

A Study on Language Learning Styles and Strategies

Lee, Hae-kyoung*

<ABSTRACT>

Learning strategies are defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques—such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task—used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella and Oxford 1992, p. 63). When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful selfregulation of learning. Learning strategies can be classified into six types: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. We will discuss each of these later.

This paper aims to show that it is important to emphasize that individual students’ learning styles and strategies can work together with—or conflict with—a given instructional methodology. If there is harmony between (a) the student and (b) the instructional methodology and materials, then the student is likely to perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety. If clashes occur between (a) and (b), the student often performs poorly, lacks confidence, and experiences significant anxiety. Sometimes such clashes lead to serious breakdowns in teacher–student interaction. These conflicts may also lead to the dispirited student’s outright rejection of the teaching methodology, the teacher, or the subject matter

Key words: learning strategies, learning style, cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, social, instructional methodology

I . Introduction

Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how—and how well—our students learn a second or foreign language. A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main

* 공주교육대학교 영어교육과

vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted. Following the tradition in our field, the term L2 is used in this chapter to refer to either a second or a foreign language.

Learning styles are the general approaches—for example, global or analytic, auditory or visual—that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. These styles are “the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior” (Cornett 1983, p. 9). This paper explores the following aspects of learning style: sensory preferences, personality types, desired degree of generality, and biological differences.

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This paper aims to show that it is important to emphasize that individual students’ learning styles and strategies can work together with—or conflict with—a given instructional methodology. If there is harmony between (a) the student (in terms of style and strategy preferences) and (b) the instructional methodology and materials, then the student is likely to perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety. If clashes occur between (a) and (b), the student often performs poorly, lacks confidence, and experiences significant anxiety. Sometimes such clashes lead to serious breakdowns in teacher–student interaction. These conflicts may also lead to the dispirited student’s outright rejection of the teaching methodology, the teacher, or the subject matter.

II. Learning Styles

Ehrman and Oxford (1990) cited nine major style dimensions relevant to L2 learning, although many more style aspects might also prove to be influential. This paper discusses four dimensions of learning style that are likely to be among those most strongly associated with L2 learning: sensory preferences, personality types, desired degree of generality, and biological differences.

Learning styles are not dichotomous (black or white, present or absent), but generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua. For example, a person might be more extroverted than introverted, or more closure-oriented than open, or equally visual and auditory but less kinesthetic and tactile. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories (Ehrman 1996).

1. Sensory Preferences

Sensory preferences can be broken down into four main areas: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (movement-oriented), and tactile (touch-oriented). Sensory preferences refer to the physical, perceptual learning channels with which the student is the most comfortable. Visual students like to read and obtain a great deal from visual stimulation. For them, lectures, conversations, and oral instructions without any visual backup can be very confusing. In contrast, auditory students are comfortable without visual input and therefore enjoy and profit from unembellished lectures, conversations, and oral instructions. They are excited by classroom interactions in role plays and similar activities. They sometimes, however, have difficulty with written work. Kinesthetic and tactile students like lots of movement and enjoy working with tangible objects, collages, and flashcards. Sitting at a desk for very long is not for them; they prefer to have frequent breaks and move around the room.

Reid (1987) demonstrated that ESL students varied significantly in their sensory preferences, with people from certain cultures differentially favoring the four different ways of learning. Students from Asian cultures, for instance, were often highly visual, with Koreans being the most visual. Many studies, including Reid's, found that Hispanic learners were frequently auditory. Reid discovered that Japanese

were very nonauditory. ESL students from a variety of cultures were tactile and kinesthetic in their sensory preferences.

2. Personality Types

Another style aspect that is important for L2 education is personality type, which consists of four strands: extroverted versus introverted; intuitive-random versus sensing-sequential; thinking versus feeling; and closure-oriented/judging versus . open/perceiving. Personality type (often called psychological type) is a construct based on the work of psychologist Carl Jung. Ehrman and Oxford (1989, 1990) found significant relationships between personality type and L2 proficiency in native-English-speaking learners of foreign languages. For more on personality type in language learning.

1) Extroverted versus Introverted

By definition, extroverts gain their greatest energy from the external world. They want interaction with people and have many friendships, some deep and some not. In contrast, introverts derive their energy from the internal world, seeking solitude and tending to have just a few friendships, which are often very deep. Extroverts and introverts can learn to work together with the help of the teacher. Enforcing time limits in the L2 classroom can keep extroverts' enthusiasm to a manageable level. Rotating the person in charge of leading L2 discussions gives introverts an opportunity to participate equally with extroverts.

2) Intuitive-Random versus Sensing-Sequential

Intuitive-random students think in abstract, futuristic, large-scale, and nonsequential ways. They like to create theories and new possibilities, often have sudden insights, and prefer to guide their own learning. In contrast, sensing-sequential learners are grounded in the here and now. They like facts rather than theories, want guidance and specific instruction from the teacher, and look for consistency. The key to teaching both intuitive-random and sensing-sequential learners is to offer variety and choice: sometimes a highly organized structure for sensing-sequential learners, and at other times multiple options and enrichment activities for intuitive-random students.

3) Thinking versus Feeling

Thinking learners are oriented toward the stark truth, even if it hurts some people's feelings. They want to be viewed as competent and do not tend to offer praise easily—even though they might secretly desire to be praised themselves. Sometimes they seem detached. In comparison, feeling learners value other people in very personal ways. They show empathy and compassion through words, not just behaviors, and say whatever is needed to smooth over difficult situations. Though they often wear their hearts on their sleeves, they want to be respected for personal contributions and hard work. L2 teachers can help thinking learners show greater overt compassion to their feeling classmates and can suggest that feeling learners might tone down their emotional expression while working with thinking learners.

4) Closure-oriented/Judging versus Open/Perceiving

Closure-oriented students want to reach judgments or completion quickly and want clarity as soon as possible. These students are serious, hardworking learners who like to be given written information and enjoy specific tasks with deadlines. Sometimes their desire for closure hampers the development of fluency (Ehrman and Oxford 1989). In contrast, open learners want to stay available for continuously new perceptions and are therefore sometimes called "perceiving." They take L2 learning less seriously, treating it like a game to be enjoyed rather than a set of tasks to be completed. Open learners dislike deadlines; they want to have a good time and seem to soak up L2 information by osmosis rather than hard effort. Open learners sometimes do better than closure-oriented learners in developing fluency (Ehrman and Oxford 1989), but they are at a disadvantage in a traditional classroom setting. Closure-oriented and open learners provide a good balance for each other in the L2 classroom. The former are task-driven learners, and the latter know how to have fun. Skilled L2 teachers sometimes consciously create cooperative groups that include both types of learners, since they can benefit from collaboration with each other.

3. Desired Degree of Generality

This strand contrasts the learner who focuses on the main idea or big picture with the learner who concentrates on details. Global or holistic students like socially

interactive, communicative events in which they can emphasize the main idea and avoid analysis of grammatical minutiae. They are comfortable even when not having all the information, and they feel free to guess from the context. Analytic students tend to concentrate on grammatical details and often avoid more free-flowing communicative activities. Because of their concern for precision; analytic learners typically do not take the risks necessary for guessing from the context unless they are fairly sure of the accuracy of their guesses. The global student and the analytic student have much to learn from each other. A balance between generality and specificity is very useful for L2 learning.

4. Biological Differences

Differences in L2 learning style can also be related to biological factors, such as biorhythms, sustenance, and location. Biorhythms reveal the times of day when students feel good and perform their best. Some L2 learners are morning people, while others do not want to start learning until the afternoon, and still others are creatures of the evening, happily “pulling an all-nighter“ when necessary. Sustenance refers to the need for food or drink while learning. Quite a number of L2 learners feel very comfortable learning with a candy bar, a cup of coffee, or a soda in hand, but others are distracted from study by food and drink. Location involves the nature of the environment; temperature, lighting, sound, and even the firmness of the chairs. L2 students differ widely with regard to these environmental factors. The biological aspects of L2 learning style are often forgotten, but vigilant teachers can often make accommodations and compromises when needed.

5. Beyond the Stylistic Comfort Zone

L2 learners clearly need to make the most of their style preferences. However, occasionally they must also extend themselves beyond these preferences. By providing a wide range of classroom activities that cater to different learning styles, teachers can help L2 students develop beyond the comfort zone dictated by their natural style preferences. The key is systematically offering a great variety of activities within a learner-centered, communicative approach.

III. Learning Strategies

As seen earlier, L2 learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning. A given strategy is neither good nor bad; it is neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: (a) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand; (b) the strategy fits the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another; and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. Strategies that fulfill these conditions "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford 1990, p. 8). Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright 1990; Little 1991).

Yet students are not always aware of the power of consciously using L2 learning strategies to make learning quicker and more effective (Nyikos and Oxford 1993). Skilled teachers help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies and enable them to use a wider range of appropriate strategies.

1. Strategy Use Often Relates to Style Preferences

When left to their own devices, and if not encouraged by the teacher or forced by the lesson to use a certain set of strategies, students use learning strategies that reflect their basic learning styles (Ehrman and Oxford 1989; Oxford 1996a, 1996b). However, teachers can actively help students "stretch" their learning styles by trying some strategies that are outside of their primary style preferences.

2. Positive Outcomes from Strategy Use

In subject areas outside of L2 learning, the use of learning strategies is demonstrably related to student achievement and proficiency (Pressley and Associates 1990). Research has repeatedly shown this relationship in content fields ranging from physics to reading and from social studies to science. In light of this remarkable association between learning strategy use and positive learning outcomes, it is not

surprising that students who frequently employ learning strategies enjoy a high level of self-efficacy, i.e., a perception of being effective as learners (Zimmerman and Pons 1986).

In the L2 arena, early studies of so-called “good language learners” (Naiman et al. 1975; Rubin 1975) determined that such learners consistently used certain types of learning strategies, such as guessing from context. However, later studies found that there was no single set of strategies always used by “good language learners.” These studies found that less able learners used strategies in a random, unconnected, and uncontrolled manner (Abraham and Vann 1987; Chamot et al. 1996), while more effective learners showed careful orchestration of strategies, targeted in a relevant, systematic way at specific L2 tasks. In an investigation by Nunan (1991), more effective learners differed from less effective learners in their greater ability to reflect on and articulate their own language learning processes. In a study of learners of English in Puerto Rico, more successful students used strategies for active involvement more frequently than did less successful learners according to Green and Oxford (1995). The same researchers also commented that the number and type of learning strategies differed according to whether the learner was in a foreign language environment or a second language setting. In their review of the research literature, Green and Oxford discovered that second language learners generally employed more strategies with higher frequency than did foreign language learners.

3. Strategy Instruction Research

The most effective strategy instruction appears to include demonstrating when a given strategy might be useful, as well as how to use and evaluate it, and how to transfer it to other related tasks and situations. So far, research has shown the most beneficial strategy instruction to be woven into regular, everyday L2 teaching, although other ways of strategy instruction are possible (Oxford and Leaver 1996).

4. Six Main Categories of L2 Learning Strategies

Six major groups of L2 learning strategies have been identified by Oxford (1990). Alternative taxonomies have been offered by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and

others.

Cognitive strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, notetaking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally.

Metacognitive strategies (e.g., identifying one's own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy) are employed for managing the learning process overall.

Memory-related strategies help learners link one L2 item or concept with another, but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., Total Physical Response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard). Memory-related strategies have been shown to relate to L2 proficiency in a course devoted to memorizing large numbers of Kanji characters (Kato 1996) and in L2 courses designed for native-English-speaking learners of foreign languages (Oxford and Ehrman 1995). However, memory-related strategies do not always positively relate to L2 proficiency. In fact, the use of memory strategies in a test-taking situation had a significant negative relationship to learners' test performance in grammar and vocabulary (Purpura 1997). The probable reason for this is that while memory strategies are often used for memorizing vocabulary and structures in initial stages of language learning, learners need such strategies much less when their arsenal of vocabulary and structures has become larger and automatic responses are expected.

Compensatory strategies (e.g., guessing from context in listening and reading, using synonyms and "talking around" the missing word to aid speaking and writing, and strictly for speaking using gestures or pause words) help the learner make up for missing knowledge. Cohen (1998) asserts that compensatory strategies that are used for speaking and writing (often known as one form of communication strategies) are intended only for language use and must not be considered to be language learning

strategies. However, Oxford (1990, 1999a) have contended that compensation strategies of any kind, even though they might be used for language use, nevertheless aid in language learning as well. After all, each instance of L2 use is an opportunity for more L2 learning. Oxford and Ehrman (1995) demonstrated that compensatory strategies are significantly related to L2 proficiency in their study of native-English-speaking learners of foreign languages.

Affective strategies, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, have been shown to be significantly related to L2 proficiency in research by Dreyer and Oxford (1996) among South African ESL learners and by Oxford and Ehrman (1995) among native English speakers learning foreign languages. However, in other studies, such as that of Mullins (1992) with EFL learners in Thailand, affective strategies showed a negative link with some measures of L2 proficiency. One reason might be that as some students progress toward proficiency, they have less need for affective strategies. Perhaps because learners' use of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies is related to greater L2 proficiency and self-efficacy, over time there might be less need for affective strategies as learners progress to higher proficiency.

Social strategies (e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language. Social strategies were significantly associated with L2 proficiency in studies by South African ESL study by Dreyer and Oxford (1996) and the investigation of native-English-speaking foreign language learners by Oxford and Ehrman (1995).

IV. Conclusion

This paper has four implications for classroom practice: assessing styles and strategies in the L2 classroom, attuning L2 instruction and strategy instruction to learners' style preferences, remembering that no single L2 instructional methodology fits all students, and preparing for and conducting strategy instruction.

L2 teachers could benefit by assessing the learning styles and the strategy use of their students, because such assessment leads to greater understanding of styles and strategies. Teachers also need to assess their own styles and strategies, so that they will be aware of their preferences and of possible biases. Useful means exist to make these assessments, as mentioned earlier. Teachers can learn about assessment options by reading books or journals, attending professional conferences, or taking relevant courses or workshops.

The more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their L2 instruction, as well as the strategy instruction that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences. Some learners might need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without adequate knowledge about their individual students' style preferences, teachers cannot systematically provide the needed instructional variety.

Styles and strategies help determine a particular learner's ability and willingness to work within the framework of various instructional methodologies. It is foolhardy to think that a single L2 methodology could possibly fit an entire class filled with students who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences. Instead of choosing a specific instructional methodology, L2 teachers would do better to employ a broad instructional approach, notably the best version of the communicative approach that contains a combined focus on form and fluency. Such an approach allows for deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class.

L2 teachers should consider various ways to prepare to conduct strategy instruction in their classes. Helpful preparatory steps include taking teacher development courses, finding relevant information in print or on the Internet, and making contacts with specialists.

Although we do not yet know all we wish to about optimal strategy instruction, there is growing evidence that L2 teachers can and should conduct strategy instruction in their classrooms. For some teachers it might be better to start with small strategy interventions, such as helping L2 readers learn to analyze words and guess meanings from context, rather than with full-scale strategies-based instruction involving a vast array of learning strategies and the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Other teachers might want to move rapidly into strategies-based instruction. Strategies-based instructions. Strategies-based instruction is not so much separate “instructional method” as it is sound strategy instruction interwoven with the general communicative language teaching approach noted above. Chamot and O’Malley (1996) describe the CALLA model, a form of strategy-based instruction for ESL learners that includes explicit strategy instruction, content area instruction, and academic language development. Cohen (1998) presents a different but somewhat related version of strategies-based instruction for native English speakers learning foreign languages. In evaluating the success of any strategy instruction, teachers should look for students’ progress toward L2 proficiency and for signs of increased self-efficacy or motivation.

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국문요약

언어학습 성향과 학습전략에 관한 연구

이혜경

공주교육대학교

본 연구의 목적은 개별 학습자들의 학습 성향이나 전략이 특정 교수방법론과 잘 조화를 이룰 수도 있고 또는 상충될 수도 있다는 점을 보여주고자 한다. 학습전략은 대화패턴을 찾거나 어려운 언어 과제에 도전하도록 스스로를 북돋우는 것과 같이 학습자들이 자신의 학습을 향상시키기 위해 사용하는 특정 행동 또는 기술이라고 정의할 수 있다. 학습자가 자신의 학습 성향이나 당면 과제에 적합한 전략을 의식적으로 선택할 때, 이러한 전략들은 능동적이며, 의식적이며, 목적 지향적으로 사용되어 학습자 스스로 자신의 학습을 통제하는 유용한 도구가 된다. 학습전략들은 여섯 가지 유형으로 분류될 수 있는데, 인지적 전략, 상위 인지적 전략, 기억 관련 전략, 사회적 전략, 보상적 전략, 정의적 전략, 사회적 전략 등이 있다.

주제어: 학습전략, 학습 성향, 인지적, 상위 인지적, 기억 관련, 사회적, 보상적, 정의적, 교수방법