



The learning strategy prism: Perspectives of learning strategy experts



Rebecca L. Oxford^{a,*}, Joan Rubin^b, Anna Uhl Chamot^c, Karen Schramm^d,
Roberta Lavine^e, Pamela Gunning^f, Carisma Nel^g

^a Oxford Associates, Huntsville, AL, USA

^b Joan Rubin Associates, Wheaton, MD, USA

^c The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

^d University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

^e University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

^f McGill University, Montréal, Canada

^g North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes six short narratives written by language learning strategy experts from Germany, South Africa, Canada, and the United States. The six essays, included in full here, form a prism, through which a ray of light is refracted into seven diverse colors, i.e., specific themes arising from the analysis. These themes range from the strategy-related needs of language learners and to the life changes and emotions of researchers and teachers. The overarching theme is the diversity of complementary perspectives on language learning strategies. This article helps readers explore the strategy prism and understand the significance of language learning strategies.

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1. Introduction

Language learning strategies are generally defined as the learner's consciously chosen tools for active, self-regulated improvement of language learning (Griffiths, 2008b, 2013; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011b). This article presents and analyzes strategy-related narratives from six experts, Joan Rubin, Anna Chamot, Karen Schramm, Roberta Lavine, Pamela Gunning, and Carisma Nel, who represent four countries (the United States, Germany, Canada, and South Africa) and three continents. The essays were elicited using the stimulus questions described in the introductory article ("The Twenty-First Century Landscape of Language Learning Strategies"), and they form a metaphorical "prism," i.e., a transparent but solid body with many nonparallel facets. (For further discussion of the use of metaphor in relation to learning strategies, see the immediately previous "Metaphor" article.) White light enters the prism as a mixture of contrasting frequencies that bend differently, dispersing the light into a full spectrum of colors. The colors, when examined, reveal seven cross-cutting themes in the experts' essays. The colorful, prismatic themes offer enlightenment from the experts and raise helpful challenges for the learning strategy field.

This section has introduced the concept of the strategy prism, while the next section is the review of relevant literature. The third section presents the six complete stories before analysis. A detailed thematic analysis in the fourth section reveals seven refracted colors, i.e., emergent themes. The conclusion builds on the thematic analysis.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: rebeccaoxford@gmail.com (R.L. Oxford).

2. Research review

This section reviews varied approaches to language learning strategies. Chronicled by [Oxford and Cohen \(1992\)](#), [McDonough \(1999\)](#), and [Cohen and Macaro \(2007\)](#), some definitional and theoretical conflicts exist. See also “The Twenty-First Century Landscape of Language Learning Strategies” in this special issue for more about such controversies. However, diverse views can also be helpful if they are discussed in a spirit of collaborative inquiry ([Oxford & Schramm, 2007](#)).

2.1. Views from psychology and applied linguistics

Views from psychology and applied linguistics include the good language learner, autonomy and self-regulation, focus on cognitive and metacognitive strategies, strategies for social and affective aspects of language learning, variables related to language learning strategies, the distinction between language use and language learning, strategy assistance (including but not limited to strategy instruction), and strategy assessment.

2.1.1. The good language learner

The initial spark for the language learning strategy field comes from [Rubin’s \(1975\)](#) concept of the good language learner (see also [Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978](#); [Naiman, Fröhlich, & Todesco, 1975](#); [Reiss, 1983, 1985](#); [Stern, 1975](#)), which contributes to an understanding of how learners can direct their own learning. [Griffiths \(2008b\)](#) updates the concept of the good language learner in a theoretical sense by showing that there are many different types of good language learners. In a practical sense, her book demonstrates how language learners can reach success in a variety of language skill areas.

2.1.2. Autonomy and self-regulation

Applied linguists describe learner autonomy in diverse ways: as the learner’s psychological attitude of complete responsibility, largely in self-access centers ([Holec, 1980, 1981](#)); the capacity and willingness to take responsibility for one’s language learning, as well as actions (what we would call learning strategies) in that direction ([Allwright, 1990](#)); and the capacity for critically reflecting, making decisions, and taking independent action ([Little, 1991](#)). [Oxford \(2011a\)](#) argues that many theories of language learner autonomy insufficiently deal with non-Western “social autonomies” and the strategies arising from them (see also [Griffiths, Oxford, Kawai, Kawai et al., “Focus on Context: Narratives from East Asia,” 2014](#)).

Educational psychologists emphasize the identification and teaching of learning strategies for self-regulation. For example, [Schunk and Ertmer \(2000\)](#) describe self-regulatory strategies as including setting goals; paying attention; organizing, coding, and rehearsing information; establishing a productive setting; using resources effectively; managing time; monitoring performance; seeking help; and managing emotional aspects, such as motivation, emotions, and attitude. [Rubin \(2001\)](#) views learning strategies as part of learner self-management, which also involves the learner’s beliefs and analysis of the learning task.

2.1.3. Focus on cognitive and metacognitive strategies

Influenced by cognitive psychologist [John Anderson \(1983, 1985\)](#), [O’Malley and Chamot \(1990\)](#) focus primarily on cognitive strategies for processing information and developing schemata (mental frameworks) and on metacognitive strategies, such as planning and evaluating, for executive management of language learning. The Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, or CALLA, expands on the early work by Chamot and O’Malley and integrates strategy instruction into language learning. This approach has been successful in many studies (see [Chamot, 2004, 2005b, 2007, 2009](#)).

2.1.4. Strategies for social and affective aspects of language learning

In addition to the crucial cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning strategies (see [Griffiths & Oxford, “The Twenty-First Century Landscape of Language Learning Strategies”](#) introducing this special issue), [Bialystok \(1981\)](#) reports that functional practice strategies for social interaction remain useful at all language proficiency levels. Her research also shows that formal, grammar-based practice strategies are less effective as students advance in proficiency. [Oxford \(1990\)](#) discusses many social strategies for language learning. [Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre \(2003\)](#) show that learners who are willing to communicate seek out and exploit communication opportunities, thus using social strategies. In “Social Strategy Use and Language Learning Contexts: A Case Study of Malayalee Undergraduate Students in India” ([2014](#)), [Harish](#) highlights the importance of social strategies and indicates that many factors help determine whether such strategies are used or not.

Psychologists ([Dansereau, 1985](#); [McCombs, 1988](#); [McCombs & Whisler, 1989](#); [Oxford, 1990, 2011b](#)) delineate the importance of affective learning strategies for self-control of emotion and motivation, although very advanced learners might have less need for affective strategies ([Leaver, 2003a](#)). [Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, and Deci \(2004\)](#) expand a motivational self-determination model ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)) to include learning strategies. Compared to extrinsic motivation, i.e., the desire to learn the target language for reasons separable from the learning process itself (e.g., for a practical reward or for coming closer to the target culture), intrinsic motivation – the desire to learn the language as an end in itself because of enjoyment, challenge, and interest – relates to greater use of deep processing strategies ([Vansteenkiste et al., 2004](#)), as well as a wider range of strategies, more creativity, and stronger information retention ([Ushioda, 2008](#)).

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