

Language Learning Strategies: A Case Study

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Ferreiro, Gabriela. 2004. Language Learning Strategies: A Case Study. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 12(3), 23-41. Learning strategies are commonly referred to as particular actions or techniques used by students that facilitate and enhance the learning process. Nowadays strategies are given paramount importance in the field of language acquisition since they are considered instruments for dynamic, self-governing involvement, crucial for developing communicative competence. Indeed, current trends in language teaching maintain that the upshot of appropriate language learning strategies is higher proficiency, self-confidence, and greater autonomy. The present paper will describe a case study I carried out on strategy use with a language learner attending an English Language course at elementary level at a private institute in Argentina.

Key words: language learning strategies, autonomy, strategy training

1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s the number of terms associated with the notion of autonomous learning has proliferated giving rise to discussions of such matters as self-directed learning, self-access learning, and self-study among others. The growing trend towards individualized instruction makes greater demands on the part of the learners and provides them with more responsibilities for their own learning. However, learning is regarded as an active process that engages students and teachers alike. Thus, teachers should contribute to this process by planning, assessing, and making decisions about what their students need to learn and how they might be helped. Ellis and Sinclair

(1989) state that there are teachers who are conscious of the significance of helping learners to learn. In reference to this, Coles and Robinson (1991) suggest that schools should pay more attention to the way students learn rather than being concerned with imparting information. What has been expressed so far supports the belief that it is of paramount importance that teachers develop effective approaches to learning in order to find how learners can learn more effectively, and help learners become more independent.

In order to help students attain more autonomy teachers must be aware of their students' approaches to learning, the control they exert over the learning process and the choices the learners make. It is said that no two people learn the same way or the same thing from any learning situation and that there exists a strong relationship between personality factors and approaches to language learning. Hence learning is an individual process to which learners bring their own personal characteristics. Oxford and Ehrman (1993) in Williams and Burden (1997), suggest that second language teachers should detect and understand the learners' individual differences to be able to teach their students effectively.

One way to investigate how individuals go about the task of learning a language is through research into language learning strategies. When referring to strategies and skills used in learning, Wenden (1987 a) argues that they are the operations performed by learners to answer to particular problems and make sense of their learning process. Weinstein and Mayer (1986), and Brown (2000) consider that the goal of learning strategies is to facilitate learning, and that learners use them consciously.

Many successful learners tend to work in a self directed way. Most develop a repertoire of strategies from which they can choose to employ those which they consider most useful in doing specific tasks. Unfortunately, L2 acquisition is not an easy process for everyone. Sometimes the difference that exists between more and less effective learners may not lie in the number of strategies they use but in how they choose to use them, and whether they select strategies which are

appropriate for the task at hand. Ellis (1994) and Skehan (1989) acknowledge the existence of factors and individual differences that seem to affect the choice of strategies, however, this issue will be dealt with later.

The present paper will describe a case study on strategy use I carried out with one good language learner who is currently my student in an elementary level class at a private institute in Argentina. The purposes underlying this case study are; first, to gain knowledge of the learning strategies used by this successful learner; second, to focus on the individuality of the learner and relate it to the literature in order to better inform my teaching, and third, to achieve a better understanding of how this learner goes about the task of learning a second language.

I will begin by providing a brief literature review that will define language learning strategies, present different taxonomies of language learning strategies as well as other major findings in the field. Next, I will define the research area, and then, I will move on to introduce the subject, data collection procedure and data analysis, and last but not least, I will present my conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Learning Strategies

The term language learning strategies has been defined by many researchers. Rubin explains that learning strategies comprise:

....any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. (1987:19).

Wenden (1987a) states that learning strategies refer to the operations used by learners in their attempt to make sense of their learning and solve specific tasks. According to Chamot (1987), in Ellis (1994:351),

“the learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning recall of both linguistic and content area information”. Oxford (1990:8) argues that “learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and more transferable to new situations”. Oxford (1990) affirms that language learning strategies have the following features:

1. They contribute to the main goal, communicative competence. They can foster particular aspects of that competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

2. They allow learners to become more self-directed. The aim of teaching learning strategies is to help learners to take control of their own learning.

3. They expand the role of teachers.

4. They are problem oriented. In other words, they are used in response to a particular problem.

5. They are specific actions taken by the learner. That is, they are specific behaviours in response to a problem, such as guessing the meaning of a word, rather than more general aspects such as learning style, personality or motivation.

6. They involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive. They involve affective and social aspects as well.

7. They support learning both directly and indirectly.

8. They are not always observable.

9. They are often conscious.

10. They can be taught. People can improve their learning through strategy training.

11. They are flexible. Learners exert choice over the way they use, combine and sequence strategies.

12. They are influenced by a variety of factors. For example, stage of learning, task requirements, age, sex, nationality, general learning style, personality, motivation, and purpose for learning the language (1990:9).

Ellis (1994) suggests that there are individual learner differences as well as situational and social agents that affect the use of different learning strategies. Among the latter group, Ellis includes first, the language being learnt, since there are languages that call for the use of more and different strategies. Second, the learning setting is also important because most of the time classroom learners report less use of social strategies than learners who are in more natural settings. A third factor is the task type, and finally, the learners' sex. Individual learner differences comprise learners' belief about language learning. There are students who stress the usefulness of *learning* the language (these learners tend to use cognitive strategies), whereas others emphasize the value of *using* the language (these learners apply more communicative strategies, instead). The learner factor of age should also be regarded, there are studies that reveal that younger learners use simpler strategies than older ones. Learners' motivation "can be expected to have a causal effect on the quantity of learning strategies they employ" (p.542). Learners' personal background is the last factor Ellis mentions when referring to individual learning differences.

Skehan (1989) states that although there is noticeable proof that learners use strategies, there is not so much agreement as regards what these strategies are. Ellis introduces a list that describes how the word strategies has been applied as stated by different studies:

- Some strategies are *behavioural* while others are *mental*. Thus some strategies are directly observable, while others are not.
- Strategies refer to both general *approaches* and specific *actions* or *techniques* used to learn L2.
- Strategies involve *linguistic behaviour* (such as requesting the name of an object) and *non-linguistic* (such as pointing at an object so as to be told its name) (1994:532)

Ellis concludes from the definitions of learning strategies that they "have tended to be *ad hoc* and atheoretical" (1994:533). On similar grounds, Hedge avows There are additional problems for teachers

wishing to investigate the literature on learner strategies. For example, there has been a proliferation of labels for strategies, such as “language processing strategies”, “tactics”, “plans”, and “techniques”, with no easy equivalents among them (2000:79).

With reference to language learning strategies, Skehan (2002) contends that the ambiguity concerning the concept of learning strategies still exists. Moreover, he expresses that due to this feeble theoretical foundation. Educational psychologists in the 1990’s took an alternative route. They simply dropped the term strategy (which seemed to cause much of the confusion) and focused instead on what was seen as the essence of strategic learning: the learner’s conscious and proactive contribution to the enhancement of his/her own learning process. The new term introduced to cover this learner-specific perspective was *self-regulation* (2002:21).

Both Oxford (1990) and Skehan (2002) share the view that strategies research is at an incipient stage. For present purposes, I will use the phrase *learning strategies* rather than *self-regulation*. Language learners use language learning strategies, either consciously or unconsciously, when they have to process new information or perform tasks. These language learning strategies have been identified, described and even categorized by researchers. Ellis (1994) acknowledges that the work of Oxford (2001) and O’Malley and Chamot (1990), among others, has enlightened the knowledge of learning strategies and contributed to the study of the strategies and combination of strategies that are adequate to promote learning. Accordingly, Oxford’s and O’Malley and Chamot’s taxonomies of language learning strategies will be presented.

Oxford (1990) has developed a system of categorization in which she identifies *direct* and *indirect* strategies. The former are strategies that directly involve the target language (p.37). The latter provide indirect support for language learning through focussing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means (p.151). Indirect strategies are broken down into three subcategories comprising social strategies that come into play when learners interact with the target language; metacognitive strategies

which help learners self-regulate their language learning, and finally, affective strategies that refer to the learners' motivations, attitudes, and values. Direct strategies are subdivided into memory strategies that assist learners in recalling and storing information, cognitive strategies that enable learners to understand and produce language, and compensation strategies which help learners to communicate despite existing gaps in the knowledge of the language.

O'Malley and Chamot (1994) propose three broad categories of language learning strategies:

- Metacognitive Strategies
- Cognitive Strategies
- Social / Affective Strategies

Metacognitive strategies do not depend on specific learning activities, and facilitate one to organize for a specific task, decide how well the plan is being accomplished, and assess success of the learning and the plan once the learning tasks have been finished. Evaluating, monitoring and planning are strategies that belong to the metacognitive classification. O'Malley and Chamot (1994) claim that cognitive strategies are often linked to individual tasks and involve manipulating the material to be learned mentally (as in making images or elaborating) or physically (as grouping items to be learned or taking notes) (p.61). Finally, social / affective strategies come into play when learners interact with other people or try to reduce the anxiety they feel about learning activities. I will recapitulate and enlarge upon these concepts in the data analysis section.

From the comparison between Oxford's and O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomies it might be derived that metacognitive strategies are present in both systems. O'Malley and Chamot's cognitive strategies find an equivalent in Oxford's memory and cognitive subdivisions. Furthermore, O'Malley and Chamot's social / affective strategies are similar to Oxford's social and affective subgroups. Finally, Oxford's compensation strategies, which comprise guessing intelligently and

dealing with limitations both in speaking and writing, might be placed within O'Malley and Chamot's cognitive strategies.

3. Case study

When referring to case studies Stake states:

The focus of attention is the case, not the whole population of cases: the search is for an understanding of the particular case, in its idiosyncrasy and its complexity (1988, in Nunan 1992:80)

Research Area

As it has been stated in the introduction, I have carried out this case study because I am particularly interested in knowing about the learning strategies used by a successful learner, and how this learner approaches the task of learning a language.

Subject

The participant in this study is an Argentinian adult man who was born and lives in the city of Mar del Plata. This person is currently my student. The institute where he studies categorizes EFL learners into the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of English proficiency for instructional purposes. I will give my subject the name of Gonzalo so as to preserve his identity.

At present, Gonzalo is taking the elementary level class and receives four hours of formal instruction twice a week. Gonzalo works at a local radio station, he is a sports presenter. When he was eight his mother sent him to an institute of English where he studied that language for three years. Gonzalo never had English at his school. In 2000, he travelled to Miami where he stayed for three months. There, he looked for a job at different radio stations. Unfortunately, none of these places employed him for although he could communicate in English, he did not

have a good command of the language. There are many factors that make of Gonzalo an outstanding learner: his excellent performance in exams and practical tasks, his active participation in class, his willingness to take risks when performing new and different tasks, and the fact that whenever he establishes a conversation with me he does so in English.

Data collection procedure

Before carrying out the data collection I asked this student whether he was interested in collaborating with my case study. Encouraged with Gonzalo's consent, I set out to provide him with adequate information on the case study. Strategy data were collected by means of the foreign-second language learning strategy measurement scale known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 5.1 (c) by Oxford (1989), and an in-depth semi-structured interview. I thought that the use of more than one method for collecting data would allow me to explore more thoroughly the obtained information and increase the reliability of the conclusion.

Oxford's SILL is a 80-item survey that assesses how individuals use learning strategies during and after language training. The SILL has statements related to language learning and the student has to mark the different responses to each statement from 1 to 5 (1 means that the statement is never true of the learner; whereas 5 means that the learner almost always does the behaviour that is described in the statement), thus describing how true the sentences are in accordance with what the learner does when he learns a new language. I administered the survey to my student one day after class. Since the survey was written in English I stayed close to him and assisted him whenever there was a problem of comprehension. It took Gonzalo fifty minutes to complete the survey.

Having analysed the results of the SILL, Gonzalo and I agreed to meet again in order to carry out the semi-structured interview. The interview schedule contained mostly open questions and prompts such

as comments and follow up questions to encourage Gonzalo to provide fuller answers. In this way, I combined a certain degree of control with a certain amount of freedom so that Gonzalo could feel somewhat guided as well as at ease when conversing. Despite my learner's willingness to communicate in English, the interview was conducted in Spanish. I did not want Gonzalo to get distracted during the interview due to a possible lack of vocabulary or gaps in the knowledge of the target language. Apart from that, considering that Gonzalo is taking the elementary level class, I assumed that using the mother tongue during the interview would be less demanding for him. The interview lasted for a period of thirty minutes and I taped it so as to have it available for subsequent reflection and analysis.

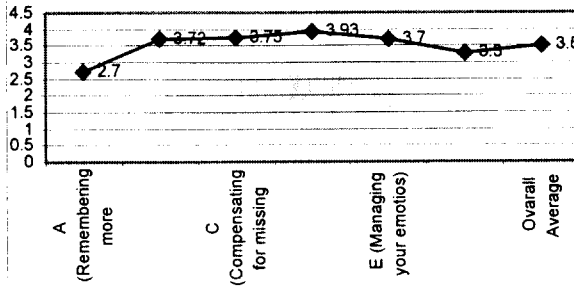
Data analysis

First, I will refer to the results gathered in the SILL survey. The overall average reveals how frequently the learner makes use of language learning strategies. The overall average obtained by Gonzalo (see Graph of Gonzalo's SILL averages) is high: 3.5. According to the key to understanding the averages Gonzalo *generally* uses language learning strategies (see Figure 3). I have found the averages for each part of the SILL fairly useful since they show which groups of strategies Gonzalo uses the most when learning a language. According to Gonzalo's scores, he *generally* uses mental processes (3.72), compensates for missing knowledge (3.75), organizes and evaluates his knowledge (3.93), and manages his emotions (3.7). To a lesser extent, Gonzalo *sometimes* learns with others (3.3) ,and uses strategies that help him remember more effectively (2.7) (for further reference about how the scores were calculated see the Worksheet for Answering and Scoring the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 5.1 (c) in Oxford (1989). Gonzalo's responses and averages scored guided me to plan the interview questions. I paraphrased some of the statements from the SILL and turned them into questions (see below the interview), then I administered Gonzalo the semi-structured

interview so as to explore more thoroughly the reliability of the data collected in the SILL survey.

High	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.0
	Generally used	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Generally not used	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or almost never used	1.0 to 1.4

Figure 3 Key to Understanding the Averages



(Graph of Gonzalo's SILL averages)

I will now proceed to analyse the interview in the hope of validating the findings obtained in the questionnaire. I will try to relate the analysis of the data gathered to O'Malley and Chamot's (1994) taxonomy of language learning strategies.

When Gonzalo is asked about his motivation for studying English he states that his primary concern is to attain a good command of the language in order to travel abroad in search for a job. Gardner et al. (1985) would assume that Gonzalo has an instrumental motivation for

learning the language, that is to say, he learns the language because of its value as a tool to get a better job (in Allwright and Bailey 1991).

Gonzalo manifests that he seeks to maximize his exposure to the language. He watches sports channels in English in an effort to understand what sports presenters report. Every afternoon he watches the sit-com Friends and he encourages himself not to rely on the Spanish subtitles *estoy tratando de oír, siempre tuve inconvenientes con la interpretación · yo sé que a partir de oír a dos personas hablando o interactuando se aprende mucho. Siempre tuve a un maestro, ahora mi intención es también la de sentarme frente a la T.V. y empezar a entender, intentar seguir el hilo de la conversación o comprender las ideas principales en los artículos del Buenos Aires Herald*. He also says he uses the dictionary and looks up the meaning of unknown words that call his attention. Gonzalo's words help to illustrate his use of cognitive strategies. He makes inferences when he uses the context to guess meanings and he uses resourcing strategies when he makes use of reference materials, such as, dictionaries (see Chamot and O'Malley 1994). When Gonzalo says that he is trying to listen or he knows he can learn from listening to people talking, he reveals his use of metacognitive strategies, he plans what to do, and when and how to study, this clearly reflects how he self-manages his language learning. As he continues talking he admits he has always found it difficult to interpret people's conversations, this introduces an instance of self evaluation (metacognitive strategy). Gonzalo's use of these metacognitive strategies might serve to explain, at least in this part, his high rate scored 3,93 in part D (organizing and evaluating your learning) in the SILL. Metacognitive (directed attention) and cognitive (making inferences) strategies seem to work cooperatively when Gonzalo claims that from the start he tries to understand the main ideas either when listening to a conversation or reading an article in the newspaper. The extra language practice Gonzalo constantly looks for is time consuming, however, Larsen and Smalley (1972) and Skehan (1989) agree on the importance of devoting significant time to the learning of a language.

When Gonzalo is asked about his speaking skill, he immediately replies *siempre intento llevar el tópico para el lado en que se cómo expresarme: obviamente siempre intento usar el camino más fácil para mí, aunque si no entiendo pregunto*. Once again Gonzalo makes use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. He applies cognitive strategies when he uses his background knowledge, the language he knows in order to communicate, and metacognitive strategies when he organizes how to accomplish the task and plans what he will talk about and the ideas he will express. There is an instance of social affective strategies when he explains that he asks questions to clarify meaning.

As regards error treatment, Gonzalo reveals that he does not mind being corrected because he wants to learn and that helps him to self-evaluate his accomplishments. He adds that every time he is corrected when speaking, he repeats the right version of the word/phrase to himself. This feature of repetition comes to light for the second time when I ask Gonzalo about his approach to pronunciation. He admits that a good pronunciation is important for his job, and that is the reason why he usually repeats new words or phrases either to himself, when he is in front of other people, or aloud if he is alone, and he provides an example, *la otra noche estuve media hora tratando de decir la frase hijacked planes*. In reference to his pronunciation, Gonzalo admits the usefulness of working with the dictionary because it provides the phonetic script of the new words, so he tries to follow the symbols to pronounce them. What has been said so far illustrates how Gonzalo checks his own production (self-monitoring) and reflects on what he has learned (evaluation), strategies that correspond to the metacognitive category. However, Gonzalo's words acknowledge his use of cognitive strategies as well, especially when he says that he works out the pronunciation of words as they are given in the dictionary (deduction) and repeats them either through overt practice or silent rehearsal (repetition). Another example of cognitive strategies is illustrated when he says that he concentrates on the sounds and replays mentally a word or phrase (auditory representation).

Gonzalo is determined to enlarge and enrich his vocabulary repertoire,

and he claims that watching T.V. results the most effective tool for him (apart from the formal classes he currently takes). He exemplifies this when he produces phrases in English such as, How are you doing or what's up buddy? taken from the sit-com Friends and vocabulary items like attacks, terrorism, infinite justice, all of them learned from the CNN channel. -Gonzalo continues speaking in Spanish and he says I don't make an effort to learn words and expressions because they appear quite frequently on T.V., he continues once I listen to these phrases more than three or four times they become part of my vocabulary repertoire, then I try to use these concepts and adapt them to different contexts. However, he explains, It is not that I can remember everything, I usually select what I am interested to learn. If there's a word or phrase that calls my attention it is almost certain that I will remember it. Accordingly, Nation (1994) in Schmitt (1997), says that the frequent occurrence of words is important to acquire vocabulary and this seems to be effective for Gonzalo. The fact that he selects what he is interested to learn is an example of directed attention strategy which corresponds to the metacognitive category.

Gonzalo's description of how he memorizes is quite interesting. He expresses that not only repetitions serve the function of recalling but visualizations *yo visualizo las palabras es muy mental trato de concentrarme y poner toda mi fijación en una palabra, hasta que me va quedando o me pasa que si aprendo una palabra en x momento cuando pienso en ese momento automáticamente recuerdo la palabra es una visualización mental.* This time Gonzalo unfolds his cognitive strategies. He places new words or phrases in meaningful contexts and he correlates new information to visual concepts in memory through visualizations and phrases.

I have decided to close my data analysis with Gonzalo's social / affective strategies. When Gonzalo is asked whether he likes working with peers or alone, he replies that although he does not object to working cooperatively with other partners, he prefers doing things on his own. Gonzalo explains *yo soy muy tímido con el español asique imagine con el inglés · cuando estuve en Miami e iba a tomar un*

café, hacía mi pedido en inglés, pero nunca salió de mí el iniciar una conversación, prefiero que los otros lo hagan y si es así yo enseguida acepto. Here, Gonzalo describes himself as a shy person, especially when he is with unknown people, and he admits that he prefers others to take the initiative. It might be derived from Gonzalo's statements that probably it is his shyness that prevents him from working with others. Gonzalo goes on saying *si alguien me plantea un desafío con el inglés nunca lo voy a rechazar. el hecho de poder mantener una conversación, así sea por dos minutos con una persona nativa para mí es tocar la gloria, es subir el Everest, bajarlo y volverlo a subir .* This time he expresses that if somebody challenges him to use his English, he will not decline the dare. This leads me to infer that, although Gonzalo needs somebody to take the initiative and make the first move, he is willing to take risks, and this willingness to experiment with the language is one of the features that, according to Ellis and Sinclair (1989) characterizes the good language learner. Later on, he compares establishing a simple conversation with a native English speaker to touching glory, and going up and down the Everest twice. These remarks unveil Gonzalo's motivation. Although at the beginning of the data analysis it was assumed that Gonzalo could have an instrumental motivation for learning the language, now his words seem to suggest that he has an integrative motivation, as well. Hedge (2000) defines the latter motivation as learning a language because of its value in helping to integrate with speakers of that language (410g.). Getting towards the end of the interview, Gonzalo confesses that his anxiety represents an obstacle when learning the target language however, he remarks, he tries to manage his emotions the best he can so as to reduce his anxiety.

4. Conclusion

One of the primary purposes for conducting this case study was to learn more about the learning strategies used by a successful learner in my context. Luckily, Gonzalo, the subject in this study, showed no

difficulty in identifying the special methods he uses when learning English. Both the SILL survey and the interview have revealed interesting information on how Gonzalo approaches the task of learning a language.

In accordance with the results obtained in the SILL and the interview, Gonzalo seems to use the social and affective strategies less frequently than the cognitive and metacognitive ones. This might be due, in part, to Gonzalo's shyness. During the interview the learner reveals that he is a shy person and he prefers doing things on his own. However, Gonzalo does use other strategies that belong to the social/affective classification, since he asks questions when he needs additional information and although he is anxious, he admits that he is working on that, trying to reduce his anxiety. No particular cognitive strategy appears to stand out from the rest still, resourcing, repetition, deduction, imagery, auditory representation and making inferences are repeatedly mentioned in the SILL and the interview alike. With reference to the metacognitive strategies, organizational planning and self-evaluation are often reported along both instruments of data collection, followed by advance organization and monitoring strategies.

It is worth investigating and understanding one's students' approaches to learning and, it is my belief that case studies might contribute to this purpose. The present study makes interesting illustrations of this learner's use of language learning strategies that might inform my strategy training. However, due to the fact that the present case study focuses on an individual student, the findings will not be generalizable to other learners.

Gonzalo's case has strengthened my belief in the importance of *knowing* one's students. Teachers who know their students' weaknesses and strengths are better equipped to help and guide them through the learning process. Although this case study has been carried out in Argentina, it might well be replicated by any other teacher regardless the country where he/she lives or his/her mother tongue. Indeed, the key factor here is simply to be willing to know about the learning strategies used by one's learners. All in all, this case study has allowed

me to know Gonzalo better, and even though Gonzalo is a good language learner, I think he might benefit from strategy training. Now that I know about his shyness, I would stimulate him to work cooperatively with other partners. According to Gonzalo, his anxiety represents an obstacle when learning the target language, so I would encourage him to think positive in order to reduce his anxiety.

Since I have always been concerned to help students to become more successful in learning, I would suggest as further research first, carrying out a longitudinal case study, but this time involving Gonzalo's partners as well. I would set out to identify the students' current learning strategies through surveys, interviews and the performance of different foreign language tasks. Then, I would try to analyse differences in strategy use between successful and less successful learners. Finally, I would contemplate the feasibility of training especially less successful learners to use learning strategies and thus, encouraging them to become more self-directed. O'Malley and Chamot in their Cognitive Academic Learning Approach (CALLA) contend our approach has convinced us that most students can profit from instruction in learning strategies (1994:7). O'Malley and Chamot state: There is far less supportive research for learning strategies instruction in second language acquisition than with native language skills in English. Nevertheless, there is little reason to suspect that strategy training would not be as broadly effective with second language tasks as it has been with native language skills. (1994:59)

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