Strategy Training: Developing Learning Awareness in a Beginning FL Classroom

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T his paper outlines a project on language learning strategies (LLS) training conducted with first-year university students of Italian. The project stemmed from the realization that the language learning difficulties some first-year students encountered were due to a lack of awareness of what learning a foreign language actually entails and of what type of study it requires, particularly outside class. As a result of this observation, strategy instruction was used to expose students to LLS to help them tackle specific difficulties while increasing their awareness of strategies available to them to enhance their language study ability. In addition to outlining the framework upon which the LLS training model was based, this paper illustrates examples of the LLS activities in which students were engaged. It then presents an analysis of students' perceptions of this learning experience and a discussion of how LLS training affected their range and frequency of strategy use while also generating greater learning awareness. The paper concludes by discussing implications for future integration of LLS training into beginner language courses and it proposes further investigation to be conducted.

Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) are thoughts that students have and actions they take to assist their learning (Chamot, 1998). Research into strategy training shows that better strategy users who display a greater variety of strategies and employ them more frequently, make better language learners (Nunan, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Less successful students can, therefore, improve their language performance if they become more strategic in their learning approach and develop an appropriate repertoire of learning strategies. Research also indicates that teachers may play a crucial role in making students more aware of the range of possible strategies by making strategy training part of the foreign language classroom (Cohen, 1998, p. 65).

The decision to experiment with strategy training in the beginner Italian course at Griffith University stemmed from a desire to solve what Allwright[i] (2000) refers to as a "puzzle"—that the language learning difficulties some first-year students encountered seemed to be related to a limited awareness of what learning a foreign language entails and of the study skills it requires, particularly for independent study outside the classroom.

This paper describes the development, application, and preliminary results of a strategy training model designed to meet the needs of learners with no previous experience of strategy training and to involve learners actively in the training process.

Strategy training models

In an overview of strategy training studies, Cohen (1998, pp. 71–73) discusses three main instructional frameworks developed respectively by Pearson and Dole (1987), Chamot and O'Malley (1994) and Oxford et al. (1990). All three frameworks are designed to make students aware of the rationale behind strategy use and to give them opportunities to practice strategies and discuss their value. The frameworks' approach differ, however, in terms of the amount of prior strategic knowledge students are expected to have, and the degree of self-direction they can apply when carrying out a training activity.

In Pearson and Dole's (1987) approach, isolated strategies are first modelled by the teacher, then their value is explained and finally students practice them in activities. In this approach, learners do not need to be acquainted with strategy use and they are guided by the teacher's directions during the whole process. The teacher's role is that of controller and manager. In contrast, Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) and Oxford et al.'s (1990) frameworks place priority on the learners' own experience and the teacher's role is that of a facilitator helping learners become more aware of and responsible for their learning. Where these two approaches differ is in the degree of familiarity learners already have with LLS. Chamot and O'Malley's framework (1994) is applicable to students who have already had some practice in strategy use and development and requires learners to engage in strategy planning from the very beginning of an activity. Oxford et al.'s (1990) approach, on the other hand, starts from learners' language experience and can be undertaken with students who are not familiar with strategic learning. In this approach, the sequence to strategy training is as follows: students first conduct an activity and discuss how they did it; then, under the teacher's guidance, they reflect on the usefulness of strategies selected and consider how they can improve their own use of current strategies or employ new ones.

Oxford et al.'s approach to strategy training provided the framework for the development of the LLS training model adopted in this project as it requires students' active involvement in the training process, but it is also suitable to learners unfamiliar with strategic learning. Moreover its learner-centred focus also seems to be in agreement with what Gaudiani (1981) considers to be the basic principles of a participatory language classroom, where great importance is placed on students' involvement in their learning progress; and a supportive classroom is created in which responsibilities are shared. A learner-centred strategy training approach is considered to encourage more effective student participation in learning, where students first discover about themselves as learners and then reflect on how to better manage their learning. It also promotes a teacher-student rapport that is based on a dialogue, where teachers assume the role of *change agents* and help their students become more independent in a supportive and challenging way (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991).

In addition to the above considerations, the development of the training model was informed by two observations particularly relevant to the teaching context in first-year Italian at Griffith University. Firstly, given that training in LLS should lead students to self-direct their learning, their involvement at the very start of the training process can facilitate the transition from guided practice to self-directed strategy use (Cohen, 1990). And secondly, if the aim is to promote life-long learning in the classroom, then

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participants should be involved in deciding what they need to focus on in their learning (Allwright, 1999).

In light of these considerations, the LLS training adopted in this project features two characteristics which differentiates this approach from the case studies of strategy training described by Oxford et al. (1990) and makes it even more learner-centred. Firstly, strategy learning activities are designed to target problem areas students themselves had identified before undergoing the training. Secondly, student surveys were used at different stages of the implementation of the model not only as a means for gathering data, but also as a tool to promote learners' reflection.

Strategy training design and implementation

At Griffith University, Italian Studies belongs to the School of Languages and Linguistics however students come from many different degree programs. Beginner courses are aimed at students with no prior knowledge of Italian and, for some students, studying Italian might be their first formal contact with foreign language learning. The first-year program is divided into two semester-long courses each entailing five contact hours per week (a one hour lecture and two two-hour language workshops). Strategy training was introduced in second semester[ii].

At the end of the first-semester course, students were asked to reflect on their Italian language learning experience so far and to indicate, via a questionnaire, which aspects of their learning they felt needed a more efficient study method, and which language areas they would like to focus on in their following language course. Results from this initial questionnaire indicated that students thought it would be most beneficial to work on strategies which would help them cope with three language areas in particular. These three areas were: learning from teacher feedback, studying vocabulary, and understanding and applying grammar.

Their comments also revealed a certain inability to cope with language learning difficulties independently. Students appeared to attribute their learning difficulties to an external factor, such as the way a language point was taught in class or presented in their textbook, rather than trying to understand what was really hindering their learning process and why. Moreover, they seemed to place themselves in a rather passive position when confronted with difficulties they had studying at home, where there was no teacher to provide assistance.

Taking into consideration the students' comments and the course content and aims, it was decided to select a set of strategies considered effective to help students tackle the difficulties they had identified and to deal with the new learning material. The strategies selected belong to three broad types of learning strategies commonly discussed in the literature: metacognitive strategies, used by students to plan, monitor, or evaluate their learning; cognitive strategies, concerning the actual manipulation of the learning material (they include organising, grouping and elaborating the material, as well as relating new knowledge to existing knowledge); and social-affective strategies, where students call on the teacher for assistance or work collaboratively with others on a common task (Chamot, 1993, p. 308).

At the beginning of the new semester students filled in another survey indicating which vocabulary, grammar and feedback strategies they had already used and which ones they would like to learn more about. This information was then used to design the training activities.

The integration of strategy training into the different parts of the course aimed to tightly link students' language experience to their experience of 'learning how to learn'. Activities performed in the lecture had the function of introducing specific strategies and guiding learners to reflect on their role in learning; while the workshops offered further practical opportunities for strategy implementation and reinforcement. Generally, activities encouraged learners to activate a set of strategies rather than practice one learning strategy. This was done in light of Oxford's (1990, p. 205) observation that a *broad focus* strategy training, which combines groups of strategies (such as cognitive, metacognitive, social-affective), shows students how strategies interact and gives them a broader understanding of the language learning process.

During the training learners were informed of the value and purpose of strategies employed in specific activities and of the possibility of employing them in different contexts. However, when presenting new strategies, students carried out an activity first, without any training, and then remarked on what they did to fulfil the task. Subsequently, building on their observations, the teacher discussed the usefulness of strategies they used, introduced other helpful techniques for the task at hand, and invited learners to try out the new strategies on similar tasks.

By first having students evaluating their own experience and then trying out and evaluating new techniques, we wanted to encourage them to develop a wider range of strategies in a supportive non-threatening way. As observed by Oxford (1990, p. 207), teachers need to be sensitive of students' original strategy preference and avoid whisking away their 'security blanket' as this might demotivate their strategy learning. For this reason credits were not awarded for attainment of new strategies; it was assumed that students would feel freer to experiment with them, and would accept or reject old and new strategies on the basis of their effectiveness for their individual learning, rather than use them purely because they were required for an assessment item.

Throughout the training implementation student responses were monitored through a series of surveys which served a double purpose: firstly, to provide an understanding of what impact the training was having on students' perceived use of strategies; and secondly, to give students an opportunity to reflect on their own learning. Being able to reflect on the processes underlying one's own learning is a crucial characteristic of the 'good language learner' (Nunan, 1991), and questionnaires can prove to be very useful time-saving tools to bring about reflection and awareness raising in strategy training (Isoda, 2004, p. 9).

Sample activities

This section demonstrates the approach to strategy training by presenting a sequence of language learning activities designed to tackle one of the three language areas singled out by students: learning how to deal with teacher feedback.

Table 1 shows the sequence of activities that students carried out during a lecture, which required them to activate cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective strategies. Firstly (Part 1 step 1), students worked individually and self corrected mistakes which had been underlined in their own work, making use of all resources available to them. This step helped to activate cognitive strategies such as "resourcing", "laboration" and "deducing". Secondly (Part 1 steps 2 and 3), students were invited to compare their own corrections to their teacher's feedback, promoting the metacognitive strategies of "self-monitoring" and "self-evaluation". Students were required to play an active role in this exercise by: paying attention to their recurring errors and their ability to correct them; writing down their corrections in a notebook; creating new sentences with the correct form; and calling on their teacher when in need of further clarification. These particular strategies were those that, in the initial strategy training planning phase, students had reported to not use often.

Table 1

Learning from teacher feedback activities

Part 1	**1.** Go through your *Language Quiz 2* and try to make as many corrections as you can (using your textbook or other resources). We have underlined the parts that need to be modified.
	2. Now look at your *Language Quiz 2* marked by your teacher. Consider all the corrections she made and compare them with the corrections you made. Were you able to correct errors by yourself? Which ones were most frequent? If you have any questions please ask your teacher.
	3. In your notebook make a list of all your mistakes. Write short sentences including the right form of the words that were wrong.
Part 2	First individually and then with other two students think about the following questions:
	• What do you do with your Language Quiz when your teacher returns it to you with her feedback? (e.g., you rewrite the whole language quiz; you read it carefully without rewriting anything; you don't do anything; you rewrite only the parts that are wrong; etc.)
	• What helps you to understand and remember the mistakes you have made?
	• What helps you to remember your teacher's corrections?
Part 3	Report back to the class on the outcomes of your group discussion.

Students' self-editing work was followed by a reflection activity (Part 2) whereby learners were encouraged to think individually first and then discuss in groups strategies used to retain teacher feedback and their efficacy. This "sharing" (a form of social strategy) had two aims. Firstly, it allowed learners to interact with their peers regarding different techniques for dealing with the same language points; and secondly, it encouraged them to experience the fact that learning strategies are not inherently 'good' or "effective", but rather that they need to be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness for the individual learner (Cohen, 1990).

Finally, in Part 3, each group reported back to the whole class on the techniques they had found useful for retaining teacher feedback. This student-led discussion also gave the opportunity to share the results from the questionnaires conducted at the beginning of semester regarding how they thought they dealt with the feedback provided by the

teachers. By sharing this data with the students, it was then possible to discuss the relevance of strategies they had just used in the activity but had reported not to employ frequently in the initial questionnaire. It was assumed that having tried them out, learners would be more likely to understand their value and to appreciate how strategies which at first might seem rather time consuming become a fruitful investment for their long-term language learning. Subsequent language workshops and lectures offered students further opportunities to apply some of the feedback strategies they had practised and to transfer them to other language tasks.

Data collection method

Throughout the implementation of the strategy training students' responses were monitored to ascertain

(a) what impact students believed the training was having on their language learning; and

(b) whether, by being exposed to LLS training, learners felt they had expanded their repertoire of strategy usage in the targeted language areas.

Two types of questionnaires[iii] were used to monitor and evaluate students' perceptions of the impact of the strategy training on their learning. One type was predominantly quantitative in that it aimed to measure students' strategy use and non-use at the beginning and at the end of semester. The other was conducted in the middle of semester and was aimed at providing students with the opportunity to reflect and comment, through open-ended questions, on their learning and strategy use half-way through the course.

The quantitative surveys[iv] featured a series of statements describing various strategies, which were grouped under five strategy clusters.[v] Students were asked to indicate their use and non-use of each strategy in terms of frequency and perceived usefulness. For each strategy cluster, students could also add information about individual strategies they were using. The final part of the survey included open-ended questions regarding the 'learning how to learn' component of the course, as the aim was to see the difference between their initial perceptions of strategy training compared to their thoughts at the end of semester.

The mid-semester qualitative survey included a number of open questions which asked students to assess their satisfaction with their performance so far in the course, to compare their approach to learning across the two semesters, and to reflect on how they could improve their learning of Italian. In this way learners could evaluate their performance and plan for the second half of semester accordingly. The students' comments provided an insight into the impact the training was having on their learning and what students perceived to be the main obstacles to their own learning.

Analysis of student responses

Student perceptions of strategy use

The initial and final surveys gathered students' perceptions of their use of feedback, vocabulary, and grammar learning strategies.

The *feedback strategies* identified in both surveys included cognitive, metacognitive, and

social-affective strategies. Results show that the percentage of students using a strategy and finding it useful increased by the end of semester, in four out of the nine strategies listed (increases ranged from 11% to 21%). The most significant increase was in relation to the metacognitive strategy of "making a note of one's own mistakes" which saw a 21% increase, with 92% of students trying this strategy. There was also a 21% increase in the number of students using the strategy of "paying particular attention to the teacher's explanations on errors made", with all students reporting to have tried this strategy.

The feedback strategies that students identified as using the least were the more self-directed[vi] metacognitive strategies. In the final survey, 76% of students indicated they had never looked in the library for other textbooks or grammar books to clarify a mistake they had made and 48% had not used their textbook to do additional exercises on language points they got wrong. So, even though a positive shift emerges from the data in terms of students being more actively involved in the feedback process, it is clear that self-directed revision, involving the strategy of resourcing other texts, remains unused by almost half of the student cohort, despite the teacher's encouragement to engage in these types of activities outside class.

Vocabulary learning strategies generally proved to be very popular, with the data showing a notable increase in the percentage of students who used the vocabulary learning strategies and found them useful. Results also show an increase in the percentage of students who tried new strategies, even if they ended up not finding them useful. The greatest increase was concerned mainly with cognitive strategies (which had been practised in the lectures). These included "analysing words to identify their meaning", which showed an increase of 21% of students who tried it and found it useful; "organising words according to their meaning or grammatical function" which increased by 20%; and "making a mental image of new words", with 30% more students finding it useful and an overall 68% of students who had at least tried it compared to the 22% at the beginning of semester. It is considered that these results reflect very positively on the objective of encouraging students to use new learning strategies.

The vocabulary strategies with the highest percentage of students who had not tried them by the end of semester were: strategies linked to a particular learning preference (such as the kinaesthetic strategy of "acting out new verbs"); strategies which had not been practiced in the lectures and required a greater degree of self-directed learning (such as the cognitive strategy of "creating a system of flash cards to learn new vocabulary"); and some strategies which, even if discussed and practised in the lectures, turned out to be rather unpopular and students seemed reluctant to use them (for example, 40% of students reported to have never tried the strategy of "writing new words in meaningful sentences").

Increases in student use of *grammar strategies* were reported to have occurred in those cognitive and social strategies that students had practised and discussed in class, as well as in strategies which students had not tried in class but were encouraged to apply and explore in their own time outside class. The cognitive strategies that students found most useful were "writing sentences to try out new grammar points" (with a 30% increase); "comparing L1 and L2 language systems", with 92% of students experimenting with this strategy (of which 72% found it useful); and "regularly read the grammar notes in their

textbook (with a 30% increase). The social strategy of discussing grammar points with other students' showed an increase of 27%.

These percentages may be considered as a positive indicator of students moving towards some independence in managing their learning. Students did not show, however, the same initiative with "resourcing" strategies (with 72% of students never having consulted additional textbooks or the internet to clarify grammatical points) or strategies which required further personal elaboration, such as rewriting the rules in their own words or drawing diagrams to clarify rules. Further understanding of students' disinclination to use these grammar strategies is necessary to find effective ways to encourage learners to explore them, appreciate their value and include them in their LLS repertoire.

Student perceptions of strategy training

Students perceptions of the training were monitored during and after its implementation. The mid-semester questionnaire asked students to reflect on their approach to language learning and to consider their performance in the course. When asked whether they had been thinking about their learning in terms of language strategies they used or could use, 55% of students answered positively. On the other hand, 30% said they hadn't and they commented that they preferred to use the strategies they already had or that they had tried new ones but didn't find them useful. These observations may seem negative in terms of use of new and/or different strategies, however, they show an active management of learning and a conscious student choice of strategy use or non-use.

When asked what they thought about their results so far in the course, 55% of students commented that they were happy with them. Some directly linked their satisfaction to their use of learning strategies in general, while others considered the change in their learning as an outcome of the application of specific strategies, in particular social and metacognitive strategies, while working in class and outside. In terms of social strategies, some students listed studying more with friends or relatives as an important reason for their change. Others ascribed their learning improvement to their greater use of metacognitive strategies of 'preparation', 'revision' and 'organisation' of study materials.

Some students also commented on their increased motivation and committed attitude towards study. These observations seem to confirm that strategy training, by adding a new dimension of interest to the language learning process, can enhance students' engagement.

> "I have been more motivated and enthusiastic because the lectures and workshops have been more involving and interesting".
> "I'm more focussed"; "I'm applying myself more".
> "This approach gives you more options and keeps you interested".

Some students who thought they were not doing so well in Italian at that point in the course, recognised that their lack of success was not linked to not knowing how to go about studying, but rather to time-management and organisational factors. Indeed, when asked what they could do to improve their Italian, they identified a number of self-

directed learning strategies as a way of addressing the issue (from 'looking for additional materials in the library', to 'gaining greater exposure to the language', to 'focusing on mistakes and problem areas'). This is exemplified by this student's comment: "*I am happy with my learning strategies but I haven't studied!*" It appears that, at times, it is not the students' perception of a strategy validity that affects its use, but rather students' capability to cope with external factors affecting their studies.

By the end of semester, students felt that the exposure to new strategies had assisted their learning of Italian in general (92% of students in the final survey indicated so) and it had helped them to "do better" (80% of students felt this way). The following comments show students' awareness of the importance of having a variety of strategies to draw on in their learning.

> "It [LLS training] has helped me to think in different ways and it has given me more options with trying to understand things".
> "It has broadened my learning abilities".
> "I discovered a few strategies that turned out to be very useful and that helped me".
> "Different approaches allow for learning something another way if the first strategy does not work".
> "One particular technique may not work all the time".

Their observations also show a greater willingness to take charge of their own learning by confronting problems and seeing themselves as the main agent in the learning process. This is further illustrated by the following remarks students made in relation to error correction: *"Focusing more on my errors and especially reoccurring errors has allowed me to correct my mistakes";* as well as in relation to greater autonomy in language use: *"They [the learning strategies] helped me not only remember the meaning of words, but also how to use them in sentences";* and in tailoring the techniques presented in class to their own needs: *"It [the training] has helped me to realise different methods that could work for me".* In light of the observation that student involvement is crucial in promoting greater responsibility in learning (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991), it appears that the learner-centred focus of the training played an important role in the development of such an independent stance as expressed by the students in the final questionnaire.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken through the project suggests that the majority of students perceived the strategy training to be beneficial in raising their awareness of existing language learning strategies; providing opportunities to reflect on themselves as learners; and expanding their strategy repertoire. By being exposed to strategy training, students felt they had increased their range of techniques to deal with their language learning. This is a positive outcome of the project as a wider range of LLS is thought to be a crucial factor for good language learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

As far as strategy non-use is concerned, the data indicate *which* strategies students decided not to use, even if they perceived them as useful, and which students never attempted to use. However, a deeper understanding of *why* they did not employ them is now required in order to further enhance the training. Firstly, additional insight into the

reluctance to use strategies perceived as useful will help to plan ways of encouraging students to explore these strategies, realize their investment value and employ them. Furthermore, understanding what lies behind the perception of a strategy as non-useful (and therefore not worth trying out) will help to identify what instructors can and cannot act on in terms of strategy training.

The analysis of the data has proven useful in making the instructors aware of their own unstated assumption that some strategies are more 'obvious' and therefore intuitively employed, even by beginner learners. At the end of the semester, the substantial increase in students' reported use of what were considered 'intuitive' strategies such as making a note of the mistakes made, and "paying attention during class to teacher explanations of problematic language points. This highlighted the importance of explicitly training students in the very basics of LLS from the very start of their university journey.

The next stage in the project is to experiment with extending LLS training in the first-semester first-year course. This training is based on the same approach outlined in this paper and is designed to precede and complement the second-semester LLS work. It targets the needs of absolute beginner university students and combines exposure to general study skills training with a specific focus on the development of grammar learning strategies. The aim is to expose students, early on in their language learning experience, to a number of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to help them deal, independently of the teacher, with new linguistic structures. Additionally, in continuing to run the second-semester LLS training, our attention will be on further enhancing student participation in the process and gaining better understanding of the reasons behind students' strategy use and non-use.

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[i] Allright (2000, p. 5) advocates working with classroom 'puzzles' (rather than 'problems') , as this term is not negatively loaded and allows for investigating areas which are not problematic but interesting to understand better.

[ii] We introduced the training in second-semester as part of a school–wide project on assisting students transition from first to second year language courses.

[iii] Copies of these questionnaires will be made available at the Conference.

[iv] In designing these surveys we drew on Cohen, Oxford and Chi's (n.d.) *Language strategy use survey* available on the CARLA website. The survey was adapted to suit the project's monitoring and evaluation needs by changing and adding strategy clusters, descriptions of use or non-use of each strategy, and statements describing strategies.

[v] The five language learning strategy clusters were feedback, vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading. The listening and reading strategy clusters - which will not be evaluated in this study - were included as some language workshops focussed on the development of listening and reading skills.

[vi] The term 'self-directed strategies' refers to strategies used out of class, which require independent search for and use of further resources; and/or personal elaboration of materials.

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