Fluctuation in the functions of language learner strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the assumption that language learner strategies are monolithic with regard to their function (i.e. metacognitive, cognitive, social, or affective). Three ESL and three EFL Chinese-speaking university students individually performed an English vocabulary task (i.e. making fine-tuned semantic distinctions) to explore the extent that the use of a given strategy involves more than one function. Introspective and retrospective verbal report data and a measure of vocabulary depth were obtained from the students. The results showed fluctuation in strategy functions when strategies were used either alone, in sequence, or in pairs or clusters. In addition, there was not only one-way, linear progression from one function to another, but also two-way micro-fluctuation both for the same strategy and across strategies.

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1. Introduction

For more than four decades, the field of language learner strategies (LLS) has received considerable attention in the research literature (e.g. Cohen & Griffiths, 2015; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Oxford, 2017). This fascination with strategies is undoubtedly predicated on the notion that language learners can achieve greater success in their language learning and use if they are more strategic in their efforts. Based on an extensive survey of the LLS Auauliterature, Oxford arrived at a definition of strategies as contextually-specific thoughts and actions that can be both mental and physical. They are combinable in clusters or chains and have cognitive, emotional, and social roles. In addition, their use in self-regulation is complex in nature (Oxford, 2017: 48).

LLS have been categorized in various ways, such as in terms of language learning vs. language use; in terms of the skill area that they deal with (i.e. the receptive or the productive skills); and in terms of age, proficiency level, gender, and specific language or culture. However, the most popular way to classify strategies has been according to their *function* (i.e. purpose or role) in a specific situation (Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 2017). In fact, it has been popular over the years to label strategies according two their function, as *metacognitive* (e.g. planning how to use a strategy, monitoring how it is going, or evaluating how it went), *cognitive* (e.g. dealing with the language material mentally), *social* (e.g. engaging in interaction with others), and *affective* (e.g. channelling positive or negative reactions into strategic action).

What typifies this manner of labeling is that it has been done in a relatively monolithic way, with the tacit understanding that however else a strategy may be classified, it possesses just one function. So, for example, the strategy of "guessing a word from context" would be labeled *metacognitive* if the learners were ostensibly focusing on the planning side and *cognitive* in nature if the learners were ostensibly using cognition in looking for clues in the specific context. This approach has yielded

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huge amounts of data from thousands of studies worldwide whereby learners have self-reported their use of relative percentages of metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies, in a rather immutable fashion. The question that we would ask is whether this monolithic approach is, at least to some extent, producing data that do not accurately represent the actual functions that given strategies or combinations of strategies play in the completion of a given language task.

This paper takes the stand that the functions of any given strategy are more "fluid" in nature. A strategy may certainly entail the activation of a single function, such as a metacognitive one if its function is simply to plan, monitor, or evaluate; or a cognitive one if it is exclusively focused on the cognitive processing of language forms. However, it would appear that there are moments (i.e. seconds or minutes) where more than one function might be activated when a given strategy such as "requesting directions from a stranger on the street" is used:

- the metacognitive function during the moment that learners are monitoring the appropriateness in making a request to a stranger;
- the cognitive function a moment later when learners are selecting the actual language term to use in referring to this person (e.g. "sir" or "you"), as well as the appropriate tone of voice, facial expressions, or gestures;
- the social function while learners are actually engaged in the interaction;
- the affective function if a moment of frustration while using the strategy motivates them to, say, return to the metacognitive function for more planning in the use of this same strategy.

All of these functions may take place within just a minute or two and would, in our view, involve the shifting of functions for the same strategy, namely, "requesting directions from a stranger on the street".

This paper reports on a study which performed a micro-analysis to investigate the extent to which the fluidity-of-function approach is plausible, given our misgivings as to whether the prevailing form of strategy labelling provides an accurate description of strategic behavior. The study was limited in nature expressly for the purpose of this micro-analysis and looked at the performance of a small group of Chinese learners of English on a vocabulary task.

2. Review of the literature

In the early development of the LLS field, researchers like O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) classified language learner strategies into essentially the four main categories defined above — metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective. Oxford's *Strategy Inventory of Language Learning* (SILL), for example, was an outgrowth of research involving the systematized linking of strategies with these strategy categories in strategy lists and questionnaires.

For some years, LLS researchers have then relied on these function labels as fully representing the given strategy in order to make statements about higher- and lower-performing students. Numerous studies have appeared reporting their findings by labelling strategies according to these four functions (see, for example, Plonsky's 2011's meta-analysis). While as indicated above other systems of classification have been utilized for describing strategies, the focus of this study is just on the labeling of strategy functions.

While the SILL moved the LLS field along dramatically, Oxford cautioned even in her early work about the potential confusion of strategy types and how conflicts in categorization could arise. She noted that the complexity of language learning might render it impossible to classify a given strategy (e.g. "planning") as though it fit into one and only one functional slot — e.g. metacognitive (Oxford, 1990: 17). In fact, in the early 2000s she stopped using the SILL and encouraged others to modify it to fit their cultures and situations (Personal communication, September 28, 2016). She suggested using general strategy measures like the SILL only when using other strategy measures and interpreting the results with care given that the functions which strategies serve are more nuanced and dynamic than their categories imply. She has elaborated on this view over the years, and in her latest volume (Oxford, 2017), she takes an exhaustive look at LLSs. Cohen also questioned the workings of strategies and concluded that it was not possible to easily demarcate cognitive and metacognitive roles when learners were using a strategy for a complex task (Cohen, 2011).

In the early 2000s, several scholars suggested means for adding rigor to strategy classifications. One such effort by Gu (2004, republished in 2012) problematized a series of issues regarding the classification of strategies for research and for teacher development. Gu suggested that as a concept the notion of *strategy* involved a dynamic process: selective attention, analysis of the task, choice of decisions, the execution of a plan, monitoring progress and modifying the plan, and evaluating the results. His analysis of the central dimensions of a strategy was aimed at identifying possible problems in learners' strategic behaviors and at helping the learners to modify their strategy choices if necessary. Macaro (2006) proposed a revised theoretical framework, identifying four features essential in describing strategies: the location of strategies in working memory; their size, abstractness, and relationship to other strategies; the explicit learning goals; and the learning tasks.

Dörnyei, a critic of LLS who had gone so far as to suggest that strategies did not exist (2005), recently wrote that in the new individual differences landscape, self-regulation and LLS could both be viewed as significant players (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). He considered his change of opinion a testament to the vitality and enduring appeal of LLS in the eyes of scholars, despite ambiguities associated with efforts to define them.

Ironically, while some experts may be calling for analyzing the complexity involved in strategy use (see, for example, Oxford, 2017, Chapter 3), researchers and practitioners have gravitated towards categorizations that treat strategies as