

4. Learning Strategies and Learning Styles in Adult Classroom

As stated earlier, learning strategies and learning styles in adult education may differ from those traditionally used with young learners. Through whatever window adults are viewed, it must be remembered that they learn differently. Rather than causing problem, this diversity may be considered enriching for the teaching and learning process in adult classes. There are a lot of classifications of learning strategies and learning styles, this chapter relies on the classifications and explanations by Anne Burns and Jack Richards as they introduced them in their *Pedagogy and Practice in Second Language Teaching* (2012). The whole chapter is based on their knowledge and expertise in the field.

First of all, one needs to keep in mind that each individual may have his or her own style of learning which produces the best results for him or her. Think about yourself. How do you learn? What suits you best? Do you like learning in a group or individually? Is seeing the way things work important to you? Is reading about a topic enough for you or do you need to see or hear a demonstration on it?

Adults may not be conscious of their individual learning style. They may know that a method works or doesn't work for them, but they may not know why. As a teacher begins to work with adults, it is important to get to know the participants and help them come to know their learning styles. In getting to know them, teacher can assess their learning styles, determine what is comfortable for them and incorporate methodology which will take advantage of their style. (Lawler, P. A. 1991)¹

Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are conscious behaviours involving cognitive, social and affective processes (predicting, making inferences, etc.)

Strategies can take the form of **covert mental activities** that learners use to process and manage the flow of information in a second language. For example, learners can improve their comprehension of what they read or listen by employing such strategies as *predicting*, *making inferences*, and *monitoring* their comprehension. Some strategies are overt social behaviours, such as *when learners ask questions to clarify* what they do not understand or *request speakers to repeat* what they say in order to continue in an interaction. Strategies can also take the form of **internal speech** to manage negative emotions. For example, when some learners are anxious or feel discouraged, they "*speak*" to themselves in order to encourage themselves positively.

The use of strategies is managed by **metacognition**: Cognitive, social, and affective strategies are controlled by a higher level of cognitive processes known as **metacognitive processes**.

¹ LAWLER, P. A. *The Keys to Adult learning: Theory and Practical Strategies*, Research for Better Schools, Philadelphia 1991

These processes enable individuals to manage the way they use strategies through planning, monitoring, and evaluation. The control and regulation of strategy use often depends on learners' metacognitive knowledge, knowledge about themselves and other as learners, knowledge about the nature and demands of the task, and knowledge about strategies that can be used for achieving their goal in language use and learning, be it learning new vocabulary or grammar items, comprehending what they read or listen to, or expressing meaning through speaking and writing.²

The amount of attention learners give to the strategies they employ may vary according to different factors: Although the use of strategies requires attention on the part of the learners, not all tasks require the same amount of attention. For example, when they have to solve a comprehension problem while listening to a lecture with very little visual support, learners may have to heed the language input closely and use familiar content words to reconstruct the content of what they hear. On the other hand, if they are talking to someone face-to-face on a familiar topic, such as a movie they saw the night before, they may use the facial expressions of the speaker or their knowledge of the plot to draw quick inferences of words they do not understand.

Strategies may be employed individually or in an interactive and orchestrated manner to form a network of processes for achieving a better communication or learning outcome: Language learning and communication are complex activities. When learners encounter problems, they may have to use not one but several strategies to enhance their performance and achieve their goals. This is because different strategies, when applied together to a task, can interact effectively with one another to achieve a unified learning or communication outcome. For example, when learners draw inferences of the meaning of what they hear in a listening text, they also need to monitor their interpretation by considering clues from the context or from the unfolding text. If they realize that they have made a mistake in their interpretation, they should use another strategy, such as wait for repetition or rephrasing of the information and try again. A learner who only uses the strategy of guessing and ignores accompanying cues may miss valuable opportunities for arriving at an accurate or acceptable interpretation.

Some strategies contribute to language development directly while other may not: there are **two types of strategies**.

1. This type is used for improving the learning of a second language, such as strategies for remembering and producing new vocabulary items that can help increase learners' proficiency.
2. The second type is used for managing a problem or enhancing communication during language use. This type of strategy may or may not lead to language development. A communication strategy may help to develop a learner's language further if it requires the learner to draw on his or her linguistic resources, no matter how limited it may be. For example, a learner may resort to paraphrasing or circumlocution to produce speech that is comprehensible to listeners when the learner cannot think of a word in the second language. On the other hand, another learner who experiences a similar problem may decide to use an avoidance strategy, such as using a word in the first language or keeping silent completely. Clearly, this strategy is not going to help the learner's language development.

² BURNS, A., RICHARDS, C. R.: *Pedagogy and Practice in Second Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press 2012

The quality and the use of strategies by individual learners is influenced by **internal and external factors**. Broadly speaking, whether or not learners use strategies or use strategies that are effective depends on three factors:

1. The learners themselves
2. The tasks they have to complete
3. The environment in which learning and use of the second language take place.

Research indicates that high-proficiency learners use more metacognitive strategies than their low-proficiency counterparts. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that high proficiency learners are not hindered by low-level perception or production processes, such as word recognition (reading and listening) and word production (speaking and writing). As some of these processes may have become automatized, high-proficiency learners can therefore give more attention to monitoring and evaluation of their comprehension. The nature of tasks, for example, reception (listening and reading) vs. production (speaking and writing), can also influence learners in the strategies they select.

Strategies can be viewed at a **macro level** as a general strategic approach to a task and at a **micro level** as specific strategies for realizing that approach. It is useful to make a distinction between the generality of broad global actions and the specificity of **small actions or tactics** that help to realize the general strategy. A general strategy can be viewed as a general approach that one takes to achieve a goal while a specific strategy, or tactic, is one of several ways in which that strategic approach can be realized. A general, or macro strategy typically consists of a number of relevant specific strategies. The following table shows this **generality-specificity distinction** for the frequently used strategy of inferencing.

General Strategy	Specific strategies - tactics
Inferencing	Use contextual clues to guess the meaning of unknown words
	Use familiar content words to deduce the meaning of what is heard
	Draw on knowledge of the world to guess the meaning of what is heard
	Apply knowledge about the target language to guess the meaning of unknown words
	Use visual clues to fill in meaning unavailable from the text

Knowledge about and use of strategies may be jointly constructed and managed by learners working together: The literature on learner strategies typically focusses on the way individual learners use strategies and the effects of individual characteristics, such as gender and language proficiency, which may be related to the effectiveness of their strategy use. Language learning and language use, however, are not activities that learners engage in on their own exclusively. Thus, learners' knowledge about and use of strategies must also be understood in its interactional and sociocultural contexts.

Classification of learner strategies.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) Burns and Richards (2012)³ adopted an **information-processing theoretical model** which contained an operative, or cognitive, processing function and an executive, or metacognitive function. In addition, they included social and affective dimensions to account for the influence of these processes on language learning. These are represented as follows:

³ BURNS, A., RICHARDS, C. R.: Pedagogy and Practice in Second Language Teaching, Cambridge University Press 2012

Cognitive strategies are mental operations that interact directly with incoming information. They facilitate comprehension and recall, and production. Examples include *summarization*, *translation*, and *inferencing*.

Metacognitive strategies are mental operations that manage learning and cope with difficulties. They are used for planning, monitoring, and evaluation learning process. Examples include *selective attention* and *self-monitoring*.

Social-affective strategies are behaviours that involve others to assist one's learning and communication and control one's emotions in order to complete a learning task. Examples include *asking for repetition and clarification* and *positive self-talk*.

Oxford's (1990) strategy system comprises **two distinct but related groups of strategies**:

1. **Direct strategies**: involve mainly mental processing of language to help learners store, retrieve and use language in spite of limitation in vocabulary and grammar. The three main sets of direct strategies are

- a) memory strategies
- b) cognitive strategies
- c) compensation strategies.

Within each set are more specific strategies and further subsets of these special strategies, for example, *creating mental linkages*, *analysing and reasoning*, and *guessing intelligently*.

2. **Indirect strategies** "support" and manage language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language and work in tandem with the direct strategies. The three main sets of indirect strategies are

- a) metacognitive strategies
- b) affective strategies
- c) social strategies

Just like direct strategies, each set of indirect strategies is further differentiated into more specific strategies, such as *arranging and planning* your learning, *taking your emotional temperature*, and *asking questions respectively*.

The two models share three similar characteristics.

- 1. They acknowledge the importance of metacognition or thinking about one's thinking.
- 2. They acknowledge the role played by cognitive strategies that directly manipulate input through mental processes such as inferencing and prediction.
- 3. The models are explicit about social-affective dimensions of learning. By acknowledging the conceptual and social affective bases for language learning, these frameworks are sufficiently comprehensive and therefore useful for preparing activities for strategy instruction.⁴

Questions:

- 1. What may be the role of teacher in identifying learning style of adult learners?
- 2. Give a comprehensible definition of a learning strategy.
- 3. Explain the notion of „metacognition“ in learning strategies
- 4. Explain the notion of „metacognitive processes“ in learning strategies.
- 5. Explain how learning strategies can be employed individually and interactively.
- 6. Explain the following notion: „Some strategies contribute to language development directly while other may not“

⁴ BURNS, A., RICHARDS, C. R.: Pedagogy and Practice in Second Language Teaching, Cambridge University Press 2012

7. What are some of the internal and external factors when it comes to learning strategies?
8. Explain how learning strategies can be treated at a micro and a macro level.
9. What are the two classification of learning strategies?
10. What common characteristics do the two models share?

Task 1: Think about a learning style which suits you the most. Describe the learning style and give reasons for your choice.

Task 2: Think about a learning strategy that works for you. Describe the learning situation, the learning strategy and the specific strategies / tactics you employ with the learning strategy you've chosen.