Parameters for Assessing the Effectiveness of Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The process of second language acquisition relies on the use of different language learning strategies. In order to improve the success of the language learning process, language learners and teachers need to be able to assess the effectiveness of these strategies. This article uses existing literature to identify and explore the three primary parameters that determine the effectiveness of a language learning strategy: efficiency, relevancy, and motivation. The paper also discusses the different personal and individual factors which affect the effectiveness of the different strategies, as well as the synergetic effect between the parameters.

Keywords: second language acquisition, language teaching, language learning strategies, relevancy, motivation.

Introduction

Second language acquisition is a long and intricate process. This process relies on the utilization of language learning strategies, which are defined as operations used by the learner to in order to aid the acquisition, storage, or retrieval of information (Rigney 1978). Numerous strategies are combined and used in order to cover all aspects of the new language: from vocabulary, to grammar, to phonology and more (Ritchie and Bhatia 1999). No single strategy can suffice by itself in order to learn all aspects of a language. Rather, a combination of language learning strategies, used both together as well as separately, is required in order to make the most out of the individual language learning strategies (Gu and Johnson 1996). What this paper proposes is that no single parameter suffices in assessing the effectiveness of language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies are not equally effective, meaning that some strategies will allow the language learner to acquire the new language better and faster than others (Oxford 1989; Gerami and Baighlou 2011; Lavasani and Faryadres 2011). This difference stems both from the inherent qualities of the strategies, as well as from a range of individual characteristics of the learner, such as gender (Oxford and Nyikos 1989) or level of grammatical sensitivity (Skehan 1991). When deciding which strategy to use, it is in the interest of the language leaner to choose the most effective strategy

for learning each aspect. In addition to the inherent benefit of using the most effective strategies possible, choosing the appropriate language learning strategy also prevents one from encountering the undesirable consequences of using ineffective strategies, which slow and hinder the student's progress. This was evident in a study of unsuccessful learners in an intensive English program (IEP), whose rate of progress was slow compared with that of their classmates due to the use of ineffective strategies (Vann and Abraham 1990). In addition to this, using ineffective strategies can create a sense of anxiety which further reduces the ability of the language leaner to properly learn the language, by making the language learning process more difficult (Pintrich and De Groot 1990).

It is clear why gauging the effectiveness of language learning strategies is so important. What this paper seeks to achieve is to outline the parameters by which teachers, students, and autonomous language learners can gauge the effectiveness of the different language learning strategies. Based on an analysis of existing literature on the subject, three primary parameters emerged by which the overall effectiveness of a language learning strategy can be assessed. These parameters are efficiency, relevancy, and motivation, and the remainder of the paper is dedicated to a discussion of each of the parameters, as well as to highlighting their synergetic effects.

Efficiency

Defined as "the production of the desired effects or results with minimum waste of time, effort, or skill" ("Efficiency", n.d.), efficiency is an important parameter to consider when gauging the effectiveness of language learning strategies. The advantage of efficient language learning strategies over inefficient ones is evident in the rate of progress of the language learners, as well as in their success at achieving proficiency (Oxford 1989; Gerami and Baighlou 2011; Lavasani and Faryadres 2011).

A wide range of factors affect the choice of language learning strategies used by learners, and their subsequent degree of success in the language learning process. These factors range from qualities such as gender (Oxford and Nyikos 1989), to personality traits such as extraversion and conscientiousness (Kang 2012), to the learner's current level of proficiency in the language (Vesselinov and Grego 2012), and to inherent aptitudes and abilities, such as associative memory and grammatical sensitivity (Skehan 1991). The influence of this wide range of personal characteristics on the efficiency of language learning strategies means that no single strategy can be perfect for everyone, as each person will find some strategies to be more efficient than others.

Such personalization is harder to accomplish the more rigidly structured the course is, though it can still be accounted for even in that type of setting. This is possible as long as the students have control over the strategies that they can use in order to learn the material, even if the material itself is chosen entirely by the teacher

(O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo and Küpper 1985; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). In addition, some of the personal factors still can be accounted for by teachers even in the structured classroom setting. An example of this is the general level of proficiency of the students, which can be roughly estimated and generalized for all the students in a certain class, based on their grades and how long they have studied the language. Even accounting for this single factor can have a meaningful impact when determining which language learning strategy to use (Vesselinov and Grego 2012).

An interesting thing to note is the advantage of autonomous language learning courses in this case (or any other situations where the learning process is highly individualized). In those circumstances, the learner's traits and qualities can be taken into account to a higher degree when determining which strategy is most efficient for him or her, than in a traditional structured group or classroom setting.

Relevancy

The relevancy of the learning material to the student's goal is another one of the parameters which are crucial to the success of a language learning strategy. It is measured by the congruence between the person's goal in learning the language, and the strategies applied.

Every person has a goal in mind when he or she sets to learn a foreign language, and these goals can vary from person to person. Some, for example, want to achieve full fluency for the intellectual challenge or for academic purposes, while others just want to be able to speak the language when going on vacation. Others may have a more specific interest in mind, such as wanting to be able to understand poetry in the language, or follow recipes for cooking. Thus, relevancy is mostly a matter of prioritization; is the person learning the vocabulary words that they are going to need, or are they wasting their time learning words that they will have little use for (Nation and Kyongho 1995; Nation 2006)? Are the grammar rules that they are learning actually necessary for their ability to speak and write at the desired level, or are they irrelevant (Holec 1981)?

If, for example, a person is learning a language only for the purpose of being conversationally fluent (as opposed to also being able to read and write), then the amount of vocabulary words that they need to learn is lower than if they were seeking to also achieve the capacity to have unassisted comprehension of written texts (Nation 2006). In this case, the language learner achieves diminishing returns from learning additional vocabulary words past a certain point, meaning that they could have spent this time on other aspects of the language, learning things which would have more useful, such as practicing a live conversation with a native speaker (Yasui 2010).

This is also evident in the case of language learners with special interests, such as a specific scientific or academic field, who can benefit more from learning specialized vocabulary than from learning general service vocabulary after a certain point (Nation and Kyongho 1995). Indeed, as far as vocabulary is concerned, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that go beyond the high frequency vocabulary used in academia, have been proven to be of little value for learners with specific purposes (Sutarsyah, Nation and Kennedy 1994).

The relevancy of the language learning strategy and the material that it covers to the learner's goals is an important parameter to consider. While it is possible to make progress using efficient language learning strategies, a language learner who is learning material that is not relevant for them (or that is less relevant than other available material), will take longer to achieve their goals than if they had learned the more relevant material.

Motivation

The language learner's motivation has a significant positive impact on both the learner's rate of progress, as well as on their eventual proficiency in the language (Oxford and Shearin 1994; Dornyei and Ottó 1998; Noels, Pelletier, Clément and Vallerand 2000). Language learning motivation is composed of several aspects, including expectancy of success or failure, interest, perception of rewards, perception of relevance, overt decision to learn, persistent learning behavior, and high involvement (Gardner and Lambert 1972). Each one of these aspects has a positive relationship with the learner's level motivation. Thus, an effective language learning strategy should improve these aspects in order to maximize the student's level of motivation, and consequently increase their success at learning the language.

Presently, motivation is becoming an even more important aspect of language learning due to the increased prevalence of people engaging in autonomous language learning programs (Blake 2006; Blake 2011). In these cases, low motivation rates can lead not only to limited engagement with the material, but also a high rate of attrition among learners who stop learning the language entirely (Reinders and White 2011).

Synergy between Parameters

While the sections above dealt with the each parameter for gauging the effectiveness of language learning strategies, this section suggests that there is a meaningful synergy, or interaction, between the parameters. This is evident in that improvement of one parameter can have a positive impact on another. The learner's level of motivation, for example, is increased by the use of language learning strategies where the outcome of studying is at least equal to the amount of effort that the learner has put into studying (Oxford and Ehrman 1995). This answers the definition of efficiency,

indicating that using efficient language learning strategies can increase the motivation of the language learner to learn, which is an added benefit to using efficient language learning strategies.

Similarly, since perception of relevance is one of the key factors influencing the learner's motivation to learn the language (Gardner and Lambert 1972), using language learning strategies which focus on teaching relevant material also has the added benefit of increasing motivation. These examples of synergy between the parameters illustrate the complexity of language learning strategies, and show the importance of considering all of the parameters when gauging the effectiveness of a language learning strategy.

Further directions for research

This paper has explicated the importance of efficiency, relevancy, and motivation: the main parameters which are relevant when assessing the effectiveness of language learning strategies. In addition to accounting for these parameters in research as well as in practice, future studies should also seek to explore the interaction between the parameters, as studying this interaction can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of what facilitates second language acquisition. One possible research topic is the comparison between the degrees of significance of the different parameters when contrasted with each other. For example, when choosing one of two strategies, where one offers a higher level of efficiency and the other is more motivating to the learner, which is the better strategy to use? That is, to what extent is one of the parameters more important when it comes to determining the overall effectiveness of the strategy? There are obviously many more facets to the relationship between the different parameters; this example is merely intended as an illustration of one possible strand of research and its practical implications.

Conclusion

Effective language learning strategies allow the learner to acquire a second language better than ineffective ones. This paper suggests that when approaching the task of assessing the effectiveness of a language learning strategy, one needs to consider three primary parameters: efficiency, relevancy, and motivation. Since these parameters are influenced by a variety of personal factors, the assessment process is individualized; a strategy that works best for one person does not necessarily work as well for another person. In fact, the same strategy can have varying degrees of effectiveness for the same person at different stages of the learning process. Another complication arises from the synergy between the different parameters; since none of the parameters is insulated from the others, a change in one parameter can lead to changes in the other parameters too. Overall, the more these factors are taken into account, the more accurate the assessment process.

In essence, these parameters are meant to serve as guidelines for researchers, language learners, and language instructors. By accounting for them, these practitioners can successfully gauge the effectiveness of different language learning strategies and determine the most effective ones for learning each aspect of the language. This improved understanding of language learning strategies increases the success of the language learning process by increasing the level of proficiency, reducing the time required to achieve proficiency, making the material more relevant to the learner's goals, and by increasing the learner's motivation to learn, which makes the process more enjoyable to participate in, and lowers the attrition rates among learners.

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