

Why Training in VLS/LLS?

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This article gives an account of vocabulary learning strategy instruction (VLSI) and language learning strategy instruction (LLSI) in relation to three questions: a) What does it mean by vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) in comparison with language learning strategy (LLS)?; b) Can second language learners get through their learning process without being introduced to any learning strategies?; and c) What is the point of training in VLS/LLS in the second language classroom? Particularly, the body of this article focuses on the pedagogical implication of LLS/VLS in the second language (L2) classroom. The questions are discussed respectively in the following sections.

A) What does it mean by vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) in comparison with language learning strategy (LLS)?

For more than two decades, LLS has received recognition from educators and researchers, especially in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). This, to some extent, affected the increase of interest in VLS because learning strategies include VLS, as stated by Nation (2001): *"Vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies."*

According to Wenden's (1987) notion: *"Strategies are problem oriented. Learners utilise them to respond to a learning need, or to use a more technical definition from cognitive psychology, to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information."* Moreover, Robbins (1996) states: *"Strategies are deliberate, cognitive steps used by learners to enhance comprehension, learning and retention of the target language."* Oxford (1990) asserts that learning strategies are divided into: *'direct strategies'* and *'indirect strategies'*. The former is concerned with *'memory strategies'*, *'cognitive strategies'*, and *'compensation strategies'*. The latter focuses on *'metacognitive strategies'*, *'affective strategies'*, and *'social strategies'*. Thus, in order to become successful language learners, it is assumed that learners need to utilise both strategies to cope with their language learning effectively.

In addition, Chamot (1987) defines LLS: *"Learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information."*

Clearly there are differences in the way various scholars define LLS. However, it appears that the various definitions also share a core similarity. They clearly involve three prominent categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective strategies, as mentioned in (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994; Oxford, 1990).

Since VLS are clearly related to LLS, we tend to go by the aforementioned definitions. VLS, therefore, mean techniques, tools, or devices consciously employed by the learners to facilitate their vocabulary learning. Moreover, the VLS and LLS are teachable in that learners can be taught other types of VLS or LLS and how to operate them effectively. Thus, they are provided with a choice of VLS/LLS and are taught how to use them so as to develop their vocabulary as well as the second (L2) or foreign language (FL) learning and to effectively deal with their vocabulary and L2 or FL learning problems.

It can perhaps be said that if language learners are well exposed to VLS/LLS knowledge, they will be able to enlarge their VLS/LLS repertoire, and they, then, can make use of the strategies in order to attain their language learning goals and also achieve communicative competence in the future.

In terms of learning strategies, it is assumed that all learners can be successful in L2 language acquisition if they employ suitable strategies during their learning process. Perhaps it can be simply summed up that learning strategies generally refer to what learners do to help them learn a target language, to become more effective users and learners. To use a figure of speech, VLS and LLS are like robotic arms or tools, which assist learners to master their target language effectively and efficiently. Since each tool has its own specification, which one is chosen as best suited to a particular learner will depend on his/her style and preference.

B) Can second language learners get through their learning process without being introduced to any learning strategies?

As the matter of fact, it is necessary that tricks or tactics should be hinted to the learners as a meaningful guideline so that they can have an opportunity to adopt or adapt

the strategies in order to facilitate their learning process successfully. However, some learners may feel comfortable with their own styles and preferences of language learning. According to my experience as an EFL teacher, some of my successful language learners feel at ease when they learn vocabulary by heart or rote learning. During an informal talk, they mentioned: *"Introducing too many methods, techniques or strategies to learners really confused them."* This suggests that they preferred their own language learning tools.

Apparently, my students, the successful ones, unconsciously used traditional strategies (i.e. rote repetition) to help them deal with their vocabulary learning. Besides, some students felt happy to cope with language learning by employing their own mechanical or traditional tools. For example, to enrich English vocabulary, they normally recorded words seen outside class as new words; then, they looked up the meaning of those words in the bilingual dictionary (English-Thai Dictionary). After that, Thai meanings were written down in a notebook. Everyday they learnt those words by heart independently.

Lessard-Clouston (1996), one of LLS proponents, emphasises: *"To developing students' communicative competence, LLS are important because research suggests that training students to use LLS can help them become better language learners."*

Hence, learners solely can manage to get through their learning process by employing their own strategies. However, training or introducing some hints, tactics, or strategies to the learners who really require the strategies will be clearly beneficial for them to get through their learning process more effectively.

C) What is the point of training in VLS/LLS in the second language classroom?

The core point that learning strategies can be taught has been confirmed by Chamot and O'Malley (1987) who present the applicable pedagogy sequence, which was developed for what they call the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). The purpose of CALLA is *"to develop the academic language skills of limited English proficient (LEP) students in upper elementary and secondary schools."* Also, CALLA emphasises: *"The acquisition and use of procedural skills that facilitate academic language and content learning."* (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994)

The CALLA model encompasses three components: a) the content-based curriculum, i.e. content topics like Science, Mathematics, Social studies, and language arts are aligned with an all-English curriculum; b) academic language development: LEP students' academic language in the four skills is developed, i.e. "*developing the learner's skimming of a scientific article, taking notes on a chapter in a social studies textbook*", and so forth; c) the crucial component: learning strategy instruction, i.e. the methodology of LLSI involves four key issues: learners' mentally active, strategies can be instructed/taught, transfer of LLS taught to new similar tasks, and academic language learning considered more effective with learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

In employing the CALLA lesson plan model, a five-phase method of learning strategies instruction is introduced to the students in order to familiarise them with choices of learning strategies and the students are exposed to various types of learning strategies demonstrated by the teachers. The five phases require the teacher to prepare, demonstrate or teach the learning strategies, practice, evaluate, and finally expand. The underlying conception of CALLA is to train the students to choose a suitable strategy to help them learn effectively. Moreover, it aims to build their self-confidence in language learning bit by bit until they will accept the full responsibility for learning by themselves or in the hope that they will eventually become autonomous learners in the future when there are no teachers to help them. The CALLA framework for strategies instruction has been used by other scholars, who focus on strategies training (e.g. Robbins, 1996; El Dianry, P.B. & Brown, R., 1992; Bergman, J.L., 1992). Robbins (1996) has adopted the idea of CALLA into her workshop for Japanese students at Doshidha Women's College of Liberal Arts, Japan under the title: 'Language Learning Strategies Instruction in Asia: Cooperative Autonomy'. In Robbins' workshop, she presented the figure of the CALLA framework containing a five-phase sequence of strategies instruction originally developed by Chamot (1987) at Georgetown University, for learners who studying a foreign language in the U.S.A. (e.g. French, Spanish, and so on).

With regard to Robbins's (1996) demonstrating an adaptation of the metacognitive model of LSI to the Japanese students in the real classroom setting, the students' evaluation of the demonstration reveals positive attitudes to the LLS taught in class and appreciation of the value of the experience. Robbins also recommends teachers to apply the CALLA framework as a successful LLSI in the real classroom situation. Robbins (1996) states:

"I hope that you will be met with the smiling faces of students who are empowered by their knowledge of language learning strategies and have become cooperatively independent learners."

Furthermore Oxford (1990) presents a clearer view of learning strategies by illustrating twelve features of LLS:

"1) contribute to the main goal, communicative competence, 2) allow learners to become more self-directed, 3) expand the role of teachers, 4) are problem-oriented, 5) are specific actions taken by the learners, 6) involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive, 7) support learning both directly and indirectly, 8) are not always observable, 9) are often conscious, 10) can be taught, 11) are flexible, and 12) are influenced by a variety of factors."

One of the features, which can presumably support the idea of VLSI/LLSI, is feature no. 10, which states that language learning strategies can be taught.

In fact, information which will be introduced to the learners should be worth learning, and it should be fruitful to learners so that they can make use of the knowledge, or strategies purposefully and meaningfully for their entire lives.

Regarding language learners, especially the second language learners who wish to acquire target languages successfully need to employ some specific tactics or techniques so as to help them cope with the target language effectively. For instance, a language learner can select some suitable strategies to help him memorise and recall words taught or seen effectively. Apparently, the strategies will help make language acquisition easier (Wenden, 1987).

Robbins (1996) presents her paper focusing on her workshop that is concerned with how to instruct language learning strategies in Asian classroom situation. She puts emphasis on LLS in terms of an adaptation of a metacognitive model of learning strategies instruction. She also emphasises the significance of the development of language learning strategies outside classroom in that learners should be supported to independently continue to employ LLS instructed in class to other tasks independently.

Robbins (1996) does refer to a finding of a research conducted by researchers of Georgetown University's Language Research Project (LRP) quoted as follows:

"Another finding of the LRP research was that learners who use strategies more frequently give higher self-ratings as language learners: in other words, the learner's confidence level is positively related to use of LLS"

The results obtained confirm that teachers have two dominant roles. The first role is to introduce and instruct learning strategies in class. The second role is to encourage and promote the continuity of learning strategies.

Besides, the method of learning strategies instruction: Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), which is developed by Chamot and O'Malley (1994) is mainly focused and is adapted as a framework for strategies instruction, then was launched in a Japanese university EFL/ESL classroom by Robbins (1996).

The framework for strategy instruction involves both teachers' and learners' responsibilities, Robbins (1996). At the beginning, teachers have to mainly play an important role; for example, they have to explain the purpose of the model, demonstrate how it works, and also pinpoint its usefulness to learners. Then teachers have to urge or prompt the strategies introduced. They have to give feedback to the learners' performance. Eventually, they need to assess strategies employed and more importantly promote and support the transfer of the strategies to other learning tasks.

Regarding learners' responsibility, firstly, they have to attend and participate in class. Then, they have to apply the strategies with guidance. Next, they have to assess strategies. Finally, they freely form an intention to make use of the strategies towards other tasks independently. That means the success of building up their own learning strategies in terms of autonomous learning.

Obviously, CALLA method will not be successful if without either teachers' or learners' synergetic actions. It means that teaching and learning claims to be successfully functioned when there are two parties, teachers and learners cooperatively working together.

Stevick (1980) claims: *"Teaching and learning are two men sawing down a tree."* It is clearly that learning strategies can be instructed under the condition that learners need to learn them.

Hence, learning strategies can be taught, instructed, or trained, provided that the learners are physically and mentally ready to take the input. One thing needed to be bear in mind is that if learners do not really need to learn, the strategies cannot be successfully taught.

To answer question (c), I can simply say that the purpose of training in VLS/LLS in L2 classroom is to provide our L2 learners an opportunity to know more choices of techniques/strategies to deal with their language learning. The strategies/tools suggested in the L2 classroom hopefully can facilitate their language learning more effectively. Besides, getting to know various tools can expose them to different experiences of language learning and likely enhance the learners' perspectives of L2 learning autonomously.

At this position, I would like to draw out three significant points emphasised in this article. First, learning strategies can be taught; second, introducing choices of learning strategies or techniques to the learners is part of teachers' responsibility; and third, we cannot claim that learning strategies can be successfully taught if our learners refuses to take them in. Apparently, a teacher can provide learning opportunities, but it depends on learner's own will: what he or she wants to do with the opportunities being offered.

I do agree with Stevick's (1980) statement: ***"One cannot claim to have "taught" unless someone else has learned."***

In a nut shell, learning strategies can be taught when learners do need to consume or consciously take the strategies in.

In addition, the learners may respond more or less positively to different learning strategies presented according to their own cognitive learning styles and preferences. For instance, analytical learners may like sitting at home with a grammar book figuring out the system of how a language works whereas learners who like learning by doing may like being exposed to the authentic situation (e.g. talking to people and experiencing the real language in the real world).

According to my experience, when I was at an intermediate level up to an undergraduate level, learning strategies were not taught in class. What I used to deal with my learning process was only a traditional or mechanical way of L2 learning (e.g. doing rote

learning like a parrot). I could survive during my learning process mainly because of the traditional style of learning. Later, learning strategies were gradually introduced into the classroom. I, then, learnt how to adapt those strategies to suit my style which was learning by doing. For example, I know that I was weak at speaking English, because in the past I had no one to whom I could talk in English outside class. Besides, I was not brave enough to speak English with my English teachers. It was part of our cultural barrier. I realised that I needed to practise English-speaking skill. What I served both my extrinsic and intrinsic motivation was to create my own learning strategy which suited my style, as a communicator, I, then, started speaking English to + animate, - human which means my interlocutors were my pets. They were personified and given roles like human beings, the ones I liked and some that I disliked. I managed to keep practising everyday after school. The result turned out satisfactorily. My English speaking was gradually better. For example, I began to think in English; I improved both fluency and accuracy in speaking skill. My vocabulary repertoire was also enriched. Clearly, my strategy did work effectively.

Truly an individual learner has his or her own styles and preferences in coping with their language learning. Nevertheless, less successful learners need to be definitely cared. They should be introduced to learning strategies of good students or other strategies introduced or taught by their teachers. With the belief that they will be able to form a clear vision of how to learn successfully by making use of the strategies introduced/taught in class.

In terms of learning theory, I do agree with Hutchinson and Waters (1987:39) as they cited a Chinese proverb which underpins the philosophy of learning theory:

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

Obviously, spoon-feeding seems to impede learner's brain development. In fact, learners should be taught to know how to learn or to equip a suitable tool to hunt for the food they need. Then, they would become more confident when they have to search for knowledge independently, especially when they are away from the classroom wall.

I have acquired one of British proverbs and associated it with my Thai proverb. I actually consider both proverbs reflecting the same point about teaching and learning

theories in relation to language learning strategies. The British proverb says: "**You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.**" Similarly Thai proverb says: "**We can lead a cow to the meadow/field, but we can't force the cow to eat the grass unless it really desires to.**"

Both proverbs implicitly convey that language strategies can be taught when learners cognitively and mentally need to take them in.

After pondering about VLS/LLS, I came up with an idea that some humans were born with their learning strategies. For example, they naturally know when and how to apply their survival strategies. With their instinct they learn how to live successfully in the world. Perhaps, it can be assumed that some people have an ability to develop their own strategies to cope with each situation effectively. However, the ability depends on each one's intellect in terms of vision, reflection, creativity, and so forth. Truly, to develop their strategies in order to reach the crescendo of L2 learning, they need to be taught so that they will know how to employ the tools/strategies effectively. They later may learn to adapt the strategies to suit their learning styles and preferences.

I, thus, associate a story written by Bach (1970) with learning strategies. Bach philosophically states two significant points of cognitive and pedagogical theories. For those learners who possess affective domain (e.g. love learning, have strong integrative motivation, etc.) may have ceaseless inspiration to develop, adapt, and create learning strategies. The following quotations confirm this point.

*"For this gull, though, it was not eating that mattered, **but flight**. More than anything else, Jonathan Livingston Seagull **loved to fly**."* (Bach, 1970)

Learning strategies can be taught when learners wish or need to learn.

"Can you teach me how to fly like that?"

"Of course, if you wish to learn." Bach (1970)

Thinking of the real learning situation, it is possible that some learners have not yet realised the value of vocabulary learning strategies/language learning strategies as they may not have any clues why it is worth acquiring or knowing VLS and LLS. Lastly, my query is: To make our learners realise the necessity and the significance of VLS/LLS, should we, EFL/ESL

teachers, care for “*Peering into the ‘black box’ to identify the different learner strategies at work in SLA...*”? Personally I believe it is worth “*stumbling blindfold around a room to find a hidden object*” (Ellis, 1985)

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