The Role of Strategies in the Learning Trajectory of Spanish as Foreign Language in India

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Abstract – The language learning strategies has emerged as a new field of research in the language pedagogy. In the last forty years there have been lot of debate over defining, classifying and developing a theoretical framework for the language learning strategies (LLS). This also seems true because there has been a paradigm shift in the role of the learners who are now seen as active collaborators in the knowledge creation. In the present paper, the researcher would like to investigate the role of these LLS in learning Spanish as foreign language in India. The researcher would provide a initial description of definitions, concept development and its historical trajectory. The paper will also talk about the difference and similarities between communication strategies and learning strategies. The seminal work of Rubin started a new debate in this field of LLS and the research in this field has attracted the attention of many well researchers such as Ellis and Oxford. Other pioneering researchers who have contributed to this field are O'Malley and Chamat, Nunan and Cohen. The paper will also throw light on some of the important language learning strategies employed by the Indian students and will examine critically a typical Indian classroom and also gives example of some of his research findings related to learning Spanish as foreign language in Indian universities.

Keywords: Collaborators, Foreign Language Learning, Learning Trajectory, Learning Strategies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Second or foreign language learning is different from the first language learning because of the presence of a conscious element in the former. According to Oxford (1990), L2 learning is in a way similar to that of the first; the only difference is that the latter is acquired unconsciously while the former needs conscious efforts by the learner. There has been a paradigm shift in the role of the learners who are now seen as active collaborators in the knowledge creation. There are a number of factors which influence the learner and their learning process. One of the key concept related to the learning process is the language learning strategies (LLS) employed by the students in their learning process. In the present paper, the researcher has tried to investigate the role of the LLS in learning Spanish as foreign language in India. Apart from providing a complete description of definitions, concept development, historical review, analysis of LLS, the paper will also examine critically a typical Indian classroom and also gives example of some of his research findings related to learning Spanish as foreign language in Indian universities.

2. DEFINITION

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the strategy is defined as "a detailed plan to achieve success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry or sport, or the ability to plan for such situations". Using the same definition in the case of language learning, it can be said that strategies are plans to achieve success in the learning process. The strategies which the students use while processing new information and performing tasks have been identified and described by researchers in several ways. For instance Rubin (1975) referred to strategies as "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". For Oxford R. (1990), the "learning strategies are steps taken by the students to enhance their own learning". Anna Uhl Chamot (2004) underlines that "learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal. Strategic learners have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and learning approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet both the task demands and their own learning strengths". According to Wenden and Rubin

(1987), the learning strategies can be defined as steps or plans employed by the students "to facilitate obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information". From the psychological perspectives, Oxford points out that second or foreign language learning strategies can be defined as "an action plan, behaviour, step, or technique that a student uses, with a certain degree of awareness, to improve their progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language". She adds that such strategies can facilitate "the internalization, storage, recovery and use of the new language and are tools for greater student autonomy".

It is clear that all language learners use learning strategies consciously or unconsciously when processing new idea and carrying out tasks in the language classroom. The classroom provides surroundings in which students are expected to get new information and deal with difficult tasks and it is natural to see their attempts to find the quickest means to do them comfortably. These attempts and eagerness to do and complete the tasks given by the teacher in the classroom are referred to as strategies.

Another very important aspect of the strategies is their conscious dimension. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) says that if a strategy is employ so frequently that it becomes automatic and unconscious, and then it is no longer a strategy, but should be referred to as a process, procedure or procedural skill. Therefore consciousness is a fundamental element in the use of foreign language learning strategies. Cohen (1998) also argues that the element of conscious choice is important for the concept of language learning strategy because "the element of conscience is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic".

3. FIRST USE OF THIS TERM

The first use of this phenomenon in the context of language learning appeared in the fundamental work of J. Rubin (1975) with the title "*What the" Good Language Learner "Can Teach Us*". This article is considered a work of great influence in the field of research related to language learning strategies. In this seminal article, the individual variation of learning and differential success among students was questioned. In this paper, the author also examined in detail the strategies employed by successful language learners and how these learning strategies can be taught to less successful students. Rubin gave a series of activities carried out by successful language students such as practice, memorization, guessing etc.

4. CLASSIFICATION

One of the most important challenges in the field of language learning strategies is their taxonomies. Researchers always face problem of classifying and

categorizing the strategies employed by language students due to several reasons. Some of them are:

► Non-existence of a theoretical framework of classification

► Unobservable strategies

► The individual difference in learning

► The different individual variables such as age, gender, nationalities etc.

► Environmental factors

According to Hsiao & Oxford (2002), despite previous research on the existence and application of learning strategies, "exactly how many strategies are available to students in second or foreign language learning and how these strategies should be classified is open to debate." However, most of these attempts to classify language learning strategies more or less reflect the same categorizations of language learning strategies without radical changes.

Oxford divides LLS into two main classes, direct and indirect, which are subdivided into 6 groups. Direct strategies are those that "require mental processing of language" and, therefore, "directly involve the target language" (Oxford, 1990, p.37). In this category she places three subtypes which are memory, cognitive and compensatory strategies. Indirect strategies are called "indirect" because they support and manage language learning without (in many cases) directly involving the target language". In this category she includes, metacognitive, affective ad social strategies.

5. SPANISH CLASSROOMS IN INDIA

In a typical Indian classroom, each student is a distinct individual with their own learning pace and with different skills. These students have different levels or degrees of mastery of the language, which is a fundamental problem for FL teachers. The students come to a language classroom in India from very different cultural areas, with different education systems and a variety of native languages. As the learners live in the contrast between their L1, L2 and L3 and with the multilingual context in which he/she grows, unconsciously he/she develops an aptitude which can be referred as translation competence. In situations like this, in most cases, the source language is English, which plays the role of intermediary due to globalization. Given this class type, a teacher encounters many difficulties in the classroom. Some of them are heterogeneity of levels, difficulty in controlling all the students, lack of group dynamics, difficulty managing time with the group, lack of opportunities for intervention,

lack of time to correct written work by students, shortage of attendance etc.

Teachers always face certain problems or difficulties in the Spanish classrooms in India due to its heterogeneity nature. The teacher has to adopt appropriate strategies to create a synthesis of the two cultures, Indian and Spanish, to achieve a harmonious understanding and mutual respect. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) recognizes the reorientation of learners' perceptions and their learning and emphasizes creating an inclusive classroom environment for all students. It gives great importance to student commitment to the construction of knowledge and promotion of creativity. Therefore in the Indian context, it is necessary for teachers to put more emphasis on the active participation of students in the process of knowledge construction and their own role as a facilitator of knowledge construction.

Diversity in Indian classrooms is both an opportunity and a challenge. The classrooms are enriched with cultural, linguistic, ethnic and sociocultural diversity. Therefore teachers must find ways to respect the diversity of their students and have to make an effort so that students learn the acceptance and importance of diversity.

6. SOME FINDINGS IN INDIAN CLASSROOM

The researcher carried out research using questionnaire and open ended questions in two universities where Spanish is taught as full time course. Based on the answers provided by the participants of the survey, the researcher would like to share some of his research findings.

1) All students, to a greater or lesser extent, use language learning strategies.

2) The strategies (as informed in survey) mostly used by the participants are social strategies.

3) The least used strategies by the whole group are memory strategies.

4) High-level students use strategies more frequently than low-level students. There is a difference in the use of strategies according to the student's academic year. It means that the repertoire of strategies used by students increases with the level of Spanish.

5) There is no significant difference in the use of learning strategies in terms of gender.

6) Memory strategies, contrary to popular belief, are used by the students the least.

7) After analyzing the qualitative questionnaire, it was perceived that most of the students lack knowledge about how the strategies work and how to use them. Due to the lack of strategic training, the participants responded with some very generic tactics such as practising with natives and peers, watching movies, practising translations, using the text to improve oral skills, etc.

8) For most of the participants, grammar is the most problematic amongst all aspects of language. That's why most of the participants reported practising grammar exercises.

9) Except for one strategy that is to think in Spanish, they did not present another metacognitive strategy with high usage in their answers. This means that there is a need to train students in the appropriate use of strategies. Thinking in Spanish is a metacognitive and helps in retaining information in short-term memory and serves to develop concepts in long-term memory.

Examples of learning strategies for Indian students (top 15 strategies with high average use as informed by the students)

Learning strategies	Type	Av.	SD
I pay attention when someone is speaking Spanish.	Metacognitive	4.16	0.8
I think about my progress in learning Spanish.	Metacognitive	3.95	1.0
If I can't think of a Spanish word, I use a word or phrase that means the same.	Compensation	3.92	1.2
I try to learn about the culture of Spanish speakers.	Social	3.82	1.2
I try to find out how to be a better learner of Spanish.	Metacognitive	3.79	1.2
I ask questions in Spanish.	Social	3.79	1.0
I notice my Spanish mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	Metacognitive	3.74	1.0
If I don't understand something in Spanish, I ask to slow down or say it again.	Social	3.73	1.1
I encourage myself to speak Spanish even when I am afraid of a mistake.	Affective	3.69	1.2
To understand unfamiliar Spanish words, I make guesses.	Compensation	3.65	1.2
I first skim in a Spanish passage then go back and read carefully.	Cognitive	3.60	1.2
I look for words in my own lang that are similar to new words in Spanish.	Cognitive	3.56	1.2
I look for people I can talk to in Spanish.	Metacognitive	3.56	1.2
I ask Spanish speakers to correct me when I talk.	Social	3.56	1.3
I practice the sounds of Spanish.	Cognitive	3.53	1.1

From the above table, it can be seen that among the different categories of strategies with high average use, metacognitive strategies are the most used. In this list of 15 strategies, 5 strategies belong to the metacognitive group followed by 4 of the social group and 3 of cognitive. In the list, there are also 2 of the category of compensation and 1 of affective.

Interestingly, there is no memory strategy found in this table. This list reflects that the Indian students, contrary to popular belief, use their own internal skills to process and guide the learning process. The first strategy, although somewhat ambiguous, refers to the fact that students pay most attention when speaking Spanish and the second one refers to the internal processing of progress while

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learning. These internal factors, as informed by the students, play an important role in the learning cycle. The third strategy is a very popular compensation strategy where students use the synonym to say the word. The next strategy is about learning the culture of Spanish speakers. The students reported using this social strategy as a means of learning the language. The next one is a metacognitive strategy which is about trying to discover how to learn Spanish better. It is very natural to see students adopting different steps and ways to perform a language task and to make it easier. Another metacognitive strategy is to notice errors in Spanish and then use that information to improve. The three cognitive strategies in this table are skimming, search for similar words in their language and practice the sounds of Spanish. The only affective strategy in this list is to encourage speaking Spanish, even when one is afraid of making error. Another compensation strategy in the list is to guess. To understand the unknown words in Spanish, guessing is a very popular strategy. Sometimes teachers also stress the importance of this strategy and ask students to guess the meaning of a word or an expression in a given context.

7.   SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

•   Some participants answered about the use of modern technology in the classroom. ICT and its use increases and facilitates the learning process in a very significant way. Technology can also help to increase the repertoire of strategies that students already have.

•   Two strategies that were reported to be used by almost the majority of the students, belonged to the category of the visual (cognitive) and the social (conversing with others).

•   Although they did not report many other strategies, the responses provided by the participants indicate that they are open to employing strategies in their learning process. The researcher, in his personal experience of teaching Spanish as a foreign language in India, has observed that students practice different types of different types of strategies to facilitate learning, retain information in their memory, practice the sounds of language etc.

•   Another aspect that is important is the training of strategies. It has to assimilate the strategic instruction in the curriculum so that students take advantage of the rich repertoire of available strategies.

•   One has to consider the individual variation of processing the new information obtained in the language classroom. All students are not similar and many of them do not know how to activate mental functions called learning strategies and as a consequence they cannot learn in a better way, resulting in minimal learning. That is why it is proposed that the introduction and training of the strategies in the FL class should be carried out in order to have the most fruitful and effective result.

•   The students of this century are equipped with a lot of information and with the arrival of new technology; they are already well informed about various aspects of the language. They need a guide, a facilitator, a mentor who can help them acquire the various skills in a better way. In this sense, strategies can play an important role and act as a tool to facilitate the learning process of Spanish language in the Indian context.

•   Modern language learning in the 21st century should allow and educate students in such a way that they develop autonomous thinking and work as a responsible social agent.

8.   CONCLUSION

To conclude, I just want to refer to the fact that not only are learning strategies important but also to consider the teaching strategies adopted by teachers. The teacher always faces the challenge of taking students from point A - which is what they currently know - to point B - which is the learning objective of any course. In many cases, the distance between the two points is enormous and the path is not obvious. The transportation of students between these points encompasses many processes of both teaching and learning. Both students and teachers use different steps and procedures that can be referred to as strategies to reach point B from point A. These learning and teaching strategies are geared towards facilitating the learning process, encouraging students and stimulating them as active protagonists of their learning process. Unfortunately the teacher in the Indian classrooms, mostly in semi urban and rural areas, still follows the only authority in the class and the students do not get the most prominence in the teaching plan. In general, the mentality of teachers is governed by the philosophy of obedience of students. They do not want to stop being the centre of the class and they always exercise control over the teaching process. This role of the teacher has to do with the tradition and culture of the country and it is very difficult to break this rigid custom and practice. In this type of situation, it is even more important to consider the philosophy of knowledge construction with the active participation of students and to reflect on a dialogical model between the two protagonists. In this sense, the strategies can provide an important

tool which the students can employ for facilitating their learning process.

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