Strategy or self-regulation?

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Abstract: My aim is to draw attention to the importance of operating an effective self-management strategy in language learning. Learners'conception about language competence, their self-monitoring and self-evaluating practices reveal that they are active participants of the learning process, emotionally involved in their learning and employ metacognitive, affective and social strategies to lower anxiety and raise self-esteem.

I. Introduction

The feedback that learners get from there social environment strongly influences their attitude to language and determine the ways they evaluate their knowledge. Drawing on empirical data I illuminate that learners constantly redefine their roles in the learning process and are determined to regulate themselves to the given situation in order to cope with communicational challenges. Positive statements, motivation and reinforcement facilitate language learning and make the whole process a viable endeavour.

II. The aim of the study

I analyse a sample set of material based on my collection of metalinguistic comments of language learners' to reveal their strategic behaviour. I asked my respondents to report and reflect on their own learning processes retrospectively. My respondents are language learners at different levels of second language (L2) proficiency between the ages of eleven and thirty eight.

III. Defining the term 'strategy'

There are different taxonomies to classify and identify communication and learning strategies used by language learners. Faerch and Kasper (1983) identify the term *strategy* with a systematic technique used by L2 learners to cope with communication difficulties in an imperfectly known second language. They claim that language learners have basically two approaches to overcome a problem. One approach is when they try to escape and avoid a linguistic obstacle or challenge, and operate a type of avoidance strategies. A typical type of avoidance strategy is when the learner reduces his communicative goal to avoid a problem, or simply abandons the topic. The other approach is when they operate achievement strategies. It refers to resourceful behaviour when language learners try to conquer and control the problem instead of fleeing from it. The authors above consider the element of choice as central in strategic behavior.

Oxford (1990), Bialystok (1991), Cohen (1998) and Dörnyei (2005) identify the construct in terms of intentionality. Bialystok (1991) uses the term *control of the language learning process*, and *conscious analysis of language knowledge* to refer to strategic behaviour. In her conceptualization, a manifestation of strategic behaviour is when the learner is able to turn selective attention towards a linguistic phenomenon. Bialystok suggests, it is intentionality that makes the learning process an effortful activity, therefore intentionality is a prerequisite of strategic language use. Consequently, more directed attention facilitates more strategic approach to linguistic challenges.

Dörnyei (2005) recommends using *self-regulation* instead of *strategy* as it better describes the dynamic nature of communication and that of the learning process. In line with Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998) he underscores that self-regulation is an inevitable element of strategic learning and communication. Dörnyei makes an important point that the ultimate outcome of language learning depends on the learner's self-regulation, which refers to their ability to participate as responsible actors in the learning process. According to his conceptualization strategic behaviour is an effortful, proactive and goal-oriented process, where language users constantly regulate themselves and adapt to the given situation.

IV. Discussion

The retrospective interviews I conducted with language learners give evidence that they operate *affective, metacognitive* and *social strategies* in their language learning process. *Affective, metacognitive* and *social strategies* represent a subset of *indirect achievement language learning and language use strategies* in Oxford's (1990) and Cohen's (1998) taxonomies. These strategies are employed to monitor and evaluate one's learning process, as well as to regulate and gain control over emotions, attitudes and motivation about learning (Oxford, 1990, p.135). The samples illuminate how language learners seek and find opportunities to speak about their concerns regarding L2 learning, and how they get encouragement and reward from their social environment.

Excerpt 1.

'Once I had a business negotiation with Americans. They were fascinated by my sophisticated English and gave voice to their satisfaction publicly. Due to my good language competence the company where I work often sends me to international negotiations, conferences and fairs. My present employer told me that they were satisfied with my professional background and career history, but it was my English proficiency that justified me for my present position. This reward gave me personal satisfaction and raised my self-esteem, and was one of the best motivators in using English. I can say

that my good command of English has strenghtened my position in the circle of business partners, opened up new opportunities in my career and facilitated my upward movement. Now that I am a higher-level manager at a multinational company I often tell my story to my associates in order to persuade them to learn foreign languages. I know from experience that language knowledge is an invaluable resource, an intellectual asset, which is worth investing time, money and energy in it. '

/Csaba (36), a high-level manager at a multinational company/

This learner's comment shows how a person can wield power and strenghten his status in the corporate hierarchy and within a community due to high language proficiency. The manager bases his statements on personal experience. The fact that other people, especially native Americans acknowledge his knowledge gives him motivation and encouragement. He says that his environment's positive feedback has raised his self-esteem and opened up new work opportunities. Based on his experience of success he has developed a positive attachment to English. Pavlenko (2006) emphasizes that learners' attitude to their second language is influenced by their experiences with that language. Hamers (2004) in her 'feedback mechanism' underlines that the feedback language learners and users get from their social environment regarding their language performance will ultimately determine their language development. Hamers (2004) introduces the term 'feedback mechanism' in her sociocognitive model of bilingualism to describe the dynamic character of interpersonal interactions, and to emphasize that the environment (physical and social) and the individual level constantly interact.

The language user above has positive experiences and attributes his considerable successes to his proficient English knowledge. He raises awareness that langauge knowledge is a symbolic capital, something that is worth doing. It pays back, as his personal career shows. He encourages his colleagues to learn languages and to find opportunities of self-encouragement and emphasizes that positive feedback and reward are the best motivators in language learning.

Excerpt 2.

'I would have never thought that making a presentation in English could have such a positive effect on my language learning. Speaking in public was a nightmare for me and I couldn't sleep over it. It was quite a communicational challenge: you are on the stage and everybody stares at you. And what is even more frightening is that, at the same time, you have to manage all those IT technological devices: the projector, the mice, your behaviour, movements, gestures. What happened to me is: I had to control so many things at a time that I simply forgot about monitoring my grammar. There were a lot of mistakes, but the other students told me they understood what I said. What's more I got a five for my presentation. It is strange but making a presentation was an ice-breaker. Until that event I was sure that I would never be able to speak English in public. The audience's positive reaction and the teacher's reward made me fel happy and satisfied. '

/Zoltán (24), a second-year university student /

The respondent reports on a past personal experience of overcoming a threatening thing, a communicational challenge, giving a presentation. Speaking English in public is one of the most frequently mentioned reasons for inhibitions. There is nothing wrong with inhibitions if we are able to handle them and can cope with them. The problem is that many speakers tend to consider them as something beyond their control, so they do not take the courage of taking the risk of testing themselves in real situations. The speaker above is a real risk-taker. He takes responsibility for his own learning and conveys the message that we have to take actions in our own hands and should be resourceful participants of the learning process.

Excerpt 3.

'My teacher asks us to speak English with her outside the classroom. I avoid meeting her. I am afraid of making too many mistakes. What if she lowers my mark just because she gets angry with my mistakes. It is just too risky to chat in English with her. I know it is a chance to practise but still I don't dare to go up to her. Who knows my fear might disappear, I should give it a try. '

/Tamás (22), a third-year college student/

The report reveals a typical dilemma that language learners have. As a teacher I know that language inhibitions greatly influence one's willingness to use a language in on-line authentic speech. Fear over making errors is considered to be the biggest obstacle learners have to overcome. The comment shows that the learner above is ready to take responsibility for his own learning, and that he is trying to consciously control the process. It is even more promising that he realizes his problem and gives voice to it. Conducting a loose conversation with the teacher or other authorities of knowledge seems to be a good opportunity to practise the language, Tamás knows it, but it also increases his fear and raises the question: What will the teacher think about his knowledge? His concern shows a typical view, a misconception learners exhibit. Some learners have the false impression that the primary requirement of foreign language use is well-formedness and correctness. They are too extensively focused on grammar. Students in the institutional framework learn for marks and language examinations, they represent an excessive grade and result-or product-oriented view. They tend to overrate the importance of grammar and the structural aspect of language. They are primarily interested in the result of learning, actually they learn for paper, that is for language certificates. At the same time, they forget to devote enough attention to the learning process itself. To get a passing mark in an English course or in a langauge exam is a very reasonable goal in language learning but language learners must be aware of the fact that the ultimate outcome of their learning depends on their proactive and resourceful, tactful participation. The importance of defining their own role and responsibilty is something that language teachers have to repeatedly call their attention to. Scholarly literature (Dörnyei, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998) supported by empirical data argues that strategic learning can be taught. Their interviewees' reports give evidence that, on the one hand, the threat of a bad mark or failure in language exams seem to be very strong, but, on the other hand, operating

an effective self-management strategy such as affective, metacognitive and social strategies, can create favourable conditions for successful learning. Accordingly, learners should be taught that they must take every chance they get to use the language rather than lamenting about the risk of getting a bad mark or feeling embarrassed on speaking in natural communication. Very often learners when explaining their inhibitions emphasize that the most threatening thing in speaking a foreign language is not the mistakes they might make. They are rather more worried about is that they think their cospeaker will have a bad impression about them, and that their inappropriate or poor language performance will destroy the picture they have created about themselves. As a consequence, it will result in a face loss, a loss of respect and authority on the speaker's part.

It is interesting that many of my students have reported about similar fears or, as they call dangers, in spite of the fact that I always reassure them, when getting involved in informal discussions either on or off-lesson I will never punish them for their mistakes in any way and try to make them understand that it is worth taking the risk of using the language.

Tamás's last statement: 'My fear might disappear, I will give it a try.' gives the impression that he is aware of the importance of taking the risk and that of his own responsibility. What shines through his metalinguistic comment above is that the speaker is ready to regulate himself, and is willing to change his mind. Also, he might take the chance in the future. He is able to accept that you simply cannot be always on the safe ground.

Excerpt 4.

'Some of my ex-school mates work for international companies. I asked them how they feel about using English in everyday work. They reported on feeling very awkward and artificial about speaking a foreign language in the Hungarian background with other Hungarians. First, it was especially scary when they had to use English in front of their bosses. But, as they say, it is only a question of time, practice, strong will, and you grow used to it. You would never think how much you can do if it is a must or you want it very much.'

/Péter (25), a fresh graduate working for a Hungarian company/

Reporting on a past experience reflects the learner's previous concern. Using English in a Hungarian environment with Hungarian colleagues around might sound clumsy. Learning from practice he soon learned that it can be true in general but it is context-related, and if the situation requires so there is nothing strange in it. Drawing on personal experience the learner finally comes to the conclusion that using a second language in a monolingual environment like Hungary is something we have to get accomodated to in our global multilingual world. There are cases when using a foreign language is not a question of choice, rather more it is a must, and without it you cannot cope with job responsibilities and cannot be competitive on the labour market. Peter'scase exemplifies exactly this situation. You have to take all chances you get to coach yourself for effective language use. You have to adapt to the changing demands and environments. As he says, the key to success is: determinedness, consciousness and managing your own learning. This is your only chance to overcome your

inhibitions. Péter's comment also implies that the way we feel about learning is fluid, it changes over time. Just like situations differ from one another, our conception about language knowledge and language learning changes over time. What is artificial today can be natural tomorrow. We have to calculate with the dynamism of both the learner's personality and the learning. process itself We must know that the process is full of controversies, there are ups and downs. Learners sometimes feel positively and optimistic, sometimes feel hopeless and pessimistic about their own learning. The message of the respondent's last comment is, once he himself was able to change his mind and accomodate himself to the changed conditions, anybody else can follow his example and do the same. You might think something in this way today but differently tomorrow.

Excerpt 5.

'I do not care about mistakes?' 'I am not taking a language exam, after all. They will let me know if something is unclear, provided it is important. I could just as well find a lot of mistakes in Hungarian natives' speaking Hungarian.

/Angéla (38), an associate at a multinational company, having no language exams/

Angéla feels much more comfortable when using English because she knows that even natives are far from perfectness, She does not think that grammatical correctness is the primary criterion of language competence. She says, getting the meaning across and mutual understanding are more important. The respondent calls our attention to the fact that interpersonal communication is based on mutual understanding and shared attention. She teaches us that we have to learn how to tolerate uncertainties. The example gives evidence that she is employing an affective strategy, she lowers anxiety by reminding herself of the fact that other people make mistakes even if they are at a high level of proficiency. Why should she worry since it is not a language exam. Angéla represents a use-based and communication-centered view in language use suggesting that you shouldn't be always focused on well-formedness and correctness. She underpins her statements by comparing language use in everyday communication with that of a language exam. She admits that a favourable, stresfree environment is a positive atmosphere where the language user feels more comfortable. In such a situation it is definitely easier to be calm and self-confident. Also, her statement implies that a test situation in a language exam would change her behaviour too. She makes an important point that in natural communication we can always rely on our cospeaker's cooperation, support and good will. The respondent's reliance on the cospeaker's cooperativeness shows that besides the affective strategy, like lowering anxiety, she also appeals to social strategies in her English use.

Excerpt 6.

'My classmates keep asking me to translate words we learn at school. Last time Rámi asked me what 'melléknév' in English in the grammar lesson. I said I don't know that word, and he laughed at me and said: Don't tell me you can speak English. It's a shame when

they ask me to translate a word into English and I don't know. Mum says, nothing wrong with it. No wonder I don't know those words as we never speak about things like that at home. So I usually tell them I know the words we usually use in talks with mum and dad at home. Anyway, mummy never asks me to retell the lessons we learn at school in English. We simply talk. I hate when they ask me to translate school materials. Why do they think I know everything?

/Brendon, an eleven-year old Hungarian-English bilingual boy, using English at home, Hungarian at school/

Hamers (2004) underscores the home literacy environment (reading aloud, joint reading, discussing stories) and differences between families in their language use patterns influence children's ability to use their languages for academic purposes. She argues that those children who do not use L2 for literacy-related tasks, lack the necessary vocabulary in that domain, and are not familiar with certain academic concepts and do not develop relevant learning strategies, consulting the dictionary or other literate materials, for example. Based on her empirical data Hamers (2004) concludes that children use their respective language according to their experiences and earlier language use practices.

According to her observations Hamers has also found that those children who use their second language as a tool for learning in their home settings could use it for academic purposes as well. However, those applying the second language only for the communicative function, did not understand certain concepts in educational settings. It implies that children without any academic experience in terms of their second language have difficulties in using L2 for educational purposes.

It turns out from Brendon's comment that his use of English is restricted to mostly the communicative and not to the academic or cognitive function, therefore academic terms and concepts do not belong to his active lexicon. As academic terms are not among the routinely discussed topics, he has never been expected to acquire those words. On the other hand, he insisits that testing for words is unusual in his language acquisition context. It is even more astonishing for him that someone judges his language knowledge by his ability to translate one particular word into his second language and vice versa implicitly questionong the relevance of the discrete-point assessment of language competence in natural conversations. Rámi's comment represents a very result-, and product-oriented view of language learning, which is very typical. Altough some learners are disappointed with their language knowledge when they test themselves for words, they should be aware of the fact that they first learn the vocabulary involved in topics they use on regular basis. Consequently, we lack the lexicon for topics that are not the parts of our discussions. The example reflects Brendy's holistic and pragmatic and needs-based view of language use. His comment reflects his awareness of the interrelationship between language and the social context. His remark emphasizes the relative nature of language knowledge, meaning that we usually do not develop all skills and aspects of language equally. Certain skills and competences are better developed whereas others are less improved. Research conducted into bilinguals' language competence underpin that they develop certain skills and aspects of language to the extent that they practise them in their environment. Consequently, if someone uses the language for the communicative function in authentic interactions, they might lack the concepts and grammar that do not appear in their discussions. Brendon's remark: 'We never speak about things like that' implies the same. He has developed a good proficiency in using English for the communicative function in home settings, but as it differs from the language they use during the lessons at school, it is understandable that he lacks certain academic terms and expressions. Brendy's comment illuminates another linguistic issue. In line with other empirical data it underpins that bi-, and multilinguals operate a kind of labour division between their languages. They distinguish between their langauges according to contexts, people and places and situations. Brendon claims: 'Mummy never asks me to retell school lessons in English at home.'. He also expresses his dislike regarding Rámi's method of testing his knowledge. He claims that it is unusual in their language use pattern that he is asked to translate a particular word from one language into another without context, and admits that he is not good at making such word-from-word translations.
Rámi's comment: 'Then don't tell me you can speak English!' typically shows the perfectionist layperson approach to language proficiency. Laypeople usually think that the criterion of being a competent or good language learner is native-like proficiency of the given language.

V. Conclusions

Language learners tend to reflect on the opinion of their social environment, and that opinion influences the way they feel about their learning. The reference to others' metalinguistic statements gives evidence that feedback mechanism plays an important role in building emotional attachment to a second language. It is seen that both positive and negative statements affect the way language learners feel about their respective language. In order to obtain further data on learners' self-managing practices we have to ask language learners to speak about and report on their language-related problems. From time to time we can initiate discussions about their positive and negative language learning experiences. Then we can make conclusions as those reports have implications for teaching. Knowing such details we can operate more personalized teaching methods. Listening to personal stories and anecdotes come useful, as we can witness individual differences and integrate our findings in our language teaching methods and techniques.
We must raise students' awareness to the effective application of indirect achievement strategies such as affective, metacognitive and social strategies. We must make them understand that employing successful affective strategies would enable them to find opportunities to gain reward, practice and motivation in L2 learning. Operating social strategies would mean the ability to share their experiences and discuss linguistic problems with other learners and authorities of knowledge. Seeing others in the same shoes can make them feel that they are not alone with their fears, and can help to lower their anxiety and increase self-esteem.
Applying effective metacognitive strategies would raise their awareness of the fact that they are active participants of the learning process. There are a lot of tools in their hands that can make the endeavour

successful. For example, we must encourage language learners to ask foreign language speakers with first-hand, personal experiences about their foreign language use in real-life, authentic situations. Lesson can be learnt from how they handle obstacles, what strategies, tactics they use to avoid difficulties. We can also ask language learners to specify reasons and purposes they use the language for and push teachers to conduct needs-analyses and apply needs-based teaching.

It is the teachers' responsibility to raise their students'attention to the fact that they can make their learning more enjoyable by monitoring their learning and carry out think-aloud protocols of the linguistic challenges they encounter. They should be taught to find ways of gaining self-reward and self-encouragement. They should find opportunities to speak and practise the language as it is a prerequisite of improvement.

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