suggests the use of a grid on which learners are asked to describe the strategies they employ, and to rate them in terms of frequency of use, enjoyment, usefulness, and efficiency. Rubin (1981) provides some helpful guidelines in making use of student reports of their own strategies. It is important that any kind of formal device of this nature should not simply be a historical record of what a learner did; it should, more importantly, serve as a way of recording possibilities of what a learner might do in the future; it should also constitute a means whereby learners can expand their repertoire of techniques by discovering what strategies are used by each other. It is hypothesised that an approach which encourages learners to become more systematically aware of learner strategies will see an increase in such features as guessing, cheating, copying, skipping, lifting, code switching. Traditionally these practices have generally been frowned on. It is suggested that there is no intrinsic need to frown on them within language learning, since they are practices which are likely to contribute to the growth of communicative competence.

Lastly, a plan should contain some provision of evaluation of attainment and progress. The provision could be built into the statement of objectives, as is very commonly done. The effectiveness of indicating levels of attainment is probably increased when the learners have a part to play in the evaluation. Various modest techniques for self-assessment are feasible. For instance:

- (a) Students can mark their own or colleagues work according to some predetermined criteria.
- (b) They can do the same, without the predetermined criteria—part of the task then is to decide on the criteria for themselves.
- (c) Students can keep a record of their own progress.
- (d) Students can do this, and use the record as a basis of self-referral to the teacher for help or confirmation of their own judgements.
- (e) They can keep a record of their progress and use this to determine their self-access to the bank of materials for revision and remediation.
- (f) Students can constitute self-help groups to solve problems of members of the group.

- (g) Students can choose when to try out their competence, e.g. by listening to or reading material graded at various levels up to the level of authenticity.
- (h) When working in a self-access mode, students can decide when to move on to new material.
- (i) Students can be helped to construct tests for themselves or for each other; the cloze tests seem particularly amenable to this kind of use.
- (j) Students can be encouraged to grade themselves; the grade either to stand alone, or to be taken along with the teacher's grade, and possibly a grade from the group.

What is proposed here then is a teacher-guided and systematic approach to the development of self-direction in language learning. Self-direction is taken to be a highly desirable element in language learning, possibly an indispensable element. Self-direction does not necessarily emerge of its own accord; for most learners it needs to be fostered and developed. Self-direction can be realised in a variety of ways of working, but basically it is an attitude of mind on the part of the learner. The suggestion advanced here is that the appropriate attitude of mind can be most effectively developed by the teacher working at the level of learner-plans; working at this level, the teacher will enable the learners to conceptualise and put to maximum use the array of learner-strategies that lie under the surface of language learning. The practical implementation of the approach advocated here might take the form of increased consultation between teacher and learner, and between learners working together. The practical outcomes might take the form of documentation accessible to the learners, or constructed by the learners; such documentation would contain specification of objectives; calculation of the time scale of achieving objectives; indications of time allocated to out of class practice; some analysis of available material, which indications of alternative pathways through the material; and assessment of learner strategies; instruments of evaluation, including self-assessment.

## NOTE

Much of the foregoing discussion represents insights and practical experience derived from discussion with colleagues in SCEO, particularly Leslie Dickinson and Bill Cousin, whose work in the field of self-direction in language learning is well known. I have learnt much particularly from their work in devising contract-based self-access work with students. This practical experience is reported in *Report on Workshops in the Role and Training of Helpers for Self-Access Language Learning Systems*, SCEO mimeo 1982, and *Report of the Workshops in Self Directed Learning*, SCEO, mimeo 1980.

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