



Do Young Learners Exploit the Same Learning Strategies as Adults?

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Received: 01.12.2014; Accepted: 01.31.2015

Abstract: *Learning strategies are considered to be one of the key factors affecting the learning process, its effectiveness and study results. They are important for lifelong learning of foreign languages and as a learning skill they represent a priority in the process of European globalization and integration. Moreover, learning strategies as a foreign language didactical concept constitute the core of the competence to learn and thus creating enough opportunities for primary pupils to acquire learning strategies is crucial as they acquire steps towards an effective process of learning through planning their work and self- evaluation.*

Keywords: education, learning strategies

The research on learning strategies started four decades ago and at the beginning of the investigation the researchers discussed the question why some learners are more successful than others (Rubin, 1975; Naiman & Fröhlich & Stern, & Todesco, 1978). Since then there have been numerous articles on the topic that highlight the importance of learning strategies in learning and acquiring foreign languages and promoting learner autonomy and the shift in the role of the teacher. Thus recent studies also have discussed the importance of strategic focused teaching and have also been directed also at implementation of learner strategies into the curriculum and the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning strategies (Chamot, 1999; Oxford, 1990; Cohen & Weaver, 2006). We have plenty of results gained from various studies conducted all over the world. Even though the research on learning strategies started in the 1960s, a relatively small number of surveys focus on strategies employed by young learners. The published results vary and are valid for different groups of young learners: from immersion classes, where English is a second language, to foreign classes in private schools or schools with an extended course in English (Gunning, 1997; Chamot & El-Dinary 1999; Gúrsoi, 2010). Therefore we should encourage a debate on young learners' strategy use in regular

settings and try to discover whether it would be possible to use the same categorization as we do for adult and teenage learners, and to take young learners' age, developmental and individual differences into consideration.

Theoretical Background – Research on Learning Strategies

Throughout the years for which the concept of learning strategies has been investigated the researchers devised different definitions that have many features in common. Researchers agree on the fact that learning strategies are mental processes, steps taken by learners to enhance and promote their own learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1999; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Cohen & Weaver, 2006; Cohen 2007) or "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

The first studies were quite descriptive, yet vital for understanding learning strategies and especially how they are used. All these characteristics of a good language learner laid the ground for designing different research instruments, i.e. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by R. Oxford (1990). To date SILL has been translated into many languages and administered to hundreds of students all over the world. The studies based on these results revealed that learning strategies correlate with numerous variables such as gender, age, learning styles, motivation, attitudes and beliefs, and culture.

Other studies focused on comparing successful and less successful students (Vann & Abraham, 1990; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999). Successful students were more active, were able to use strategies to a greater extent, and used a remarkable variety of learning strategies compared to less effective learners. Moreover, they were able to monitor their own learning process and took actions when needed. On the other hand, less successful learners used a considerable amount of learning strategies too but in an ineffective way, i.e. they were not able to adjust or select effective learning strategies that would fit the task, meaning that their metacognitive knowledge of the nature of the task failed. Learning strategies unlike learning styles are teachable. Therefore in the 1990s the research started to focus on developing models for implementing learning strategies into the foreign language curriculum (Chamot & O'Malley, 1999; Chamot, 1999; Weaver & Cohen 2006) in order to help less successful students to become more independent and effective learners. Based on the facts gained from the research mentioned above the existent taxonomies of learning strategies were elaborated and new ones were developed.

In 1990 Rebecca Oxford introduced her model of direct and indirect strategies, considered to be one of the most sophisticated taxonomies, and which, compared to other models, has less technical terminology, yet is systematic and comprehensible.

She divides learning strategies into two major classes: direct and indirect. Direct learning strategies deal with the new language and comprise memory-related, cognitive and compensation learning strategies.

Indirect strategies are responsible for the learning process: they are useful in all language situations. They synchronize, support and manage the target language without involving it directly (Oxford, 1990). Indirect strategies, according to R. Oxford (ibid), are metacognitive, affective and social. Metacognitive strategies are vital for successful learning as they help learners to centre, plan and evaluate their own learning and children should acquire them first. Thus, from the very beginning the teacher should assist learners in establishing routines that would help them understand how to organize their work. Young learners should become aware of the strategies that work for them and help them to remember and recollect the subject matter. At the same time learners should also become aware of how to maintain these routines. Thus, primary teachers should promote metacognitive strategies and then simple memory related and different cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies should correspond with learners' cognitive development and therefore should become more and more sophisticated and differentiated. It is a well-known fact that when supported appropriately even six or seven-year-old children are able to talk about and describe the strategies they use and consciously adapt new ones. Therefore creating opportunities for learning new strategies in foreign language classes is fundamental.

Empirical part of the research – Research design

As mentioned above there are plenty of studies that focus on teenage learners, young adults or adults, and just a limited number of studies which focus on the learning strategies young learners apply. Furthermore, we know that young learners do not learn and acquire language in the same way as adults do. Thus, it could be assumed that they also employ different strategies, typical for their age, those that would be in accordance with their cognitive and emotional development.

Therefore, the empirical part of the research aimed to outline the learning strategies inventory that Czech young learners apply and employ in primary schools in learning English. The research also outlined the factors that influence the choice of learning strategies as well as the role of the teacher in the process of shaping of learning strategies (Hrozková, 2013).

In the research both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. The research sample consisted of 202 pupils who completed their primary education at schools in the South Moravian region (9 schools). The main instrument for collecting the quantitative data was a field-tested questionnaire for young learners designed by Oxford and Cohen in 2002 (in Cohen & Weaver, 2006, p. 75). The questionnaire was translated into Czech and then piloted in order to prove the validity of the instrument, especially the comprehensibility and timing suggested by the authors. The questionnaire was supplemented with short characteristics of each respondent e.g. length of their studies, extra English lessons, motivation and their teacher's support and encouragement.

The qualitative part of the research was based on a semi-structured interview prepared for pupils who either used many learning strategies or a limited number. The analysis of the results of the quantitative part

showed 17 pupils who were so called “extreme cases“(they use learning strategies to a great extent or vice versa, their mother tongue is not Czech, they gave interesting open ended answers in the questionnaire). These subjects were the interviewees for the semi-structured interviews in which they were asked questions to find out more about the strategies they apply and use. The interviewees were also asked to specify and extend their answers from the questionnaire. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, analyzed and the answers were categorized.

Results and discussion

All the pupils from the purposive sample could apply all the six categories of learning strategies including cognitive, memory - related, social, metacognitive, affective, and compensation strategies. Boys employed more learning strategies than girls. Indirect strategies were used more frequently than direct ones. The most applied in both groups of learners, successful and less successful, were affective, metacognitive, and social, and to a lesser degree compensation, memory and cognitive learning strategies.

Table 1. Median for direct and indirect learning strategies

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Median Value</i>	<i>minimum</i>	<i>maximum</i>
indirect	2.55	1.24	3.90
direct	2.05	1.30	3.20
affective	3.00	1.20	4.00
metacognitive	2.50	1.00	4.00
social	2.33	1.17	4.00
compensation	2.11	1.28	3.39
memory-related	2.11	1.11	3.78
cognitive	2.03	1.18	3.24

Note: Significant at $p \leq 0,01$.

Cognitive strategies were used by both successful and less successful pupils. Successful pupils employed a greater number of these strategies. The difference was also to which extent they were able to use them. They cooperated with their parents, like less successful learners did, but they did not rely on their help so often and to the same degree. That means that they were less dependent on their parents' help and were able to seek opportunities to practise English outside the classroom; they watched films with English subtitles to a certain degree, listened to English songs on the radio or YouTube. Less successful pupils watched films too but less frequently and always with Czech subtitles. They were less autonomous learners as they asked their parents for help very often even if they did not speak English, which was quite surprising. *Translation* as a cognitive strategy was rather overused and was preferred by the pupils from the sample and, sadly, by their teachers too. Surprisingly the teachers opt for translation even in such situations in which compensation strategies would be more suitable and efficient. This fact also influenced the pupils' willingness and readiness to read books in English. Interviewees claimed

that they could not read books in the target language as they were not able to translate each word and therefore would be unable to understand the plot. Beside reading books *translating* was also connected with watching films and playing computer games. Many learners claimed that they could not watch films or play games due to their lack of the skills in translating all the words they heard. One of the successful learners provided interesting answers concerning the strategies she used. She had a special exercise book in which she recorded everything she wanted to remember. Each week her class wrote a test at school so as a home preparation she designed her own test and practised a lot pretending that she was already taking the test. That helped her to concentrate, to revise what she needed and to overcome any inconveniences. This strategy corresponds with the age specifics of young learners and should be, in my opinion, incorporated into the learning strategy taxonomy as it is typical for children to pretend that they are teachers or pupils at school. The strategy was named *Doing practice test*.¹ Successful learners from the sample, unlike less successful ones, used cognitive strategies but did not employ memory-related ones to the same degree.

Less successful pupils declared that they applied a greater number of metacognitive strategies than their successful peers but, on the other hand, they relied on the help of others more often, were less organized in terms of homework and did not seek practice opportunities as successful pupils did.

Memory-related strategies, sometimes called mnemonics, were neglected, even though they are important for developing all the four language skills, and very important for vocabulary learning and retrieving. Moreover, structured reviewing helps pupils to move the knowledge from the fact level to the skill level, i.e. to procedural knowledge. In addition, linking verbal labels to pictures or vice versa could correspond with learners' preferred learning style. Hence, the teacher should offer rhyming words or chunks, short stories based on the words that should be remembered, or even silly rhymes that would help their pupils to remember and recollect the words practised.

Compensation strategies were not used by less successful pupils at all, whereas successful learners used a very limited number. As mentioned above, instead of compensation strategies both teachers and pupils preferred translating into Czech, which was reflected in metacognitive strategies use as well.

Even though metacognitive strategies should prevail in classes who have completed primary education, meaning that the learners ought to use a wide range of them, in this research the opposite was true. The successful subjects employed just a few: *self-monitoring*, *self-evaluating*, and *organising*. The above-mentioned *self-* strategies were applied in an unexpected way. *Self-monitoring* was related to learning vocabulary since the subjects identified this language element as the most challenging area of English. The strategy named *self-evaluating* was identified in a rather

¹ The strategy is similar to the one E. Gürsoi identified in her research conducted in Turkey in 2010 but she considered the strategy a compensation one. I do not agree with her as the interviewee did not use the strategy to compensate something but the purpose was to prepare for the test she was supposed to sit for. Therefore I understand the strategy as a cognitive one.

negative way in this research. The learners claimed that they could not read books as they would not be able to translate them but, and this is quite surprising, they had not tried it before. This fact just verifies that *translating* was overused and that the teachers did not support compensation strategies enough. Instead they and I believe in not intentionally, promoting translating in situations in which compensation strategies would work more effectively.

Regrettably, the subjects did not apply the metacognitive strategies that deal with planning work, setting goals and seeking practice opportunities in naturalistic situations such as films, social media or others.

The word “affective” deals with emotions, positive as well as negative, motivation, attitudes and values. The subjects were able to use self-encouragement strategies such as *encouraging yourself* which is an important strategy for motivation. The level of anxiety was reflected in the strategy called *taking risks wisely* and many pupils claimed that making mistakes was normal for them as everybody makes mistakes. Furthermore, they stated that their teachers were helpful and supportive in these situations. *Meditation* as one of the affective strategies was used in an interesting way, typical for young learners who like role plays and simulations. One pupil practised for tests, vocabulary or grammar, and imagined that she was already taking the test. This strategy helped her overcome any inconveniences connected with examining.²

Language is seen as social behaviour. One of the basic interactions is asking questions. It is typical for young learners that they are curious and ask a great deal of questions. They *asked* their peers, teachers and parents *for verification and clarification*. They cooperated with their classmates in English lessons and at home they cooperated with their parents, who helped them with their homework. As both successful and less successful pupils relied on their parents or siblings’ help and used it as a learning strategy that is not listed in R. Oxford’s taxonomy, I view it as a new social strategy and name it *Cooperating with parents*. This strategy, in my opinion, is not identical with the one called *Cooperating with proficient users of English* as many of the parents involved did not speak a word in English, yet the pupils asked for help and relied on it.

Conclusion

In research focused on learning strategies young learners apply it is possible to use both quantitative as well as qualitative methods, although qualitative methods seem to be more suitable. One of the most important results showed that interviewees used some different strategies than those outlined in R. Oxford’s strategy inventory accordingly with their cognitive and emotional development (1990). The newly identified strategies were *cooperating with parents*, suggested as one of the social strategies, and doing *practice tests* identified as a cognitive strategy (Hrozková, 2013). Therefore I believe that the taxonomy deserve further elaboration. The taxonomy would be valuable for language teachers as it is vital for them to understand their language learners’ strategies and to provide facilitation of

² This strategy is one of the new identified cognitive strategies: *Doing practice tests*.

learning strategies, which should cover 70% of language tuition and 30% of strategy – based instructions (Harmer, 2007).

Teachers gave some advice about learning strategies in English but the facilitation could and should be based on previous analyses of learners' needs, more explicit, learner-centred, properly planned and implemented into the foreign language curriculum.

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