Should We Teach Strategies?

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Abstract

I suggest that effective strategies are those that make input more comprehensible and that help us use writing to solve problems. It may be useful to teach some strategies directly, but some strategies may be innate, and others could develop as a result of comprehensible input. Those that can be taught help us recover from inefficient strategies we learned in school.

1   Introduction

I assume in this discussion the correctness of the hypothesis that we acquire language subconsciously by understanding aural and written messages, that is, from "comprehensible input," and that subconsciously acquired language is far more important in language comprehension and production than consciously learned language (e.g. Krashen, 2003).

Discussion of strategies in the second language acquisition field has largely been independent of the acquisition-learning distinction. In fact, many of the strategies proposed and investigated in second language education relate to conscious learning (e.g. ways of reviewing for a grammar test or memorizing vocabulary). Much more useful are strategies that help language acquisition. I will present some samples here, and also discuss strategies often assumed to help language acquisition (writing competence), but in reality serve other purposes.

2   Strategies that help language acquisition

Strategies that help language acquisition are those that help acquirers obtain comprehensible input and those that make input more comprehensible. Here are just a few examples.

2.1   Narrow reading

Among those that help acquirers obtain more comprehensible input via reading is the strategy of narrow reading, the practice of reading texts by one author or about a single topic of interest, which helps ensure comprehension and natural repetition of vocabulary and grammar (Krashen, 2004). This strategy contrasts with the usual classroom approach of trying to do a "survey," selecting texts of different genres, often written in different eras. Rather, the narrow reading strategy encourages early specialization, gradually broadening reading as interests and knowledge of what is available develop.

Evidence supporting the narrow reading idea includes Lamme (1976), who found that good readers in English as a first language tended to read more books by a single author and books from

a series. More recently, Cho and Krashen (1994, 1995) reported considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second language acquirers who read books in the Sweet Valley series; readers rapidly moved from Sweet Valley Kids (second grade level) to Sweet Valley Twins (fourth grade level) to Sweet Valley High (fifth and sixth grade level). Several readers in these studies had never read a book in English for pleasure before, but became fanatic Sweet Valley fans.

2.2 Narrow listening

The analogue to narrow listening in aural language is narrow listening. In one form of narrow listening (Krashen, 1996), the acquirer collects brief recordings of proficient speakers discussing a topic selected by the acquirer. The acquirer then listens to the recordings as many times as desired, at leisure. Repeated listening, interest in the topic, and familiar context help make the input comprehensible. Topics are gradually changed, which allows the acquirer to expand his or her competence comfortably.

Foreign language students in the US who do narrow listening in class report greater comprehensibility with each hearing of short recordings on topics they were interested in and said that they found it helpful and better than commercially prepared recordings (Rodrigo & Krashen, 1996; Dupuy, 1999).

As a general strategy, narrow listening, like narrow reading, means seeking out aural input (radio, TV, recordings, audiobooks, and interaction) on topics the acquirer is interested in. Thanks to the internet, this is increasingly possible (e.g. eslpod.com).

2.3 Obtain background information

An example of a strategy that helps make input more comprehensible is to obtain background information in the first or second language. A wealth of research confirms that background information in the form of pictures, discussion, and easier reading helps make texts comprehensible. The validity of this strategy is confirmed by studies showing that texts on topics familiar to readers are generally more comprehensible than texts on unfamiliar topics (e.g. Johnson, 1981, 1982; Ribovich, 1979; but see Scott, 2004, for an interesting exception).

It has been hypothesized that one of the reasons for the success of bilingual programs is that they provide subject matter information in the first language, which makes subsequent instruction and reading in the second language more comprehensible (Krashen, 1999), leading to better acquisition of the second language.

Note that narrow reading and listening incorporate the background knowledge strategy: As we read in one area, or focus on the works of a single author, we build up background knowledge that makes subsequent reading more comprehensible. This helps explain why series books are so popular, and effective in developing literacy (Cho & Krashen, 1994, 1995; Lamme, 1976).

Closely related to narrow reading is selective reading. Selective reading means limiting one's academic or professional reading to what one needs at the moment to solve the problem one is working on now. Bazerman (1985) reported that top physicists typically only read and studied those technical papers that related to their current projects, filing the others for later reading, when they became relevant. They made no attempt to "keep up with the literature."

2.4 Seek COMPELLING input

I have hypothesized that the most effective input for language acquisition and literacy development is not simply comprehensible and interesting: It is COMPELLING (Krashen, 2011). Compelling input is so interesting that there is no focus on form: In fact, you cease to be aware of what language the input is in. You are in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992): your sense of self and time diminishes, only the book, movie, or conversation matters.

If this "compelling input" hypothesis is correct, it implies that second language acquirers should not listen to or read things just because they are in a language they want to acquire. Rather, they should try to listen to and read things that are genuinely interesting or compelling. Similarly, making friends with somebody just because they speak a language you are interested in generally doesn't work.

There is a simple test to determine if input in a second language is genuinely compelling: If you find yourself noticing interesting expressions, ways of saying things that you previously weren't familiar with, and making mental or written notes to try to remember them, the input is not compelling enough.

3   Writing strategies

The best known writing strategies comprise the composing process, strategies expert writers use. These are not language acquisition strategies: They will not help you acquire new syntax, vocabulary, or command of genres. Acquisition of language comes through input/reading, not through output/writing. These strategies will, however, help you use writing to solve problems and come up with new insights and thereby contribute to your cognitive development (i.e. make you smarter). These strategies also help writers deal with writer's blocks.

Evidence for each of the following strategies is well-established in the research literature (reviewed in Krashen, 2003; Krashen & Lee, 2004).

1. Planning: Good writers have a plan before they write, but it is flexible; they are willing to change the plan as they write and discover new ideas.
2. Revision: Good writers are willing to revise. They understand that as they move from draft to draft, they come up with new ideas.
3. Good writers delay editing, concerning themselves with formal correctness only after they are satisfied with the ideas they put on the page.
4. Reading: Good writers stop frequently and reread what they have written.
5. Regular daily writing: Productive writers write a modest amount each day, rather than waiting until they have large blocks of time available.
6. Incubation: Good writers understand the importance of short breaks that encourage the emergence of new ideas and solutions to problems.

It should also be pointed out that some of these strategies can be developed or taught in the first language, with immediate or easy transfer (Krashen & Lee, 2004).

4   Strategy teaching as re-programming

I have argued that the strategies to be emphasized are those related to language acquisition, not learning, as well as those that help us use writing to solve problems. My hunch is that even strategies that are teachable and useful are simply a means of re-programming, of helping us recover from the lessons they have learned in school.

Language acquirers need to know that they can read narrowly, because they are used to courses that present them with surveys, a little of this and a little of that, which nearly guarantees a constant flow of incomprehensible and often uninteresting input. They also need to know that they can read selectively. They don't have to read everything, for fear it might be on the test.

Language acquirers need to know that they are free to get background knowledge in the first language. Many of us have been taught that "total immersion" in the second language is necessary and that any use of the first language will get in the way.

We need to encourage revision and delaying editing, because, thanks to timed writing and sit-down examinations, students often have the impression that they need to get everything right on the first draft.

Writers need to know that they are free to take a moment of rest for "incubation," when they face a writer's block. Contrary to the impression they got in school, with the emphasis on "time on task" and constant hard work, they don't need to look "busy" at every moment.

5 What I do

The strategies presented here have been important to me: I also needed and continue to need "reprogramming": The influence of my schooling is so strong that I need constant reminding. These strategies are easy to learn, but the strong influence of our schooling makes them hard to remember and apply.

I try to use the selective reading strategy. While writing this paper, I reviewed several research papers on strategies. Even though new books and papers of interest in other areas appeared, while I was writing this paper, I did not read them, postponing reading them until I was working on a project in those areas. I admit, however, that I feel guilty doing this. Deep inside is a voice that urges me to read every article in every new journal that arrives.

In lighter reading in other languages, I try to follow the narrow reading principle, generally reading science fiction, my favorite fiction genre. I have read, for example, nearly the complete works of Bernard Werber, a French science fiction author. To make matters even better, Werber has written several series, on the same theme and with the same or related characters, one on ants (!!), and one on life after death. I hope there will soon be audiobooks. The series were especially compelling, so much so that when I was in my "Werber" period, I temporarily abandoned my usual practice of alternating novels in French and German. For a full year, it was only French.

The strategy of getting background information has been very useful: Before reading a series of papers in another language (or hearing a speaker), I try to first read what is available in English, and then what is published in the second language.

Composing process strategies have been very important to me. Now, when I have to revise, I'm happy, not upset that the paper won't be finished soon, because I now understand that revision means that I'm learning something new. I have gradually understood Elbow's insight that in writing, "Meaning is not what you start with, but what you end up with" (Elbow, 1973, p. 15).

I have also learned to take short breaks when stuck, to allow for incubation. Following Poincaré's (1924) advice, I don't try to do intellectual work during short breaks; rather, I do something relatively mindless, like cleaning up.

I have also learned the importance of regular daily writing. I can identify with Dickens: If Charles Dickens missed a day of writing, "he needed a week of hard slog to get back into the flow" (Hughes, cited in Plimpton, 1999, p. 247). Daily regular writing, even if brief, prevents this.

6 Post-script: Strategies that never need to be taught

Some strategies develop naturally or are innate, and the inability of students to use them is the fault of the input they are faced with, not ignorance of the strategy. This applies to prediction, which some people maintain must be taught ("What to do think is going to happen next?").

Smith (1983) notes that "everyone predicts – including children - all the time" (p. 23), and argues that we need to predict in order to get through the day, in order to deal with the complexity of the world. Most of our predictions are correct, which is why we are so rarely surprised. When students are unable to predict "what is going to happen next," it is because the text is confusing or nonsensical, not because they lack instruction in prediction strategies.

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