

LET THEM TELL US: LEARNER PERSPECTIVES ON STRATEGIC APPROACHES

Much recent learner-centred research in Second Language Acquisition has addressed the fundamental role played by various types of learning strategies in the quest to master a second/foreign language. A variety of approaches, such as questionnaires, interviews and observation, have been exploited in an increasing number of investigative projects in order to assess the application of such strategies in different learning tasks. It is our intention to demonstrate the use of student journals as a quantitative and qualitative research instrument in a university foreign language context to highlight the frequency of metacognitive and social/affective strategies, rather than merely cognitive strategies, deployed by our learners in the ongoing development of their writing skills in English Language. We shall put forward the proposal that in order to equip learners with the tools to achieve greater autonomy, integrated instruction in relevant strategies and the encouragement of guided written reflection is thus to be recommended.

Gran parte de la reciente investigación en la Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas ha destacado el papel fundamental que juegan las estrategias de aprendizaje en el afán de dominar una segunda lengua. Se han empleado distintos métodos, tales como cuestionarios, entrevistas y observación, para un número creciente de proyectos de investigación con el fin de evaluar la explotación de estas estrategias en diferentes tareas lingüísticas. Nuestro objetivo es demostrar la utilización de diarios escritos por alumnos como un instrumento cuantitativo y cualitativo en el contexto universitario de inglés como lengua extranjera para así señalar la frecuencia de estrategias metacognitivas y socio-afectivas, en lugar de estrategias cognitivas, usadas por nuestros estudiantes en el desarrollo de la expresión escrita. Proponemos que un programa integrado de instrucción en las estrategias relevantes y la incitación a una reflexión escrita guiada son recomendables para equiparar a nuestros alumnos con las herramientas para alcanzar una mayor autonomía.

The innumerable processes involved in the learning or acquisitionⁱ of a second or foreign language are highly complex in nature and for the most part difficult to observe or identify. Yet, informed by insights from psycholinguistic enquiry, investigation within the multi-faceted discipline of Applied Linguistics has revealed much about the nature of learner capacity and aptitude for second and foreign language learning and has greatly contributed to the changing climate in the world of English Language Teaching. It is now true to say that efforts to improve teaching technique and classroom performance from the perspective of the instructor have given way to a greater focus on learning processes and the tactics displayed by those more directly involved in the quest for linguistic mastery: the learners themselves.

A considerable body of academic research within the two complementary disciplines of Cognitive Psychology and Second Language Acquisition, inspired by the seminal "Good Language Learner" research initiated in the 1970'sⁱⁱ, has brought to the fore the fundamental role played by more tactical elements in the complex process of learning a second/foreign language and attaining the objective of achieving communicative competence. One of the resounding conclusions from the many empirical investigation projects that have been carried out is that successful language learners, or those who are seemingly better equipped to improve their language skills, predominantly make use of a wide and flexible repertoire of different types of learning strategies which involve many aspects of the learners themselves and not just the cognitive. It has been suggested that well-chosen or appropriate learning strategies support learning both directly and indirectly and that these techniques, once isolated and identified, can be taught to those who are less successful, leading to considerable potential for the ongoing development of language skills both inside and outside the classroom. However it is also true to say that the ability to exploit appropriate strategies for a variety of learning tasks is not always inherent or automatic since learners need guidance in how to learn more effectively: linguistic proficiency is seldom achieved without some kind of direction. It is thus the role of those facilitating language development to provide learners with effectual ways to learn, catering for a wide range of different learning styles, rather than simply teach content matter or evaluate progress .

The connotations thrown up by the very name of strategy, despite its military origins, suggest the management of available resources in a planned or carefully orchestrated tactical campaign towards a certain goal, or "a plan, step, or conscious action toward achievement of an objective" in non-adversarial situations (Oxford 1990:7). In the research literature, the concept of *language learning* strategy has indeed proved difficult to define in a consensual manner (Ellis 1994: 530) since the multitude of definitions that have been proposed are complex and notoriously vague, with even a hazy differentiation between *learner* strategies and *learning* strategies. Cohen provides a useful definition for our purposes: "Second language learner strategies encompass both second language learning and second language use strategies. Taken together they constitute the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both. (1998:5)"

Henceforth we shall use the umbrella term *learning* strategies since they more than often describe those actions or behaviours which learners resort to in order to make the process of language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable. Thus, in general terms strategies can be described as steps taken by learners to enhance and improve their own learning and may range from cognitive techniques such as analysing or note-taking to metacognitive or learning management techniques such as planning or

self-evaluation to social or affective techniques such as co-operating with others or lowering anxiety (Oxford et al 1996:19).

Over the last thirty years or so, a wide and varying range of language learning strategies have been formally discovered and named. For their identification, a variety of classifications and typologies have been offered in the research literature (Stern 1975, Naiman *et al* 1978; Rubin 1981; O' Malley and Chamot 1990), but for the purposes of this study we shall use Oxford's (1990) well-known comprehensive scheme which embraces 62 different strategies divided into 6 sub-groups: memory, compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies. These subgroups can be further divided into two major types: *direct* and *indirect* strategies. It is the latter group, the lesser-investigated indirect strategies which will form the basis of the present study. It is our intention to demonstrate here that explicit training in metacognitive, affective and social learning strategies as an integrated part of the formal teaching programme in English as a foreign language in a university learning context, specifically in the area of writing skills, facilitates more effective learning, especially since the development of writing skills typically produces a certain amount of anxiety and demotivation and is highly appropriate for the exercising of metacognitive and affective control.

Metacognitive strategies are generally considered essential for successful language learning in their executive capacity of organising learning time and co-ordinating the learning process by means of centering, planning and evaluating learning. It has also been found that while learners exploit some metacognitive strategies consciously, such as planning and evaluating learning, they fail to employ other crucial metacognitive strategies related to, for example, evaluating progress, or seeking practice opportunities (Oxford 1990:138). Social strategies involving interaction with others and affective strategies or motivational factors are also highly influential on language learning success or failure, since effective language learners are, according to Oxford (1990:140), often those learners who know how to control their emotions and attitudes towards learning. In our experience, greater attention has been afforded in both research and instructional contexts to cognitive strategies, which directly involve the manipulation of the target language such as taking notes or grammatical practice. Yet, by providing learners with a wider range of metacognitive and socio-affective strategies, not only will they raise their awareness of learning but they will also be better equipped for greater autonomy in order to take control of their learning.

Researchers have been gathering data on language learning strategies for some time using a variety of approaches either by means of direct observation or more recently computer tracking, or by using self-reporting instruments such as recollective studies, surveys or interviews, questionnaires, diaries and dialogue journals, with no single method dominant in the field or considered optimal for such research (Cohen 1998, Little?). Psycholinguistic processes are largely by nature unobservable and highly complex, interwoven and inaccessible resources for improving learning potential and language learning strategies are generally internal, mentalistic processes so most research methods might be considered inappropriate. It has been suggested that open, unprompted techniques could be more useful for eliciting information rather than pre-set questions or observation routines, and learner diaries have long been used as instruments in the investigation into language learning processes and as research documents which especially throw light upon affective, social and cognitive variables (e.g. Bailey 1983; Matsumoto 1994).

The value of such written retrospective verbal report is only recently emerging as a research instrument with much potential for strategy research due to the wealth of data which may be elicited, especially of directly unobservable aspects such as self-evaluation or affective factors such as anxiety. Although diaries have been used for research into language learning strategies (Fedderholt, Oxford *et al.* 1996), dialogue journals between learners and teacher have yet to be used as a research tool in formal studies in this areaⁱⁱⁱ, the potential of students' own written perceptions deriving from guided or free reflection on a variety of issues relevant to them and their own, ongoing learning experience is gradually being realised despite the drawbacks provided by the enormous volume of potentially random recollective, self-report data produced (Mlnarczyk 1999; Oxbrow 2000 - more refs in Oxford *et al.* 1996:20).

Journals and diaries are learner-generated and usually unstructured, with no explicit correction and only veiled guidance, since if only required to write about specific strategies learners might be less co-operative than if they were provided with an outlet for describing multiple concerns of their overall language learning experience (Cohen and Scott 1996: 100). Entries typically cover a wide range of issues, including written retrospective verbal reports of the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies they use in their language learning. Learners become more aware of the strategies they and their peers use over a period of time and they become "participant observers" (Long 1979, quoted in Oxford *et al.* 1996:21) in their own learning with the opportunity for self-evaluation and improvement. Diaries are used to find out what is significant to the learners themselves rather than what the teacher perceives their needs or problems to be. Also journals provide a vehicle to improve and experiment with written expression as learners are encouraged to write and reflect regularly, especially valuable for those learners who do not like to participate orally in class. Affective issues, such as anxiety and motivation, may also come to the fore, as is very much the case in the present study.

Dialogue journals are the tools we have employed for our data collection for strategy research in a Canarian university foreign language context. The corpus for this longitudinal study^{iv} corresponds to 37 students divided into 2 writing groups A and B. Our primary objective is to determine the quantity and types of learning strategies used by university foreign language students in the area of writing skills after integrated training. Secondary objectives correspond to expanding students' awareness of their own strategy use and adding new strategies to their repertoire, to provide further practice for writing skills development and encourage greater learner autonomy. Writing instruction is not merely a question of emphasising and drilling linguistic or metalinguistic concerns or the assembling of a tightly-controlled word puzzle with different components interlocking in multiple ways. Too much emphasis on mechanical concerns may inhibit the fledgling writer and kill both creativity and motivation, fundamental ingredients of successful and meaningful written expression. The interactive nature and reflective nature of writing also need to be addressed in the midst of outline construction, paragraph analysis and topic sentence isolation. Written expression is after all a daunting task in any language and writing well does not come naturally to many. Training is needed and awareness needs to be raised both at instructional and developmental levels.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 158-9) propose four frameworks with guidelines for strategy training for both first and second language contexts^v: their own guidelines are also the ones adopted here. The first stage is preparation and developing student

awareness (group discussion, awareness-raising tasks, retrospective writing tasks about previous learning experiences, questionnaires and strategy inventory), followed by the initial presentation of strategies (modelling by teacher, describing or naming strategy and providing rationale for strategy use). The third step is practice in order to develop learners' skills in using strategies for academic learning through co-operative learning tasks or group discussions, leading on to the learners' evaluation of their own strategy use by discussing strategy use, filling in checklists or questionnaires and writing a dialogue journal with their teacher, finishing with expansion or the transfer of strategies to new tasks

Data from journals can be interpreted either in an analytical, quantitative manner or in global, narrative way (Oxford *et al.* 1996: 20). Quantitative calculations alone say little about the social or affective factors. Qualitative data can be transformed to quantitative data through content analysis procedures, and both types of data will be presented here. All the journals were analysed and strategies as reported by students were labelled and classified according to Oxford's (1990) 62-item classification scheme. The quantitative results reveal, in most cases, a well developed repertoire of strategies after integrated training. It is significant to point out here that the highest percentage of strategies present in the data were indirect (62%) rather than direct strategies (38%), with the highest scoring group proving to be the metacognitive strategies (32%) followed by affective strategies (20%), with an equal value of cognitive strategies (20%). A range of metacognitive strategies were mentioned in all diaries, and within the metacognitive group, frequently appearing strategies were those corresponding to the sub-group of arranging and planning learning, particularly those of seeking practice opportunities, setting goals and objectives and identifying the purpose of a task which corresponds to those strategies which had constituted part of the integrated training programme in writing skills instruction. More significantly, we found a high value of the sub-group "evaluating your learning" which includes the strategies of self-evaluation and self-monitoring, tactics which were previously little used by our subjects. This seems to differ greatly from previous learning strategy studies (Oxford *et al.* 1996, O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) in which the most frequently appearing learning behaviours corresponded to memory and cognitive strategies, with a limited selection of metacognitive strategies, and very rare mention of affective and social strategies. The relatively high mention of affective strategies also contrasts with findings in other studies (Oxford *et al.* 1996: 25) and the highest scoring strategies in this group corresponded to those of making positive statements and discussing your feelings with someone else. It goes without saying that the strategy of writing a language learning diary was the most effective in this class.

It is beyond the scope of the present study to compare individual strategy use, calculate the frequency of strategies or analyse which are the most/least frequently used in each sub-group in relation to other variables such as sex or proficiency level^{vi}. Yet as we can see, a wide repertoire of indirect strategies related to writing skills has been unearthed after an initial revision of the enormous body of data, and verbatim examples of learners self-reported strategies follow showing a heightened awareness of both strategy use and writing improvement. The retrospective self-reporting in the dialogue journals^{vii}, an activity of genuine communication between teacher and learner in the target language has been a most revealing source of data on the learners' perspectives of strategy training which itself has proved to be much more than a mere instrument for data collection, but a technique in itself for strategy training, both on a metacognitive

level, by encouraging reflection about the learning process, and on an affective level, by lowering anxiety, raising motivation and providing the opportunity to share thoughts, feelings and worries. We must not forget also the didactic value of such an autonomous writing activity, shown in learners improving greatly in writing fluency and also acquiring language from the teachers' own language: in the words of one learner: " This way of writing English is very useful for me. I'll give you an example: I notice that you use sometimes the expression "It sounds like..." and I've never seen this before, so I ask a friend for its meaning and she told me it. So now when I have the opportunity I will use it ADD" Motivation is also raised considerably: in the words of another learner, "Have you ever thought what we feel when you return our diaries to us? Its almost indescribable. It's like a mixture of pride and curiosity (An English native writes you!)".

Not only was the progress in written expression highly noticeable, with journal entries becoming ever more fluent and ambitious, but this practice technique was also viewed as extremely positive and motivating by the students themselves. For many learners this was an innovative and experimental fluency exercise with conclusive results, and they were encouraged in this way to think more about their learning, pleased to discover the teacher's interest. Students always seemed motivated to write about problems with writing or the strategies they use in all four skills areas. Being at a loss for ideas is a frequent obstacle in formal composition writing, which is a familiar experience when *obliged* to write, but this was not the case in free practice of this kind. One of the values of this study has been the discovery of the fresher, clearer writing voice discovered by learners as they lose the fear of being graded or evaluated formally, unafraid to express opinions or disagree with a set writing model or frequently unattainable ideal which is often the case with more formal composition writing - it seems obvious that practice in both accuracy-based and fluency-based writing is desirable. Their previous experience of teacher evaluation of formal composition writing has been limited to a letter grade and a perfunctory, largely unread note, usually written in justification of the grade awarded in relation to the evaluated piece of work's conformity to a previously presented writing model, with any originality or creativity discouraged. Very seldom are there constructive pointers for future improvement or further practice opportunities.

It is undeniable that these dialogue journals contributed especially to the development of all three indirect strategies in a motivating, contextualised manner and a considerable improvement in both fluency and language use in weaker students was highly noticeable. It was gratifying to see evidence of using dictionaries to look for required unfamiliar vocabulary and the recycling of new lexis learnt recently in class or appearing naturally in the teacher's entry^{viii}. The success of this particular method in the development of learning strategies relies not only on the invaluable opportunity for genuine, communicative practice (with a written record for the learner), but also on the lowering of the affective filter, the freedom of subject matter and fewer restrictions ("...I Hate compositions, they kill my freedom in writing and that makes me feel like a robot, and I'm not a machine") and teacher input with unobtrusive correction. The undeniably social practice of reading and writing takes place in learner-controlled discourse with contextual practice of acquired grammatical, functional and lexical knowledge.

As teachers and researchers we need to not only train our learners in the effective use of language learning strategies in an integrated fashion, but also analyse the success of such learner training: how can we find out if these strategies are being used and how successful they are. Teachers are often unaware of or mistaken about their students'

strategy preferences (Oxford *et al.* 1996:). Language learning strategies may be highly beneficial and maximum benefit may be derived if and when both teachers and students are aware of their utility and pay attention to them.

Strategy research is still in search of a satisfactory methodology, but diaries have a great deal of potential for the investigation of learning strategies and learning preferences of second language students (Nunan 1992:124). As well as being a mine of information for the teacher/researcher and providing insights into the teaching/learning process which can only improve learning, keeping a language learning diary or writing regularly in a dialogue journal is a way of developing student awareness of their own strategy use and fosters active personal attention to strategy potential as well as enabling learners to forge ahead in their quest for autonomy and providing the necessary space for them to discover and share a wide range of strategies with a supportive reader: successful learners can be seen to have acquired the strategies and the attitudes or knowledge that allow them to use them appropriately and independently of a teacher in a truly autonomous fashion. Learners usually have little practice in self-evaluation and self-monitoring, and they often have an inaccurate idea of their own abilities (Fedderholt 1998:5).

Learning is a complex process which we will probably never be able to completely unravel. Awareness of elements that promote learning shifts emphasis from product to process. Weaker learners may benefit from strategy training, but personal commitment is vital along with awareness of learning style and strategies. Metacognitive strategies by their very nature lend themselves to thinking about the learning process, monitoring one's production and evaluating learning, so they are suited to reflective writing practice in dialogue journals where students are not only learning to write: they are, after all, writing to learn.

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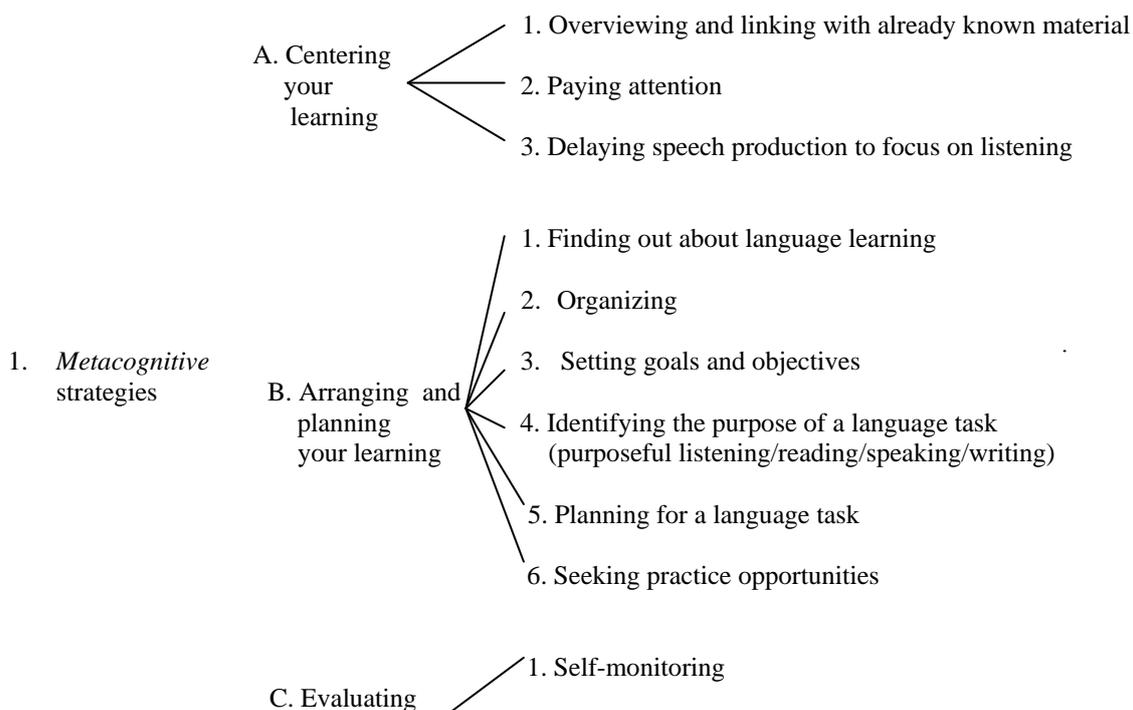
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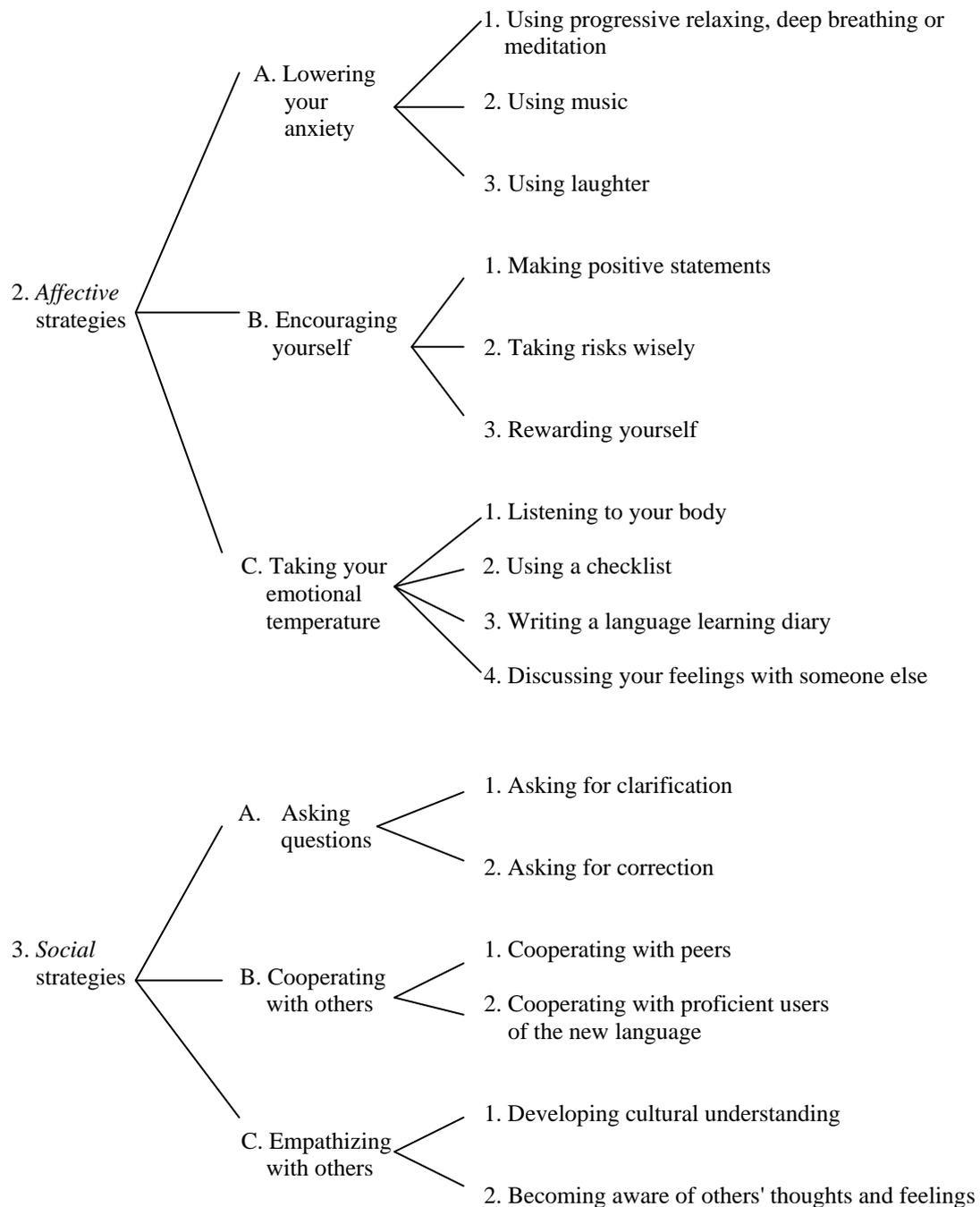
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INDIRECT STRATEGIES

(Metacognitive, Affective and Social Strategies)



your learning — 2. Self-evaluating



INDIRECT STRATEGIES

I. METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

A. CENTERING YOUR LEARNING

PAYING ATTENTION (IA2)

"I admit to having found in Carolina's work mistakes that I sometimes make, this type of exercise is helpful because correcting other's homework makes me understand how attracted a reader should feel or what a reader really expects"

"...this way of writing English is very useful for me. I'll give you an example: I notice that you use sometimes the expression "It sounds like..." and I've never seen this before, so I ask a friend for its meaning and she told me it. So now when I have the opportunity I will use it. On the other hand I think it's a positive experience write with a real English person"

"Today I have read very good compositions belonging to the other group and I have been really fascinated by their ability to write"

B. ARRANGING AND PLANNING YOUR LEARNING

FINDING OUT ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING (IB1)

...what we thought about the process which is necessary to follow when we are going to write a composition [...]I tell you that in my opinion this way of doing such a piece of work is extremely important to the point that it becomes essential to do good writing"

ORGANIZING (IB2)

"During the year I have been writing in a notebook everything we have learnt. This notebook has been divided by me in several sections: vocabulary, grammar, etc, and now I'm writing a special section about phrasal verbs"

SETTING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES (IB3)

"I am satisfied with my marks but I know I can improve my results ... I have decided to correspond with an English or American person"

IDENTIFYING THE PURPOSE OF A LANGUAGE TASK (IB4)

"It is a great idea to write a diary in English, I learn much with this, because if I don't know how to write something, I will look in the dictionary and this will help me to learn vocabulary"

"...this way of writing English is very useful for me. I'll give you an example: I notice that you use sometimes the expression "It sounds like..." and I've never seen this before, so I ask a friend for its meaning and she told me it. So now when I have the opportunity I will use it. On the other hand I think it's a positive experience write with a real English person"

"I thought that the outline wasn't a good idea, but now I can't write a composition without it"

SEEKING PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES (IB6)

"I have also written short stories in English.....I went to the bar and pretended to be studying but what I was really doing was writing what people said, but they spoke in Spanish and I wrote it in English"

"Answering to your question if I usually read in English, it is true I really enjoy it, sometimes I think that I enjoy more reading in English than in Spanish"

"My worst mistake is think a lot in Spanish. For this reason Sonia and I are speaking more and more in English when we have a free hour [...] Furthermore, I love reading interesting books and this year I have read English books because I need to practise this language"

"I have to tell you that take the diary with me during my holidays was very useful because the more you write, the more you learn to express yourself"

C. EVALUATING YOUR LEARNING

SELF-MONITORING (1C1)

"I have been reading this diary and I have noticed a lot of mistakes I have done, but the most important thing is that I have noticed them and I know the correct form, isn't it? And I have found many useful constructions in your writing. Thanks"

SELF-EVALUATING (1C2)

"I have recently noticed that I have improved on my written English. It must be because I have started to write freely, to write about what I want when it suits me. There are no barriers or limits to express myself and I enjoy doing this...there are certain moments in which I prefer writing to speaking"

"Now I like very much to speak English and I sometimes speak English with my sister. I realise that my English is improving because I don't speak many words in Spanish when I don't know some words in English and I try explain it with a phrase"

"I realized that I write, for example, my diary and I don't look for many words in the dictionary and that I write more quickly than before"

II AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

A. LOWERING YOUR ANXIETY

"Do you want to know why I am so fluent at writing? I have always heard (since I can remember) English music"

B. ENCOURAGING YOURSELF

REWARDING YOURSELF (IIB3)

"...we met some boys from Sweden....but suddenly I was talking with them in English, of course, and I felt so good!"

MAKING POSITIVE STATEMENTS (IIB1)

"In any case I am happy with my marks, I think they are the ones I deserve. I know in the next exam I have to study more to get a higher mark"

"At the beginning of the career I was not happy with English, because I not meet too many people in class, but later I find beautiful people for speaking in class, for example when we speak in pairs and the class is more interesting too, there is more variety [...] This year of degree was wonderful, I met many wonderful people[...]they help me when I couldn't come to class"

"Today I feel very happy because I've got an A. I've never had one"

TAKING RISKS WISELY (IIB2)

"I spoke with an English man in my job, and it was wonderful, because what he said I understood [...]Today I know that learn a foreign language is something very important, always I have known it, but today much more"

C TAKING YOUR EMOTIONAL TEMPERATURE

LISTENING TO YOUR BODY (IIC1)

"I don't know why but today I feel very tired. Every day I see that university isn't what I thought first. Anyway, I'm happy because I'm meeting different kinds of people"

DISCUSSING YOUR FEELINGS WITH SOMEONE ELSE (IIC4)

"I think I've got a very big problem about my speaking. When I was in London I spoke in English, but I got very nervous when I did with native people, I didn't like to chat with them because I worried if I made a mistake. However with the people of my class I just talked and talked. I guess I felt more confident with them"

"Writing a composition is like a headache when I can't find the last reason why I agree or disagree about...whatever, so it takes me a long time to write a presentable one"

III SOCIAL STRATEGIES

A ASKING QUESTIONS

ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION (IIIA1)

"Gina, could you explain to me the construction: "Fasten your seat belt while seated"?"

ASKING FOR CORRECTION (IIIA2)

"...would you mind to check my mistakes in this diary? I'm gonna continue writing in an informal way and the wrongs are not gonna stop me because the important will be the content, but will be really helpful for me 'cause it could let me have reflections about it"

B COOPERATING WITH OTHERS

COOPERATING WITH PEERS (IIIB1)

"I have corrected, or tried to correct, my classmate's composition. I like doing this because it gives me the feeling of being a real teacher and because it helps me to see what silly mistakes one can do on compositions"

"Today I have read very good compositions belonging to the other group and I have been really fascinated by their ability to write"

COOPERATING WITH PROFICIENT USERS OF THE NEW LANGUAGE (IIIB2)

"Thank you for your collaboration in my diary because I'm learning new words with you. Thank for your new word [cheerio], I love it, I've never heard it before"

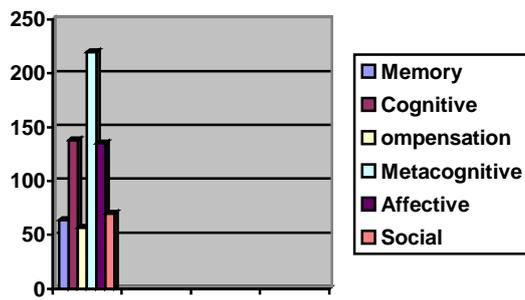
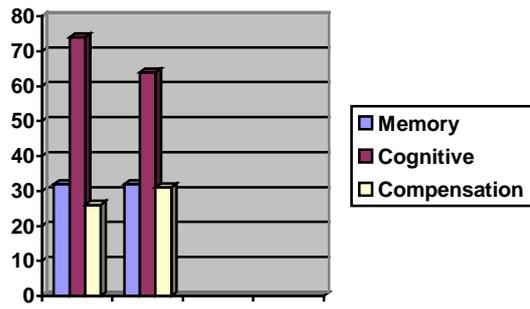
COGNITIVE

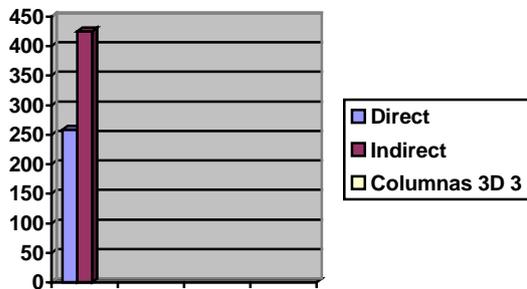
"It is a great idea to write a diary in English, I learn much with this, because if I don't know how to write something, I will look in the dictionary and this will help me to learn vocabulary"

"You ask me about vocabulary, well I will be sincere. I do not do anything special. I just try to associate (is this verb right?) words with people or objects, and sometimes with pictures"

"I rarely use my dictionary, well if I do not know the meaning of a "new" word I look it up but most of the vocabulary I know is because of reading, I love reading"

"Now I like very much to speak English and I sometimes speak English with my sister. I realize that my English is improving because I don't speak many words in Spanish when I don't know some words in English and I try explain it with a phrase"





ⁱ Although a distinction is often made between these two terms after Krashen, the term *learning* will be used superordinately to describe both conscious and unconscious processes.

ⁱⁱ Seminal studies include Stern (1975) and Naiman *et al* (1978).

ⁱⁱⁱ A interesting qualitative study is that of Mlynarczyk (1999).

^{iv} This investigative project was carried out during the academic year 1997-1998.

^v Also see Wenden (1991) for an alternative action plan for strategy training.

^{vi} This forms the basis of the author's forthcoming doctoral dissertation which uses multiple research techniques such as interviews, retrospective verbal report and questionnaires as well as learner journals in order to determine the effect of integrated strategy training on the development of EFL writing skills.

^{vii} For further positive attitudes to self-reporting in diaries see Matsumoto (1996)

^{viii} In the words of one learner: "I definitely think that your replies are a very useful help for us since we can read authentic English written in an informal way; besides we can learn helpful expressions which we may have not seen if we hadn't had the opportunity of this diary."