Abstract

This article explains key concepts found in the articles in this special issue, such as second and foreign languages, learning styles, learning strategies, and motivation. In addition, this article introduces the other articles in the issue and explains how they relate to each other, to the concepts, and to psychological and sociocultural research traditions in applied linguistics.

1. Introduction

The main goal of this special issue of The International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching is to enlighten readers, stimulate discussion, and provoke further questioning about the role of styles and strategies in learning another language. Although the focus is on learning strategies and styles, certain articles in this issue deal not just with these variables but also with language learning motivation, tasks, proficiency, achievement, and age. The two purposes of the present article are: (1) to introduce important concepts found in this special issue; and, at the same time, (2) to introduce the other articles in this issue and show how they relate to each other, to the concepts, and to two research traditions in applied linguistics. The abbreviation “L2” is employed here to refer to second and foreign languages, as differentiated from the first language or mother tongue (L1).

2. Order of the articles in the special issue

The articles in this issue have the following order based on their foci, conceptual relationships, and age groups studied. The most general article comes first: “The learner’s side of foreign language learning: Where do styles, strategies and tasks meet?” by Andrew Cohen. Following this is Nae-Dong Yang’s article “Integrating portfolios into learning strategy-based instruction for EFL college students”, with an emphasis on young adult students’ learning strategies and styles, attitudes, beliefs and proficiency.
The next article centers on reading strategies. In “An analytic comparison of three models of reading strategy instruction” Susan Allen reviews three distinct approaches to reading strategy instruction and synthesizes existing research on each.

The final two articles concern the learning strategies of children. “Language learning strategy profiles of elementary school students in Taiwan” by Rae Lan and Rebecca L. Oxford deals with strategies, motivation, gender, and proficiency among very young learners. “Using cluster analysis to uncover L2 learner differences in strategy use, will to learn and achievement over time” by Koyo Yamamori, Takamichi Isoda, Tomohito Hiromori, and Rebecca L. Oxford unites motivation, achievement, learning strategies, and (as a background variable) learning styles in a study of middle-school students.

Cohen’s article is theoretical and has practical implications. Allen’s article reviews research and theory on her subject. Quantitative research is the foundation of the articles by Yang, Lan and Oxford, and Yamamori et al. These contributions represent both the eastern and western hemispheres.

3. Organization of the present article

The present article addresses the following: second and foreign language environments, L2 tasks, L2 learning styles, L2 learning strategies, L2 use strategies, L2 motivation, and psychological and sociocultural research aspects.

4. Second and foreign language environments

In this special issue, as in much other literature in the field of applied linguistics and language learning, there is a distinction between second and foreign language learning environments. A second language (e.g., Portuguese learned by a non-native speaker in Brazil) is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication, where abundant input exists in that language, where the language is normally essential for survival, and therefore where motivation is typically strong to learn the language. In contrast, a foreign language (e.g., German learned in Australia) is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction, where input in that language is limited, where the language is not usually needed in order to survive, and thus where motivation to learn the language might be quite variable. The difference between second and foreign language learning environments sometimes proves to be crucial with reference to learning styles, strategies, motivation, and other factors in language learning.

Foreign language learning environments are central to the articles by Cohen, Yang, Lan and Oxford, and Yamamori et al. Allen’s theoretical and methodological contribution is equally applicable to second and foreign language con-
texts. Two of the strategy instruction methods Allen describes were first developed in the L1 reading area.

5. L2 tasks

In relation to L2 learning, the term task can have many meanings. Although task once referred to a duty (or a tax), in the L2 field the term has come to mean a segment or work plan that is part of an educational curriculum. The term has also accrued other meanings, such as a behavioral blueprint or set of instructions concerning what students are expected to do, as distinct from an activity, which (to certain sociocultural theorists) refers to what students really do in response to the task that is presented. Tasks can be oriented toward fluency or accuracy, or a combination of both.

Cohen’s article in this issue intimately yokes the concept of tasks with L2 learning styles and strategies, defined below. Cohen shows both theoretical and practical linkages among these three constructs. Yang’s article includes a number of tasks required for university students’ ongoing development of an L2 learning portfolio. Yamamori et al. explore the relationship between task demands and strategy use at different substages of early L2 learning. The association between task requirements and strategies is also mentioned by Allen and by Lan and Oxford, although it is not a main theme.

6. L2 learning styles

The term learning style refers to the general approach preferred by the student when learning a subject, acquiring a language, or dealing with a difficult problem (Oxford 2001; Reid 1998). Learning style is an overall pattern that provides broad direction to learning and makes the same instructional method beloved by some students and hated by others.

Within the area of learning styles, each individual reflects sensory style dimensions (visual/auditory/hands-on) and social style dimensions (extroverted/introverted). Every person also has preferences along cognitive style dimensions, among which are concrete-sequential/abstract-intuitive, closure-oriented/open, detail-focused/holistic (sometimes called particular/global), and analyzing/synthesizing. We can locate ourselves somewhere on a continuum for each style dimension. For example, none of us is likely to be totally concrete-sequential, without an iota of abstract-intuition (see Cohen’s article for details).

Most of the articles refer in various ways to L2 learning styles, even though strategies receive relatively more attention across the six articles in this issue. Cohen’s article equally highlights styles, strategies, and tasks. Yang directly studies linkages among learning styles, strategy choice, proficiency, and attitudes. However, other articles in this issue feature learning styles in a less prominent way. For instance, the article by Yamamori et al. interprets learn-
ers’ choice of strategies partially in relation to probable learning style preferences, although these researchers do not directly assess learning styles. Lan and Oxford cite an investigation by another researcher on the association between learning styles and strategies among Taiwanese children. The greater attention to strategies as compared to styles in this issue reflects a general tendency in current L2 research.

7. L2 learning strategies

The term *strategy* is from Greek *stratēgía* ‘command of a general’. In ancient Greece, strategy involved a general’s plan to win a war (Oxford 2000). In broad modern usage, a strategy is a plan that is consciously aimed at meeting a goal. The warlike meaning of the term has largely fallen away, but conscious control, intention, and goal-directedness remain essential criteria for a strategy.

*L2 strategies* are defined as any strategies related to the L2, including strategies for learning or using the L2 (Cohen 1998). *L2 learning strategies* are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, techniques [or thoughts] – 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: 63). L2 learning strategies can help learners improve their own perception, reception, storage, retention, and retrieval of language information. Examples of L2 learning strategies are planning for a language task, evaluating one’s own learning, employing analysis to find the meaning of a word or expression, and asking questions (Cohen 1998; O’Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). Literally hundreds of L2 learning strategies exist.

A learning strategy cannot, a priori, be categorized as either good or bad. What makes a strategy positive for a given person? A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: (1) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand; (2) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies for doing the task; and (3) the strategy coordinates with the student’s general learning style preferences to one degree or another. Strategies that fit these conditions “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford 1990: 8).

L2 learning strategies are of key concern in every article in this special issue. Cohen shows how L2 learning strategies relate to tasks and learning styles, Lan and Oxford explore the strategies of young children in Taiwan, Yang investigates the strategies of Taiwanese university students, Allen discusses three different approaches to teaching reading strategies to students of various ages, and Yamamori et al. link learning strategies with Japanese university students’ L2 achievement and will to learn.
8. **L2 use strategies**

In Cohen’s article in this issue, as well as in a relatively recent book (Cohen 1998), he distinguishes between L2 learning strategies and *L2 use strategies*. He defines L2 use strategies as conscious techniques employed after L2 learning has occurred, when the material is accessible for communicative use. According to Cohen, L2 use strategies include four types: strategies for retrieving information about the L2 already stored in memory, strategies for rehearsing L2 structures, cover strategies to help the learner avoid looking stupid or unprepared, and strategies for communicating in the L2 despite knowledge gaps.

9. **L2 motivation**

*L2 learning motivation*, also known as *L2 motivation*, means the desire to learn another language. The root of *motivation* is Latin *movēre* ‘to move’. To *motivate* means to provide with a *motive*, that is, an inner drive, impulse, intention, or goal that causes a person to do something or act in a certain way, while *motivation* technically means the condition of being moved to action. In the L2 field, major research on L2 motivation began with the work of Gardner and Lambert (1972), continued with Gardner’s (1985) social-psychological model which distinguished between instrumental and integrative reasons for learning the L2, and in the 1990s expanded to include a wider variety of L2 learning orientations and models (see, e.g., Crookes and Schmidt 1991; Dörnyei 1994, 2001; Gardner and Tremblay 1994; Oxford 1996).

In this issue, motivation is particularly underscored in the article by Yamamori et al., who discuss the *will to learn the L2*. These authors use cluster analysis over a period of time to distinguish among four groups of L2 learners according to will to learn, strategy use, and achievement. A different aspect of motivation, *liking the L2*, is integral to Lan and Oxford’s article, which investigates relationships among L2-liking, strategy use, proficiency, and gender. In her portfolio study, Yang links learners’ beliefs and attitudes (which are closely related to motivation) with strategy use, learning style, and proficiency.

10. **Psychological and sociocultural threads in the articles**

Although other types of psychological research traditions exist, a specifically quantitative psychological tendency has dominated much research in L2 learning and applied linguistics. This tradition looks at characteristics of individuals, often aggregated into groups, without closely focusing on the highly personalized, dynamic, socially interactive relationships among people in L2 learning and teaching. This particular psychological tradition is exemplified by statistical reporting about styles, strategies, anxiety, beliefs, and L2 performance using surveys, tests, and other measures (see, e.g., Nunan 1992). The great value
of this tradition is that it reveals the “big picture” across large numbers of individuals and variables simultaneously. The drawback is that the finely tuned, detailed analysis of individual cases is typically missing.

In addition, a qualitative tradition is now becoming increasingly evident in applied linguistics research. As Lazaraton (2003: 1) states, “Qualitative research has come of age in applied linguistics, where it continues to flourish.” One of the main qualitative perspectives of L2 learning is the sociocultural view. This perspective looks in great detail at the deeply interpersonal, “mediating” (supportive, assisting) relationships, or lack thereof, between teachers and learners. In “mediated learning,” a more capable or knowledgeable person, possibly an expert, assists students’ learning in a given setting. Learners develop greater self-regulation or autonomy by means of such support (Lantolf 2000; Vygotsky 1978). Mediated learning is a central tenet of various sociocultural approaches to L2 learning (see Lantolf 2000; Norton 2001; Williams and Burden 1997; for more general treatments outside of L2 learning, see Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1996; Rogoff and Lave 1984). Another key sociocultural concept is “situated learning,” referring to the perception that any learning is situated in a certain social and cultural setting, at a particular time, and with specific individuals interacting as participants. The benefit of this tradition is that it provides a close-up picture of the people and processes involved in L2 learning and teaching. A disadvantage is that it typically does not offer generalizability or comparability across sites and groups.

This special issue springs largely from the psychological tradition, although elements of the sociocultural tradition make themselves felt as well. Cohen’s valuable article follows the path of psychological theory. Because this is not an empirical study but instead a theoretical exploration with practical implications, there are no “findings” as such, either qualitative or quantitative. In this article Cohen does not focus on a personal, mediating relationship between teacher and student, although he does mention the option of “learner training” and “style and strategy training.” Cohen concentrates on how individual learners use strategies related to their learning styles and to the L2 task at hand.

The positive potentials of strategy instruction are cited in several other articles in this issue. For instance, Allen’s article details three different approaches to strategy instruction. Allen specifically shows how L2 teachers can provide reading strategy instruction that offers appropriate “scaffolding”, which is gradually removed as the learner becomes more self-regulated and independent. Thus, the article explores mediated learning, although the term is not used. Yang explains how, in strategies-based instruction, the teacher can strongly encourage and structure L2 students’ use of portfolios and can affect L2 strategy use. Again, this process reflects mediated learning, although the interpersonal relationship between teacher and students seems intentionally underplayed due to Yang’s quantitative orientation in this article.
The importance of the social and cultural context is readily apparent in several articles in this issue. For instance, using quantitative research, Yang, Yamamori et al., and Lan and Oxford stress the strong influence of the social and cultural background in which L2 learning occurs. Taken together, their articles show that certain factors in a given environment or culture can nurture some learners’ L2 performance but not that of others; can encourage some learners’ use of certain types of learning strategies; and can affect learners’ motivation in predictable, or at least understandable, ways. However, these three articles did not intend to describe the nature of the interpersonal relationship between specific teachers and learners. Descriptions of the interpersonal aspects of situated learning would necessitate a more finely grained form of analysis, such as that available through qualitative research methods like ethnography or narrative learner histories (see Oxford 2001).

11. Conclusion

This special issue is intended to spur debate and discussion within the applied linguistics community. Such outcomes can lead to further research that will shed light on the role played by strategies, styles, and other factors in L2 learning. Perhaps the articles presented here will also bring the psychological and sociocultural research traditions into sharper focus and will thereby promote our greater understanding of both.

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References


