

## Review of “Language Learner Strategies: Contexts, Issues and Applications in Second Language Learning and Teaching”

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| <b>Title</b>                | Language Learner Strategies: Contexts, Issues and Applications in Second Language Learning and Teaching |
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With a significant growth of interest into how language learners process information and skills involved in learning languages, language learner strategies (LLSs), as a subject of enquiry, first emerged in the 1970s in a second language research field to identify the strategies deployed by successful language learners, and has been widely researched in the last two decades. As defined by Harris and Grenfell (2004, p. 120), language learner strategies are “the skills, tactics and approaches which learners adopt in dealing with their language learning”. Harris and Grenfell, as experts in the language learner strategy research, co-authored their first book on learning strategies in 1999 titled “Modern Languages and Learning Strategies in Theory and Practice” and have published articles on language learner strategy instruction based on classroom-based studies in the context of learning and teaching modern languages in secondary schools and colleges in the United Kingdom. In their latest book, “Language Learner Strategies: Contexts, Issues and Applications in Second Language Learning and Teaching”, Grenfell and Harris not only offer a clear, detailed account of the principles and developments in language learner strategy research and instruction as illustrated by their own empirical studies of learner strategies with young bilingual learners learning modern languages such as French and Mandarin Chinese in classrooms, but also provide implications for classroom pedagogy, curriculum design and teacher education in foreign language learning for non-adult learners. This book, as the title suggests, covers the theoretical principles, issues of theory and practice as well as applications of learner learning strategies in second language classrooms. Grenfell and Harris’ effective integration of theory, research and practice into one book has definitely provided new pedagogical insights to language teachers, teacher trainers and researchers in the field of second language education who would find this book relevant and useful. This book is presented as a ‘reflective account’ as stated in the introduction and clearly signalled by the use of the first person pronoun ‘we’ throughout the entire book. By adopting this reflective approach to writing, Grenfell and Harris are able to raise, analyse and reflect on issues related to LLSs based on their extensive experiences in personal and professional roles in the field of language teaching. The critical analysis

and evaluation of issues from a personal view supported by evidence from literature reviews, research and classroom practice makes this book more engaging and intriguing from the viewpoint of a language teacher and researcher in language education.

The authors begin with a five-page introductory section to provide the brief overview and rationale of the book and suggestions on how the readers can use the book more effectively. This book is divided into three major parts, namely: 1) Basic: Principles and Practices; 2) Strategies in Practice: From Theory to Research Practice; and 3) Applications. The structure of the book clearly shows that the authors aim to establish the links between language learning theory in the established literature review, empirical studies and pedagogical implications. Surprisingly, the authors recommend a “strategic and self-aware” approach to reading this book (p. 5). Instead of reading it linearly, from theory to research to practice, readers can explore the book in their own ways depending on their backgrounds and needs. For example, language teachers may read the practical chapters of classroom practice before exploring the theoretical principles. The structure of each chapter also facilitates this self-directed approach. While each chapter begins with an introduction establishing the link to the previous chapter and outlining the focus of that chapter, it ends with a summary highlighting the key ideas from the authors’ personal and professional perspectives, and previewing the next chapter.

Part One presents LLSs within a historical context through the discussion of changes in theories of language learning and methods of language teaching from the 1960s to the present. It consists of two chapters, “The Case for Language Learner Strategies and How It Responds to Modern Foreign Languages” and “What Research Tells Us”.

Chapter 1 aims to address issues of language teaching methodology by reviewing three fundamental approaches of language teaching and their underlying rationales, and providing the significance of a strategic approach to language learning, that is, the teaching of LLSs. Although the authors highlight the advantages, they specifically analyse and illustrate the pitfalls of three pedagogical approaches, the grammar-translation method (Saussure’s structural linguistic), audio-lingual method (Skinner’s behaviourism), and communicative language teaching (Chomsky’s universal grammar) using a case in modern foreign language teaching in the UK. The use of the national example has clearly explained how “pedagogic and sociocultural imperatives” of the three teaching approaches have affected the way people think about language learning and teaching (p. 21) and successfully foregrounded their support for a strategic approach to teaching language. Grenfell and Harris argue that this strategic approach, which is predicated by cognitive theory of language learning, is a possible modern language teaching methodology, because LLSs provide a distinctive approach to the understanding of the nature of language and how language should be learned. By adopting this approach, as Grenfell and Harris stated in this chapter, the emphasis is no longer on teaching language and knowledge about language, but on facilitating learners’ “learning to learn” by teaching the strategies, tactics and activities that learners engage with (p. 21).

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background and justification for a cognitive view of language learning and LLSs. This chapter begins with the notion of a Good Language Learner (GLL), which arises from the belief that identification and teaching of ‘good’ language learning practices could help the less able learners to become successful in language learning. The authors cite the amalgam of GLL practices formalised by Naiman et al. (1976/1996), but they question its usefulness because it simply presents a range of behaviours without identifying and understanding what is entailed in practice. This critical analysis helps them to justify the need for LLS research to enrich our knowledge and understanding of strategy deployment by categorising strategies and itemizing taxonomies of strategies. To illustrate this point, they cite O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) taxonomy, which has been an influential and useful framework in the field by categorising LLSs into metacognitive, cognitive, and social and affective aspects. The introduction of this taxonomy helps readers to understand the specific types of strategies being used in their empirical research studies as described in Part Two. They strongly support the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu to language, as it allows them to “understand how social differentiation and distinction can impact on the actual of

language learning” (p. 41) and use the Bourdieusian perspective to justify their empirical investigation on sociocultural factors as described in Part Two. They end the chapter by presenting the notion of strategy-based instruction (SBI) as a shift in language classroom practice. Readers might find the section on SBI in this chapter rather brief, as the authors only provide the 5-step cycle of the basic model of SBI (Grenfell & Harris, 1999), which includes: 1) Raising Awareness; 2) Modelling; 3) Practice and Fading of Reminders; 4) Transfer; and 5) Evaluation. Readers who are novices to SBI may have to proceed to Chapter 7, where the authors discuss SBI in detail before reading the empirical research studies in Part Two.

Part Two, which is the most detailed part of this book, addresses the issues of theory and practice discussed in Part One from a research perspective as illustrated by their two UK-based empirical research projects. It is partitioned into two sections, “Section A: Progress in Modern Languages: What Difference Does Strategy-Based Instruction Make?” and “Section B: Beyond the Monolingual Learner of European Languages”, each of which consists of two chapters. The section begins with an introduction which provides an overview of the large-scale SBI project on English-speaking students aged 12–13 from two state-funded London schools, known as the Strategy Instruction Research (STIR) project. This section gives readers a better understanding of the STIR project before reading individual chapters. In addition to the clear overview of the STIR project, the research measure is clearly described. The four chapters in Part Two all follow the standard structure of a research paper covering the literature review, research methodology, results and discussion of findings, limitations of the study, and their pedagogical implications. The research studies on the whole are well-documented and analysed, but, as they admitted, there is a need to replicate the studies with larger samples and varied school contexts, since the limitations, such as the small number of learners and participating schools, the limited number of interviews, and the difficulties in think-aloud procedures, might have an impact on the significance of their studies.

Section A focuses on the impact of SBI on students’ educational achievement relative to sociocultural and affective factors. The results of the studies presented in the two chapters provide evidence for the use of SBI, especially the affective strategies for young learners learning French in a formal educational setting. Using the data from the STIR project, Chapter 3 explores the impact of SBI on achievement in relation to sociocultural factors like social class, gender and bilingual status, whereas Chapter 4 investigates the role of affective strategies in students’ learning and motivation. Although Chapters 3 and 4 literally address two different dimensions of LLSs, the quantitative analysis in Chapter 3 is in fact complemented by the qualitative analysis in Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, the multiple regression analysis showed that SBI had a positive effect on students’ achievement, but only half of the variation could be explained by sociocultural factors. This leads to a smooth transition to Chapter 4 in which the analysis of qualitative data collected through think-aloud protocols and semi-structured interviews is used to explain what other factors affect the impact of SBI on students’ progress and motivation.

Section B addresses the contexts where modern foreign languages being learned are not the second language or the typical European languages. Chapter 5 investigates the role of bilingualism and SBI while learning a third language, and explores the role of the home environment on the development of strategies among the bilingual learners in the STIR project. Unlike Chapter 5, the focus in Chapter 6 is completely changed in two aspects. First, the language involved is a non-European language, that is, Mandarin Chinese, as their third language. Second, the strategies are only developed in schools rather than being naturally acquired at home, since the target language does not have a Roman script as the first language does. Chapter 6 explores how the female learners of Mandarin Chinese aged 11–14 from a school in North East London adopt strategies for memorising and reproducing Mandarin Chinese characters, and how the typical model of SBI, as outlined in Chapter 2, can be modified and refined to cater for languages with unfamiliar scripts.

Part Three is devoted to the application of LLSs in classroom practice, curriculum design and teacher education. Chapter 7 “Strategy-based Instruction”, as indicated by the title, is entirely dedicated to the actual interventions of strategy-based instruction. They argue that LLSs should be taught in “progression”, implying that the idea of certain skills being more applicable than others should

serve as a “starting point” for SBI. More specifically, the authors advocate a skill-based approach to SBI in which learners acquire a logical order of strategies from the easiest for beginners to the most difficult for advanced learners. Despite the lack of studies to compare and contrast the effectiveness of designs of SBI lessons and materials, the authors attempt to analyse the existing textbooks, which have incorporated LLSs and further provide concrete examples of SBI teaching materials for varied levels of learners ranging from pre-school, primary to secondary students. This chapter also introduces the contrast between two approaches to strategy instruction, SBI and strategic content learning (SCL). As stated by Grenfell and Harris, SBI is a “top-down approach where the teacher, as expert determines the strategies on offer and teaches them”, whereas SCL is “a bottom-up approach where strategies arise directly from each task and where teacher and learner engage in joint problem solving to identify task demands and the most appropriate strategies to meet them” (p. 167). This contrast gives rise to their new perspective on strategy instruction, that is, an integration of “top-down” SBI and “bottom-up” SCL models to enhance strategic practice in classrooms, coined by Grenfell and Harris as the integrated strategy-based instruction (ISBI) model. The rest of the chapter gives a detailed description of ISBI model showing how the features of both models can be integrated and presented as a sequence of steps to achieve two goals, progression in skill areas from the easiest to hardest strategies and progression in independence from teacher guidance to autonomy.

The final two chapters focus on the issues of the SBI approach with curricula, syllabuses and teacher education. Chapter 8 “Shaping Learning: Curricula and Syllabuses” contrasts the policies, curricula and syllabuses in the United Kingdom with those in the United States and Canada that promote strategic pedagogy, and concludes that syllabuses that adopt a process-content oriented approach help create strategic classrooms. Besides curricula and syllabuses, Grenfell and Harris believe teachers also play an important role in developing strategic classrooms. As a result, Chapter 9 “Language Learner Strategies and Teacher Education” considers aspects of language teacher education with respect to LLSs. The most crucial part of the chapter is a framework for one-off SBI sessions for pre-service and in-service teachers based on the ISBI model, as described in Chapter 7. That framework is a useful guide to demonstrate how teacher trainers can introduce the use of LLSs in a sequence of steps to student teachers who could then conduct SBI with their own students.

This book is indeed a valuable resource for language teachers, teacher educators and researchers by providing an integrated account of LLSs in second language learning and teaching from literature reviews, empirical investigations to practical applications. In fact, Grenfell and Harris even go beyond the field of second language learning to explore language learner strategy research in learning a third language, especially a language with non-European script, namely, Mandarin Chinese, and include a much younger group of learners of modern languages as their subjects rather than university students of English who are commonly tested in most of the existing studies of second and third language acquisition. As discussed in Part Two, Grenfell and Harris mainly investigated the impact of SBI on English-speaking 12-/13-year-old students’ progress in learning a modern language against their social class and gender, their bilingual status and affective factors using the STIR project. Language teachers will find the implications relevant and insightful, because the findings of their studies can shed light on other education contexts in which social class, gender and bilingual status also play significant roles in language learning. As Grenfell and Harris add a personal aspect to their work by adopting a reflective approach, this makes the readers feel more connected to the issues discussed in their book. They manage to keep their readers engaged throughout the book by boldly sharing their critical review of issues related to the cognitive theory of language learning, LLSs and SBI, and insightfully suggesting future trends and developments for LLS research and classroom practice. Most importantly, they engage and invite their readers to reflect critically on “the possibility of a genuine paradigm shift in the way we think (about language learning and teaching) and act with respect to second language learning and teaching” (p. 225). The most fundamental idea conveyed by Grenfell and Harris in this book is that LLSs should not be viewed as a radical approach to language teaching methodology, but a useful one that can be added to classroom teaching and learning to aid pedagogy.

**References**

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