A Sociocultural Perspective on Second Language Learner Strategies: Focus on the Impact of Social Context

Studies on second language (L2) learners’ strategies tended to characterize strategies as individual learners’ cognitive predispositions or personality traits, leaving a critical question unanswered: Why do learners use different strategies in different contexts? From a sociocultural perspective, this article pursued this question by focusing on the impacts of the classroom context and the broader social context on the use of L2 learner strategies. The authors argue that the emergence, use, and distribution of L2 strategies cannot be fully understood without examining the specific social relationships and power relations in the language classroom. By highlighting the situated aspect of L2 learner strategy development, therefore, this article attempts to help educators construct a learning environment that can facilitate L2 learners’ use of productive strategies to enhance their language learning.

One major challenge in the field of teaching and learning a second language (L2) is the remarkable variation across L2 learners in terms of linguistic achievement. Although
learners of a first language mostly reach similar levels of linguistic competence, L2 learners’ achievements differ considerably, even when they receive similar amounts and quality of exposure to their second language (August & Hakuta, 1997; Breen, 2001). An experienced English as a second language (ESL) teacher who worked with the first author during a research study, provided the following answer to the question “Why do you think some ESL students do well at school but others don’t?”

I have seen a couple of, I call ’em lazy. I don’t know if they are lazy or motivation just isn’t there to really… They are not, they are not driven, they’re not motivated, they don’t … There are other students that I cannot give ’em enough, fast enough. And they will do anything and everything. They come in, “I need more homework,” “What can I read?” … Um, just, just curious, just asking, wanting to know, wanting to learn… Part of personality! (Jang, 2008, p. 129)

Like this ESL teacher, many educators and scholars may recognize substantial individual differences among their students while they struggle to find ways to help those who appear to be “not driven, not motivated.” Therefore, the concept of L2 learner strategies1 has gained notoriety because the use of these strategies is a distinguishing feature of successful language learners (Rubin, 1975).

Typically, a strategy has been understood as a set of actions that L2 learners perform in order to facilitate their language learning (Oxford, 1996). The traditional approaches to strategies, however, tend to highlight the strategic performance of individual L2 learners isolated from the context in which the learners are situated. In a similar vein, many L2 learner strategy studies have identified and compiled lists of effective language learning strategies, mostly through studies of successful L2 learners (Chamot, 2005; Naiman, Fröhich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Nyikos, 1996; Rubin, 1975; Rubin, Chamot, Harris, & Anderson, 2007).2 Recently, Carson and Longhini (2002) have also suggested that an individual learner’s strategies are often affected by her or his learning style, claiming that strategies may not be as modifiable as we have thought, “given the possibility of the overriding influence of learning style” (p. 434).

Undeniably, these mainstream strategy studies have made important contributions to our understanding of L2 learner strategies in many aspects. Nevertheless, the underlying assumption is that use of language learning strategies depends exclusively on individual learners’ cognitive predispositions or personality traits. This understanding has been called the “encapsulated view” of strategies (Donato & McCormick, 1994, p. 459). The contextualized and situated experiences of learners, such as the quantity and quality of their classroom social interactions, are rarely considered. This individualistic and cognitive approach to thinking about strategies leaves some critical questions unanswered: Why do some learners use different strategies in different contexts, rather than the same strategies in all situations? How do particular classroom contexts, and more broadly, social, cultural, and institutional contexts, constrain or facilitate the use of learner strategies? In what ways are some strategies recognized as effective but others are not?

By adopting a sociocultural perspective that highlights the critical role of the social context in cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1978), we propose that learners’ actions to facilitate or sometimes constrain their language learning cannot be fully understood without considering the situated contexts in which strategies emerge and develop, as well as the kinds of hierarchies within which students from diverse backgrounds find themselves in U.S. classrooms (Bourdieu, 1991). These types of questions and critiques have also been applied to the research on strategy instruction and reading comprehension (Davis, this issue, Handsfield & Jiménez, 2009), but here we consider their application to the research on second language learning and strategy instruction. Questioning whether individual variability in L2 achievement can be entirely accounted for by personality factors such as extroversion, or language aptitude, we suggest the following principles and recommendations regarding L2 learner strategies based on our
research findings on newly immigrated Korean ESL students.

**Conventional Understandings of L2 Learning Strategies Fail to Take Into Account Important Sociocultural Influences Such as Interracial Tensions Among ESL Students**

Whether L2 learners comprehend a text or not is often assessed on the basis of their answers to a series of questions. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the process followed by students as they take up various strategies within classroom contexts because learning strategies tend to be regarded as the personal property of individual learners that they then employ to improve their L2 ability. Challenging this common understanding about L2 strategies, we contend that there is more involved in an ELL student’s success in learning English than simply individual students’ hard work and learning styles. Especially in the multicultural and multilingual environment of ESL classrooms, broader social factors such as race and ethnicity can influence students’ choice and use of certain strategies.

In a study of recently immigrated Korean ESL students, for example, we have observed that interracial tensions and affiliations among ESL students were closely connected to the ways that the students use some cognitive strategies (Jang, 2008). In the seventh-grade ESL classroom consisting of four Korean ELLs and only one French student (Caroline), one of the most salient issues was that the Korean students believed that their ESL teacher favored Caroline simply because she was “also White.” The following event illustrates how the sentiments of the Korean ELLs, Steve and Sun A, engaged in strategically deleting Caroline’s text in a collaborative revising activity in order to disempower, or marginalize, her.

Teacher: *(Reading Caroline’s sentence aloud)*: “He found how to plant a lot more vegetables and fruits including apples, oranges, lettuce...” OK, OK. Ideas, suggestions, what do we need to do with that sentence?

Steve: *(Raising his hand)* I think, um, well, I thought, you should, um, erase apples, oranges, lettuce because, well, apples and oranges are fruits but lettuce is vegetable, so.

Teacher: That’s true, but we did say vegetables and fruits up here.

Steve: *(Reading the sentence to himself)*: “Including apples, oranges, lettuce...” Well, they all know that they are fruits and vegetables.

Teacher: OK, OK. Just keep that, so, you are saying we need to get rid of apples, oranges, here?

Steve: Yeah.

Teacher: *(to other students)*: Do we need to get rid of apples, oranges, and lettuce here?

Sun-A: Yes.

Steve, a Korean male participant, voluntarily suggested deleting part of Caroline’s sentence by using the cognitive strategies of analyzing and reasoning to make his argument convincing. Nevertheless, his suggestion was not based on any noticeable problems with the sentence, which the teacher also pointed out. Then, Steve read the sentence aloud to himself, showing that he was paying selective attention to this particular phrase. He quickly provided another reason to insist on deleting Caroline’s phrase. At the end, Sun-A and other Korean students supported him by agreeing with his recommendation.

On the surface, this group of Korean students displayed both cognitive and metacognitive strategic activities by monitoring the ongoing writing process and implementing various strategies in order to effectively complete the immediate editing task. However, from interviews and informal conversations regarding this moment of interaction, we learned that the Korean students were actually collaborating to strategically delete Caroline’s sentence with the purpose of silencing her while also reinforcing their affiliation as the “same Korean.” What was most important during this writing event was who wrote which sentences and who edited whose sentences, rather than whether the sentence is correctly written or not. This incident shows how the use of specific
strategies at the micro level can be influenced by the highly salient, but not always recognized, factor of race or ethnicity, and the students’ perceptions concerning power relations between different racial groups in the multiracial ESL classroom.

The Participation Structures and the Relations of Power in Which L2 Learners Operate Can Provide Equal Opportunities to Employ Second Language Learning Strategies

If the development of strategies is influenced by learning environments, a critical question is whether all students receive equal opportunities to try them out or not. Thus, it is important for teachers to monitor the dynamics of participation among students. Specifically in the ESL context, levels of English proficiency, rather than other attributes, may be the most important influences on opportunities to speak.

The example provided previously shows how the Korean children perceived turns for writing as a sign of fairness on the part of the teacher and their own limited power in the classroom. Sun-A thought that she should “get revenge” on Caroline because Caroline had caused Sun-A’s sentence to be deleted first. Steve also revealed the hidden intention behind his action by saying “I decided to take revenge on her [Caroline] at that time.” The Korean students complained that the teacher unfairly allowed Caroline to write more sentences than Korean students because, according to the Korean students, not only was Caroline White, but also her English proficiency was much more advanced.

Conscious attention to power relations surrounding participatory roles is significant because students’ display of learning strategies is often an attempt to gain or maintain status in the classroom. If teachers become aware of the subtle power dynamics among students, they will be better able to facilitate more flexible role-taking and thus reconfigure existing power relations involving turns for talking. This power reconfiguration then would offer more opportunities for the disempowered student to take part in class activities and produce more successful English utterances. Similarly, McKay and Wong (1996) also investigated how Chinese-speaking ESL students at a junior high school developed coping strategies in order to manage various discourses affecting their school lives. For instance, they suggested that a pervasive schoolwide discourse portrayed the ESL program as a place for dummies. They interpreted this discourse to mean that in that school, limited English proficiency indexed deficiency, and also that such a discourse provoked many ESL students to display seemingly self-defeating strategies as a way to resist this unflattering portrayal. As such, implicit assumptions concerning language learners originated from a larger social context had a noticeable impact on the ways that students employed seemingly neutral language learning strategies. Cognitive perspectives that fail to account for the influences of context, purpose, and power can only partially explain these behaviors.

L2 Learners’ Cultural Background Can Affect How Their Goals and Desires Are Formed and How These Drive Their Behaviors and Activities

Typically, most scholars who research learning strategies tend to characterize them as conscious and intentional behaviors to solve specific problems. On the other hand, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) believed that the use of strategies can reach the point of automaticity where learners are no longer conscious of employing them. We propose in this article that both the conscious and subconscious aspects of learner strategies need to be considered to understand how learners establish certain goals that direct their actions. Specifically, some of the ways that everyday interactions and larger social systems affect learners are not always at a level of conscious awareness. In other words, learners’ ideas on what should be done or what is supposed to be done in a certain situation are sometimes rooted in their subconsciously accumulated cultural experiences of obviously ordinary practices (Bourdieu, 1991).
Some practices are so taken for granted that they may not invoke conscious awareness and thus the necessary critical questioning of the practices in question. Therefore, it may not be possible for students to articulate certain strategic orientations and these specific actions, even though they exist, as demonstrated by learners’ choice and use of strategies. Let us examine the following example excerpted from a study conducted by the first author (Jang, 2008).

Teacher: Jenny, you need to look at, look at some of this. You need to answer the question why. If your argument is you should follow school rules, WH—Y. Why is it important to follow school rules? Do rules change? Rules change. Do you still need to follow the school rules if they’re changed?

Jenny: (with no confidence, in a soft voice): Ye—s?

Jenny: (changing her answer by looking at Mrs. Luis): . . . N—o?

Teacher: OK. Your argument for paying for the jacket is, um, you should follow the school rules. OK? Why should you follow the school rules? . . . Does our school have rules?

Jenny: (ambiguously): Uh-huh.

Teacher: Are you supposed to follow ’em?

Jenny: (softly, with no confidence): Yes?

In this event, Jenny, who had previously demonstrated that she was an active and competent student, employed self-defensive strategies such as feigning understanding, rather than making use of productive language learning strategies, in spite of her teacher’s persistent demand. At first glance, it seemed as though she did not understand the main point of the conversation, in other words, in this case, the students read a story about how teachers unfairly treated a minority student. However, we found out later that Jenny did understand the main point, but her cultural preconceptions about appropriate behavior for students and teachers prevented her from voicing that understanding. She revealed later that she did not comment because she thought it would be inappropriate for her to speak poorly of teachers who openly discriminated against a student, even though it was merely a textbook story.

In other words, this moment was where she encountered a new cultural practice and, therefore, had to reframe her idea about being ordinary, in-between the two worlds of her L1 and L2. Open discussion about acts of inequality and unethical behavior committed by school personnel within the school context had never been an ordinary practice to Jenny, who had grown up in a Confucian culture (Palmer & Jang, 2005). To cope with the bewildering situation without her social status as a competent English language learner in the ESL classroom, Jenny employed the strategies of silence, the use of fillers, and feigning understanding. In this sense, Jenny was strategically working on being ordinary through negotiation with her preexisting Korean perceptions of being ordinary. Jenny’s atypical pattern of strategy use and participation in the activity, therefore, could be understood vis-à-vis cultural conflicts and negotiations with new cultural practices. By highlighting the impact of situated sociocultural contexts (i.e., cultural preconceptions and social positioning) on L2 learner strategy use, this finding challenges the idea that L2 learners’ passive, non-strategic learning behavior originates from intrinsic tendencies, personality factors, or learning styles.

Recommendations for Teachers

ELL Students Need to Engage in Well-Designed, Concrete Projects

From a sociocultural perspective, learner strategies are defined as a social activity that develops through the mediation of the specific classroom setting, including artifacts, practices, interactions, and relationships among people. By focusing on the specific context in which strategies emerge, Donato and McCormick (1994) contended that “psychological phenomena (e.g., language learning strategies) can be understood
only by examining their genesis in a culturally-specific situated activity (e.g., the foreign language classroom)” (p. 454). What teachers need to note here is that the context is not static or preestablished. Rather, specific classroom activities, practices, and projects implemented by teachers could create an enriched environment where students develop and use good language learning strategies. In their case study of a college French class, the authors implemented a new form of practice, the working portfolio that asked students to provide evidence of their own language development in their individual portfolios. The underlying assumption is that the new practice (i.e., creating a working portfolio) would reconfigure the social structure of the classroom in the sense that learner strategies are developed as “by-products of socialization into the classroom practices of language learning” (Donato & McCormick, 1994, p. 454). Evidence of the mediated nature of learner strategies is shown in their findings: The students in the classroom identified, refined, and developed their own strategies while interacting with their fellow students and participating in the portfolio project, which contributed to establishing a reflective and dialogic classroom culture.

This successful example of the working portfolio highlights how students’ strategic orientations to language learning developed within their engagement in a well-designed class project. It is thus important for teachers to make an effort to create concrete classroom activities, as these can inspire and encourage students to identify and develop good learning strategies. In addition, when teachers clarify concerning the need to interact with fellow students, as well as the need to explicitly identify one’s purpose, they facilitate and enhance student learning.

**Teachers Must Find Ways to Help ELL Students Become Full Members of Their Respective Learning Communities**

All teachers and students play out their designated roles by taking appropriate actions, such as explaining, appointing, assessing, questioning, answering, turn-taking, and so on (Bloom, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989). Students who do not have appropriate cultural tools (e.g., language, knowledge of teacher’s expectations) for these practices may not be able to read the teacher’s agenda or the cultural structure of classroom activities. Their strategic actions are thus used simply to get by in a given situation, rather than to participate meaningfully, though it is possible to assume that their actions are part of the socialization in which a newcomer is apprenticed within a particular community of practice (Rymes & Pash, 2001). From a sociocultural perspective, language classrooms are not only a place for the direct instruction of efficient strategies, but also a social arena in which L2 learner strategies emerge and develop as learners who continuously participate in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this sense, we reiterate the importance of acknowledging L2 learners’ prior knowledge and experiences relating to their L1 literacy and culture as valuable assets or funds of knowledge (Moje, Ciechanowski, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004; Moll & Whitemore, 1993). To do so, it is also important for teachers to reflect on their own ethnolinguistic backgrounds and preconceptions concerning the privileged position of English. Although students in American schools are increasingly diverse in color, culture, and economic status, the majority of teachers continue to be White, middle-class, monolingual women (Gay & Howard, 2000). Sincere and straightforward conversations on sensitive issues such as racial conflicts or linguistic marginality need to be held between students and teachers as well as among students as necessary.

**Considering the Difference Between L1 and L2 Learning Process**

According to Harper and de Jong (2004), there is a tendency to equate the process of learning an L1 with that of learning an L2. This approach may cause educators to expect L2 learners to follow the same strategic trajectory employed for purposes of L1 learning. However, such a view does not sufficiently take
into account the very different social contexts in which strategies develop (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). Unlike L1 learners learning their mother tongues, L2 learners often feel marginalized due to their marked cultural, ethnic, and linguistic status and, at times, they engage in conflicts with members of other racial groups (McKay & Wong, 1996; Jang, 2008). Thus, to equate L1 and L2 learning without considering the specific social context in which these students are situated may lead educators to blame students unfairly for their underachievement regarding English language skills.

Conclusion

The examples illustrated in this article revealed that the genesis of L2 learner strategies was mediated by multiple contextual factors that were embedded in institutional, interactional, and instructional practices. It thus challenges ESL educators by highlighting the significance of constructing a learning environment that can facilitate L2 learners’ use of positive strategies to enhance their language learning (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007; van Lier, 2000, 2004). By perceiving the language classroom as a learning community, we hope this article sheds light on the promising construct of the “strategic classroom” that makes “maximum use of affective, cognitive, metacognitive, and social learner strategies to influence effective learning communities” (Takeuchi et al., 2007, p. 91).

Notes

1. The term L2 learner strategies encompass strategies for both L2 learning and L2 use (Cohen, 1996).
2. Examples of the successful language learners’ strategies identified include attention to form, monitoring one’s own and other’s speech, active task approach, realization of language as a system, classification/verification, memorization, inductive inferencing, and so on (Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975).

References


