Language Learning Strategies and Competencies: Some reflections on EFL in Algeria

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Résumé:

Cet article part d'une réflexion sur les stratégies d'apprentissage de l'apprenant de l'Anglais comme Langue Etrangère (EFL) en contexte éducatif algérien. Ceci nous permettra d'observer et éventuellement d'évaluer ses compétences en Anglais lors de l'accomplissement d'une tâche en classe ou en dehors de la classe telle que la préparation de projets dans le cadre de l'Approche par Compétences (APC). La priorité argumentaire de cet article ne relève pas de la recherche en tant que telle. Elle est beaucoup plus empirique et se veut axée sur des suggestions de lignes directrices visant à explorer et percevoir l'avenir de l'enseignement de l'Anglais comme Langue Etrangère en Algérie

Introduction

A substantial shift of interest has taken place in the last two decades or so from a teacher centred classroom environment to a more learner-based approach in ESL/EFL educational settings. This shift has come as a result of various scholarly works and research results in Applied Linguistics. The latter concentrated more on the learner's behaviour and attitudes to learning. This new vision of teaching-learning and knowledge acquisition based on the learner was initiated in Canada[1].

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[1] . See the results of the Northeast Conference (1990), and the annual "Learners' Conferences" (TESL, Canada, 1991). More specifically, "Shifting the Instructional Focus to the Learner" and, "the Learner-centred Curriculum" (Nunan, 1988, 1995).

Later on, scholars and practitioners broadened the literature on educational teaching techniques, methods and approaches in this vein to reach the teacher and the practitioner under the form of a more comprehensive literature and techniques applicable in the classroom. The investigations based on classroom observation on Language Learning Strategies (hereinafter LLS) and the learner-centred approaches in ESL/EFL settings led to better performances of the learner inside as well as outside the classroom environment (better reading competences, more overt learning in EFL settings, more accurate social interactions in English in EFL settings).

1. Some landmarks and definitions of LLS

As early as 1986[1], Weinstein and Mayer stressed on the importance of learning strategies in terms of physical and cognitive behaviours towards learning. The "*Learn to Learn*» vade mecum has thus become a key working principle in the Educational World in much the same way as the euphoria following the early days of the "Communicative Approach".

Basically, Weinstein and Mayer's definition takes us back to human cognition in processing new information whatever the nature of this information may be (knowledge, sciences, languages, ideas, etc.). The basic assumption behind this definition is that Learning Strategies are triggered off irrespective of the subject matter (sciences, technology, languages) and the learning environment (the classroom, the school, the museum, the theatre, etc.) in which the learner finds himself. We shall confine ourselves here on LLS and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

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[1] . There were pioneering articles before 1986 (e.g. Tarone, E. (1983). However, we consider Weinstein and Mayer (1986) as an influential article on the issue on LLS.

Various definitions of Learning Strategies have been proposed in the literature on education. Rubin (1987) sees them as part of the learner's conscious building of a language system of his own which directly affects learning per se. Oxford (1993) illustrates with living examples types of LLS used by learners (as the case may be for watching TV programs, guessing the meanings of unknown words or expressions, predicting what may happen next in a story or a play, etc. She regards them as active cognitive tools (processes) for memorization, internalisation, storage, and retrieval that influence directly the development of communication abilities in the foreign language.

It's obvious then that LLS can no longer be regarded as end-products in themselves (acquiring a linguistic / socio-linguistic competence in the foreign language) but rather as learning processes that make the learner shift from defensive learning and spoon feeding to a more offensive type of learning and thus become an active character in the learning process which he may even negotiate with the teacher in terms of preferences for one learning over another (conversation instead of dictation, reading instead of writing activities, etc.).

2. Types of strategies

The question raises next as to which strategies are we referring to? The terminology is not always of great help for the teacher. While some scholars use the terms "Learner Strategies" (Wendin & Rubin, 1987), others prefer "Learning Strategies" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Others still, use "Language Learning Strategies" (Oxford, 1996). Yet, a common ground may be found among the various definitions at hand. The basic characteristics of the generally accepted view of LLS are that the learner himself generates these strategies and they represent steps in the learning process taken by the language learner. They also improve the learning and are there to develop

competences in the foreign language. They reflect in fact unseen mental processes of the learner that the teacher (or parents) detects through behaviours, verbal/non-verbal attitudes, strategies of communication (orally or in writing) that the learner uses in a given task he has to overcome and accomplish. These unseen processes at work are also manifest in the use of new vocabulary, new grammar rules, generalizations, and various expressions that the learner produces in the foreign language.

One particular aspect of LLS that is of interest to us here is to train our learners to reach control and autonomy of learning. This is achieved through a 'desire' or 'want' of the learner for more learning. It may be innate in some learners. Yet, we need to train them to reach this goal. We all know that defensive learning has pride of place in our schools - and universities- and that our language learners (despite the urge for the use of the Communicative Approach) have not yet reached the stage where the teacher is no more the source of knowledge and that information and knowledge may be acquired outside class.

In this overall process of re-thinking teaching (English Language Learning / Teaching, in this case) in our schools and universities, we suggest to look at how LLS may contribute to the development of competencies such as: to interact orally, to reinvest understanding of oral and written texts, and to write and produce texts.

In this respect, one might wish to contemplate what has been suggested in this vein elsewhere and see to what extent it may be adapted/adopted to our EFL classes.

Oxford (1990: 9) gives twelve factors to develop LLS. We shall refer to six of them to see how they may constitute a starting basis for reflections on LLS and the teaching / learning of English in Algeria.

The first of these factors is to '***allow learners to become more self-directed***'. Within the new approach to teaching/learning through competencies (The Competency Based Approach to Language Teaching –CBLT-), the learner is first trained to 'interact orally' in English. Interaction involves self-adjustment (ideas, understanding and attitudes) which itself develops the ability to self-direct and have control over communicative events rather than simply be subjected to them under the form of memorisation (situational dialogues, drills, pattern practice, etc.) and assimilation.

The second factor is that LLS allow to '***expand the role of language teachers'***. The teacher himself should first be trained on how to handle these new teaching techniques. His role is not limited to giving knowledge in a graded manner but he becomes actively involved as a classroom manager, a co-communicator, an advisor, and a friend.

The teaching should be '***problem-oriented***'. This represents the third factor. We should not limit ourselves to teaching forms and functions but rather to exploit linguistic resources (texts, visual aids, the internet, etc.) events (that come naturally or are provoked in class) and tasks (opportunities to take risks as a learner) to create situations of interaction and acquire the ability and the required strategies to negotiate of meaning. The learner thus interacts orally with peers and the teacher, with the basic strategy to seek information, by asking questions, rephrasing, apologizing, etc.

The fourth factor is that '***LLS involve many aspects, not just the cognitive one***'. Behaviors and attitudes towards the foreign language are taken into account. Learners do not learn the language for necessity only but they discover the culture, ways of life and feelings of other peoples to situate themselves in this ever-changing world where information travels at a very fast speed. In this process, the learner re-adjusts his behavior

and learns to listen to others, to take their arguments, ideas and attitudes into account. He learns to work in groups, to think in groups, to act in groups.

'*LLS can be taught*' represents the fifth factor. As human beings with a capacity to think, read and write, we all have strategies to understand, absorb, and re-write a text. It is often the case that learning strategies are incorporated in a given text. The teacher should be aware of the techniques available that can lead the learner to acquire LLS out of a reading passage. He may also recall his own strategies when he was a learner himself. LLS are also taught through other means than the text proper. Books, brochures, magazines, videos and the like constitute the data base to teach how to look for facts, understand events, settings and plots, how to recognize characters or persons and reconstruct the fact, story, or event. All this should be conducted in a dynamic and well-organised teaching to develop the competency to reinvest understanding of oral and written texts.

The sixth factor is that '*LLS are influenced by a variety of factors, not only the classroom environmental factors'*. A learner can learn a lot from a friend, a pen friend or a classmate outside class. He may use learning strategies not acquired in class (the hackers' jargon, selected and supervised chat facilities on the Web, the press, multimedia centers, etc.) to help him develop the third competency: to write texts and produce them in the foreign language.

These factors presented here for reference rather than discussing the pros and cons behind their underlying principles, lead to the question on why are LLS so important in our EFL learning and teaching?

It is clear that ultimate goal of the Communicative Approach is to lead the learner to acquire a 'Communicative Competence'

in the foreign language. We believe LLS can help our learners to achieve this goal. We concede here, following Canale and Swain's (1980) argumentation, that communication strategies are a key factor in strategic competence. We must draw, however, a demarcating line between communication proper and language learning strategies in order to avoid confusion of tools and means to reach these goals. The learner uses communication strategies in situations or communicative events where difficulties arise in the transmission or reception of messages in English. Language Learning Strategies, on the other hand, are used in 'relaxed' situations where learning is triggered off without the need for communication per se. It thus becomes clear that it is of paramount importance for our teachers to understand LLS in order to produce effective learners. It becomes clear then that LLS go together with "communicative competence". This is not the case in our EFL setting. Teachers who are aware of how to reach "communicative competence" through their teaching activities, tend to ignore or set aside the role of LLS in developing this competence in their learners. The fact is that the more you train your learners to use LLS, the better language learners you get. The question remains whether the use of positive learning strategies (self-access teaching, active tasks, monitoring the learner's performance through evaluation sheets and other means, etc. are profitable for both "good" as well as "bad" or "poor" language learners on an equal footing. This may not be the case. Research has shown that a lack of 'meta-cognitive' strategies (planning, arranging ideas, motivation, lack of concentration, introvert attitudes, etc.) may be the source of failure in the use of LLS by "poor" learners. These meta-cognitive" strategies may also cause unsuccessful learning by "good" learners. The point is that one should not take positive learning strategies as sine-qua–none conditions for successful learning. A lack or ruptures in meta-cognitive strategies, which

allow the learner to assess a task and bring it to completion, are to be considered by the teacher.

The table below summarizes the most frequently discussed types of LLS. This table is drawn following Oxford (1990b) summary of LLS.

TABLE 1

Direct LLS (related to the Subject Matter)	Indirect LLS (not related to the Subject Matter)
Memory Strategies	Meta-cognitive Strategies
Cognitive LLS	Affective LLS
Compensation Strategies	Social Strategies

Broadly speaking, direct LLS relate to the subject matter itself. They include Memory Strategies that are used to store information for long-term use or retrieving it for spontaneous communicative purposes. Cognitive LLS are used when the learner chooses from his internally constructed language models and processes information in the foreign language. Compensation Strategies are used to bridge a gap in knowledge through paraphrase and negotiation of meaning.

Indirect LLS are not necessarily related to the Subject Matter. They include Meta-cognitive Strategies that help the learners to have control through focus, arrangement, and evaluation over their learning. Affective LLS help them control their attitudes, feelings and motivation in language learning. Social Strategies allow them to communicate with others at discourse level.

These main types of LLS are subdivided into other sub-strategies or strategy groups[1]. Suffice here to illustrate how some of them are put to work. A learner may use a direct

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[1] . For further details see Oxford (1990a, pp. 18-21).

cognitive strategy when he repeats what he has learnt and integrates it into a conversation in the foreign language. He may also, as part of social LLS, ask questions to understand and be understood by others. These questions seek clarification / verification, or correction. In co-operating with others, he is using a sub-type of social LLS where he cooperates with peers in a learner-learner interaction or with better users of the foreign language (other learners, the teacher himself, etc.). Another sub-type of Social Strategies is when the learner develops a cultural understanding of the Other. By this token, he becomes more aware of the culture, feelings and ways of thinking in the foreign language. Put into practice, one may see such social LLS at work under the form of questions like "Excuse me? What did you say your name was? Do you mean that…, Is that what you said… etc. Such questions are used as strategies to clarify/verify the message the learner receives.

Teaching LLS boils down to helping the learners to understand and grasp the language learning process. This is far from reality in our classes of English where mere reproduction of grammar rules and drills take the lead. The learner should be able to grasp the nature of the language he is being taught and how to communicate in the foreign language. He has to know what language learning resources are made available to him and what specific LLS he may use in order to improve his proficiency in English in terms of vocabulary use, knowledge of grammar and skills in English.

To achieve this, the teacher should follow a number of steps. The three-step approach to LLS training is the most popular. It has proven to be useful.

3. Insights and Recommendations

Step 1: The Teaching Environment

Teachers must be aware of their students attitude to learning, the classroom setting, the resources available and of course their own teaching methods, approaches and techniques.

The learners' needs should be known in advance. Training to use LLS requires knowledge from the trainer (the teacher) on the trainee (the learner) in terms of individualities, interests, motivation, attitudes, etc. An observation of the learner's behaviour in class unveils the '*unseen processes*' referred to earlier. The teacher can spot the LLS his learners are using. He needs to think on how to help them for a better use in future classes.

To know the teaching environment, one may ask the learner at the beginning of the course to fill in a form (designed by the teacher or teachers) describing themselves and their preferences for learning. One may as well prepare a mini questionnaire (that may be re-formulated as the course develops) on the activities the learners would be inclined to like most (e.g., games, role-play, discussion and argumentation, for or against such or such a topic or event, etc.) or dislike most (e.g., dictation, memorization, reading aloud, etc.) in class.

Teaching materials are also part of the teaching environment and they contribute a lot in LLS training. If a textbook does not incorporate learning strategies, then neither the learner nor the teacher is encouraged to use LLS. A simple highlighted box on the *type of LLS* the learner is going to use for a text is sufficient enough to increase his motivation for learning. A highlighted box of the *structure*(**s**) he is going to learn in the text does not seem to be that efficient. It rather makes him over concentrate on a rule of usage.

When the teacher concentrates on his teaching materials and realia, he may be surprised at the number of LLS they include but of which he has never been aware. Handouts, tapes, picture-strip stories, etc. include a wealth of LLS and give ideas on how they may be implemented and taught. The teacher may finally look for adequate teaching materials and texts that provide such opportunities to use LLS.

In terms of their own teaching, teachers need to look at and perhaps re-think their own teaching strategies and techniques according to the general classroom atmosphere and classroom reality. They should ask themselves first whether they proceed in various ways so that the learners acquire the language they are modelling or whether they stick to a 'routine' type of teaching. They should also ask themselves whether they allow their learners to approach learning in a variety of ways or whether it is the classical type of defensive learning. Is their LLS teaching inductive or deductive? And which way suits their learners best on the basis of their own reactions and attitudes to learning.

Step 2: Focussing on LLS

Once the teacher has become aware of his teaching environment and classroom reality, the next step is to concentrate on a number of prime LLS that are relevant to his learners, his teaching materials and his own teaching techniques. As teaching is often teacher-centred in our case, one might then use a limited number of tasks to help the learners develop their own LLS and encourage them to have control over language learning through guided activities in class. Self-evaluation sheets can be elaborated and exploited[1] by both the learner and the teacher. Our own experience on the use of Evaluation Sheets in oral expression for instance

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[1] . See attached example of self-evaluation sheet.

indicates that the learners are guided to have control over their language learning difficulties. Whatever the learning task may be (oral expression, written expression, etc.) a focus on LLS will undoubtedly help the learners and offer opportunities for them to accept shared responsibility in their learning.

Step 3: Encouraging Learner's Reflection

In implementing LLS in the classroom, the teacher should encourage the learners' reflective learning. Sometimes, it is useful to recall your own learning strategies and evaluate which ones you acquired and used best to achieve proficiency in English. By asking himself whether the learners have used LLS to perform a task, what is there to improve in terms of LLS in future classes and what can be inferred from the learners' reactions and attitudes towards a specific LLS that the teacher has tried to incorporate (implicitly or explicitly) during his lesson, the teacher helps in fact the learners to develop LLS for the next lesson and encourages them to effective learning. The encouragement takes place both during and after class hours. The learners may keep a journal of what they studied and how they studied it. This will undoubtedly motivate their want for more LLS and desire for control and autonomy of learning.

Conclusion

The above queries and insights are just some reflections on how LLS and competencies may be incorporated in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Algeria. Illustrative examples taken from actual classes, based on LLS and competencies and research-based outcomes of the competencies: Interact Orally in English, Interpret Visual Verbal and Non-verbal texts, Produce Visual Verbal and Non-verbal texts (Spotligh on English 1 & 2, Edition 2003) and

investigation the 'New Generation Textbooks' for English will be taken up in a forthcoming paper.

Prototype of an Evaluation Sheet for an Oral Activity

NAME	GRAM. M	S	VOC.	STRESS	PRONUN.	INTON.	HES	PART.	PROGRESS

Legend: GRAM: Grammar (M= Minor mistakes, S= Serious mistake); Voc.: Vocabulary, Pronun.: Pronunciation; Inton: Intonation, Hes.: Hesitation; Part: Participation. (Other parameters may be included). The column 'Name' refers to peers with same difficulty (Self correction). In each column (Gram., Voc. Stress, etc.) appear(s) the mistake(s) made during a given class session. The name to the classmate who happens to make the same mistake appears under 'Name'. Under Progress, the learner puts a + (if he/she thinks he made some progress) or a **-** (if he/she thinks he did not make any progress) (Self Evaluation).

An illustrative example: Suppose learner A has problems under Voc. with the distinction in meaning between push/pull. Learner B has the same problem. So A and B will have their names on the same column for 'Name' which corresponds to the mistake under one of the parameters above.

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