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Language Learning Strategies: A general Overview

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Abstract

The paper is mainly about the concept of language learning strategies discussing its definitions, types and classifications. It will also discuss the use of language learning strategies among English language learners and the role of these strategies in promoting the process of language learning. The progress of language learning strategies over the time is explored precisely in this paper. The paper will also provide information regarding the use of language learning strategies which will lead researchers to better understanding and to guide them to the righteous way when making research in this field. At the end, this paper defines the notion of Good Language Learner explaining the relationship between Good Language Learner and the use of the appropriate strategies.

1. Introduction

The significance of language learning strategies is increasing in the current year with the increasing importance of language learning all over the world. This paper is talking about language learning strategies providing a complete description of the field starting from the different definitions and classifications given by different scholars ending to the point of describing the good language learner according to the frequency of the use of these strategies. At the very beginning the researcher provides definitions and description of learning

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strategies as every learning process requires a manner to be adopted to achieve the main purpose. The next section will be devoted to the definitions of LLS as different researchers have defined LLS in different ways. The definitions of LLS are introduced and discussed here. Relevant studies and classifications of LLS by many researchers are addressed in this study in a section dedicated for the historical background of the research in this field. Rebecca Oxford's work (1990) will be specially discussed as she introduced the Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL). Rebecca's inventory is mostly adopted in the studies undertaken in the field of LLS. Finally, the notion of good language learner is defined and discussed in a specific section to clarify the relationship between the good language learner and the choice and frequency of learning strategies.

2. Learning Strategies

Every learning process requires a manner or a strategy to be adapted in order to achieve the main purpose of learning. Among the important things in the process of learning are "what" to use for learning and "how" to use it. However human beings are involved with many and different strategies while they are learning a language, some of these strategies are giving the ultimate benefit, yet some others are not effective. The term 'learning strategies' means different things and researchers have defined it in many ways. The modest definition provided by (Brown, 1980) who talked about learning strategies as processes that may contribute directly to learning. Chamot (1987, cited in Hismanoglu, 2000) went further when he attempted to define the term as processes, techniques, approaches, and actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content areas of information.

Most of the research on learning strategies is related to the notion of successful learner(s). Researching in learning strategies, Rubin (1975) started doing research focusing on the strategies of successful learners and stated that once identified such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. He classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. What exactly is meant by the term "learning strategy"? As Wenden (1987a:7-8) says "Learning strategies are the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning". Also, Williams & Burden (1997) indicated that when students are involved in a learning task, they have several resources which they use in different ways to finish or solve the task, so this can be termed process of learning strategy. This explanation might be too abstract to understand, so it may be easier to say that learning strategy is learning skills, learning-to-learn skills, thinking skills, problem skills or, in other words the methods which learners use to intake, store, and retrieve during the learning process. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). They do not only aid language learning, but also the learning of other subjects such as maths,

chemistry, etc. In other words, when learners start to learn something, they have the ability to respond to the particular learning situation and to manage their learning in an appropriate way. Thus, learning strategy is like footballers who use tactics in order to win a game, when they are in the stadium. Learners use learning strategies in order to learn something more successfully.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990:43) went beyond the previous definitions to give a more focused definition. They defined Learning strategies as "techniques and devices used by second language learners for remembering and organizing samples of the second language. One of the ways learners become actively involved in controlling their own learning is by using strategies. Strategies are the thoughts and behaviours that learners use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain information". For O'Malley and Chamot (1990) learning strategies may include focusing on selected aspects of new information, analyzing and monitoring information during acquisition, and organizing or elaborating on new information during the encoding process, and evaluating the learning when it is completed or assuring oneself, that the learning will be successful as a way to allay anxiety.

Additionally, Ellis (1994:558) writes that "The study of learning strategies holds considerable promise, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in second language learning. It is probably true to say, however, that it is still in its infancy. For this reason, perhaps, discussions of learning strategies typically conclude with the problems that have surfaced and that need to be addressed before progress can be made". Meanwhile Ghani (2003) gives a new dimension to the definition of the learning strategies describing them as a facilitator in successful learning process. She stated that learning strategies are procedures, employed by the learners; in order to make their own language learning as successful as possible.

A very important part of learning strategies is the language learning strategies. Language learning strategies play an important role in learning process. In language research recently, 'Learning Strategies' as a term is gaining importance. It refers to 'techniques' and 'tactics'; it basically refers to the process that the learner employs in practicing language activities.

As we have seen in this section learning strategies are related to tactics and techniques used in the process of learning; learning of a language in particular. Therefore, there is an increasing research in the field of language learning strategies attempting to determine which of the language learning strategies mostly used by students. The next section will discuss and explain the definitions of language learning strategies in more details.

3. **Definitions of Language Learning Strategies**

Language learning strategies have received a considerable amount of significance since early 1970s for the crucial role they are playing in language learning. Many scholars defined language learning strategies differently focusing on the way used by learners to deal with the information they receive and what the kind of strategies they use. Language learning strategies are defined differently by many researchers. An early definition given by Rigeney (1978) who defines language learning strategies as the often-conscious steps or behaviours used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information. Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989) have the same idea as Rigeney (1978) about language learning strategies. They stated that language learning strategies are used to enhance and to facilitate language acquisition. They referred to language learning strategies as "actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques—such as seeking out target language conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task—used by learners to enhance learning (1989: 29). As further noted by these authors, such strategies facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information.

According to Wenden (1987a), language learning strategies can be defined from the aspect of language learning behaviours, such as learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language, cognitive theory, such as learners' strategic knowledge of language learning, and the affective view, such as learners' motivation, attitude, etc. It is argued that three points of views can improve language learning.

Rubin (1987) defined language learning strategies as behaviours, steps, or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning. Moreover, the definition by Oxford (1990) also included cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of language learning strategies that enhance learners' language learning proficiency and self confidence (Oxford, 1990; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Next, Ghani (2003) defined language learning strategies as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students frequently use to improve their progress in L2 developing skills; these can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of new language.

Language learners use language learning strategies as a means to facilitate the acquisition of language and the use of information they receive, store, and recall. However many researchers accomplished many studies in the field of language learning strategies as it will be discussed in the next section.

4. Research Background in Language learning strategies

The early research in language learning strategies was originated in 1970s when Rubin and Naiman (1975) tried to recognize the strategies used by good language learners when learning a second language. Rubin (1975) identified that there are certain strategies employed by the learner to enhance learning. Meanwhile

Naiman and Frohlich (1975) made a list of strategies used by successful language learners, adding that they learn to think in the language and address the affective aspects of language acquisition. In (1976) Naiman et al. agreed with previous researchers on the importance of the kind of the strategies involved in learning process. They differentiate between 'Good' and 'Poor' language learners and they noted that "good" language learners appeared to use a larger number and range of strategies than "poor" language learners.

Language learning strategies vary widely and they are divided into distinct categories. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) described language learning strategies in more detail. They classify the strategies under three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repeating, reasoning and analyzing), metacognitive (related to the learning process, for example organizing, planning and monitoring) and socio-affective (involving oneself and others, for example co-operating with peers and seeking clarification).

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) give special emphasis to those classed as metacognitive, maintaining that "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (1990: 8). They concluded that the best strategy is the cognitive one, repeating words and phrases out loud "repetition as the most frequently used strategy" (1990: 80)

Later in 1993, O'Malley and Chamot stated "individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not" (1993: 105). Strategies of learning a foreign or second language as defined by Oxford (1990b) includes: specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use -- often consciously -- to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language. Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency.

Going beyond O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and in more detail, (Oxford, 1990) also classified language learning strategies, she divided these strategies into six categories arguing that many different strategies can be used by language learners: metacognitive techniques for organizing, focusing, and evaluating one's own learning; affective strategies for handling emotions or attitudes; social strategies for cooperating with others in the learning process; cognitive strategies for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it; memory strategies for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when

needed; and compensation strategies (such as guessing or using gestures) to overcome deficiencies and gaps in one's current language knowledge.

Having more advanced idea about strategies of second language learning Andrew (1998) argued that the term strategies in the second-language-learning sense, has come to be applied to the conscious moves made by second-language speakers intended to be useful in either learning or using the second language. According to Andrew (1998) strategies can be very different in nature, ranging from planning the organization of one's learning (a metacognitive learning strategy) through using mnemonic devices to learn vocabulary (cognitive learning strategies) and rehearsing what one expects to say (a performance strategy) to enhance one's self-confidence for a language task by means of "self-talk" (affective strategy).

Recently, there has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. Parallel to this new shift of interest, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of the researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning (Murat, 2000). Murat's (2002) hypothesis supports what is really going on recently in the field of language research as the main concern of this field has turned to focus on the process of learning, including the learners, the strategies they used to use, and the context in which the process of learning takes place.

Ghani (2003) had an extensive study on the area of language learning strategies, she defined these strategies as: specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing second language skills. According to her, these strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Ghani (2003) studied in more details the learners in terms of their use of strategies for learning. She states that learners have been found to vary considerably in both the overall frequency with which they employ strategies and also the particular types of strategies they use. Different students adopt different behaviors or strategies to learn a new language. Learners used to use strategies which are helpful for them according to their learning styles. This is confirmed by (Ghani, 2003) when she said that "These learners use different kinds of language learning strategies, or specific actions and behaviors to help them learn. Their strategies differ greatly, at least in part because their general learning styles are so varied. Some students learn words by breaking them down into their components and some of them consciously use guessing when they read.

Yet another study on language leaning strategies focused on students of foreign language by Andrew (2006) agrees with (Ghani, 2003) which states that learners are being encouraged to learn and use a broad range of language learning strategies that can be tapped throughout the learning process. This approach is based on the belief that learning will be facilitated by making students aware of the range of strategies from which they can choose during language learning and use.

Eventually, research on strategies for effective language learning has focused on (1) the identification, description, and classification of strategies; (2) their frequency of use and the learner's success at using them; (3) differences in language proficiency level, age, gender, and cultural background that might affect their successful use of strategies; and (4) the impact of language strategy training on student performance in language learning and language use.

5. Taxonomy Of Language Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategies have been classified by many scholars. However, most of their attempts to classify language learning strategies reflect more or less the same categorizations of language learning strategies without any radical changes. In what follows, Rubin's (1987), Oxford's (1990), O'Malley's (1985), and Stern's (1992) taxonomies of language learning strategies will be handled:

O'Malley (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main subcategories: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies and Socioaffective Strategies. Metacognitive Strategies is a term to express executive function, strategies which require planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferenceing are among the most important cognitive strategies. Socioaffective Strategies can be stated that they are related with social-mediating activity and transacting with others. Cooperation and question for clarification are the main socioaffective strategies (Brown 1987).

Rubin (1987), who is pioneered in the field of strategies, makes the distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute directly or indirectly to language learning. These strategies are:

- Learning Strategies

- Communication Strategies
- Social Strategies

Learning Strategies are of two main types, being the strategies contributing directly to the development of the language system constructed by the learner:

- Cognitive Learning Strategies
- Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Cognitive Learning Strategies refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that requires direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin identified 6 main cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning:

- Clarification / Verification
- Guessing / Inductive Inferencing
- Deductive Reasoning
- Practice
- Memorization
- Monitoring

Metacognitive Learning Strategies, these strategies are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning. They involve various processes as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management. Communication Strategies are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. Social strategies are those activities learners engage in which afford them opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin and Wenden 1987:23-27).

Oxford (1990:9) sees the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. Oxford divides language learning strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect, which are further subdivided into 6 groups. In Oxford's system, metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning, memory strategies are those used for storage of

information, and compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge gaps to continue the communication. Oxford's (1990:17) taxonomy of language learning strategies is shown in the following:

- DIRECT STRATEGIES
  I. Memory
  A. Creating mental linkages
  B. Applying images and sounds
  C. Reviewing well
  D. Employing action
  II. Cognitive
  A. Practicing
  B. Receiving and sending messages strategies
  C. Analyzing and reasoning
  D. Creating structure for input and output
  III. Compensation strategies
  A. Guessing intelligently
  B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

- INDIRECT STRATEGIES
  I. Metacognitive Strategies
  A. Centering your learning
  B. Arranging and planning your learning
  C. Evaluating your learning
  II. Affective Strategies
  A. Lowering your anxiety
  B. Encouraging yourself
  C. Taking your emotional temperature
  III. Social Strategies
  A. Asking questions
  B. Cooperating with others
  C. Empathizing with others

According to Stern (1992), there are five main language learning strategies. These are as follows:
- Management and Planning Strategies
- Cognitive Strategies
- Communicative - Experiential Strategies
- Interpersonal Strategies
- Affective Strategies

Management and Planning Strategies are related with the learner's intention to direct his own learning. A learner can take charge of the development of his own program when he is helped by a teacher whose role is that of an adviser and resource person. That is to say that the learner must:

- decide what commitment to make to language learning

- set himself reasonable goals

- decide on an appropriate methodology, select appropriate resources, and monitor progress,

- Evaluate his achievement in the light of previously determined goals and expectations

Cognitive Strategies are steps or operations used in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. In the following, some of the cognitive strategies are exhibited:

- Clarification / Verification
- Guessing / Inductive inferencing
- Deductive Reasoning
- Practice
- Memorization
- Monitoring

Communicative-Experiential Strategies, Communication strategies, such as circumlocution, gesturing, paraphrase, or asking for repetition and explanation are techniques used by learners so as to keep a conversation going. The purpose of using these techniques is to avoid interrupting the flow of communication. According to interpersonal strategies learners should monitor their own development and evaluate their own performance. Learners should contact with native speakers and cooperate with them. Learners must become acquainted with the target culture. For Affective Strategies it is evident that good language learners employ distinct affective strategies. Language learning can be frustrating in some cases. In some cases, the feeling of strangeness can be evoked by the foreign language. In some other cases, second language learners may have negative feelings about native speakers of second language. Good language learners are more or less conscious of these emotional problems. Good language learners try to create associations of positive affect towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as towards the learning activities involved. Learning training can help students to face up to the emotional difficulties and to overcome them by drawing attention to the potential frustrations or pointing them out as they arise.

It can be seen that much of the recent work in this area has been underpinned by a broad concept of language learning strategies that goes beyond cognitive processes to include social and communicative strategies. In 1990, Rebecca L Oxford introduced strategies inventory for language learning (SILL). This inventory describing the various types of language learning strategies that learner employs to help him/her to learn a new language. These LLS can be classified under six types, Memorization, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social strategies. Below is a detailed description of them:

- **Memorization Strategies:** Memorization strategies are techniques used to remember more effectively, to retrieve and transfer information needed for future language use. Memorization helps students to store in memory important information gathered from their learning. When the information is needed for use

in the future, these strategies help the student to get the information back. For example, the semantic map of a group of nouns or verbs that shows the relationship between the words.

- **Cognitive Strategies:** Cognitive strategies used to help the students to manipulate the target language or task correctly by using all their processes. They include reasoning, analysis, and drawing conclusions. For example, the use of drills to practice the language and the use of dictionary to find difficult words.

- **Compensation Strategies:** Compensation strategies are employed by the students to compensate the missing knowledge in the target language due to lack of vocabulary. The strategies help to allow the students to use the language to speak and write in the target language even when their vocabulary is limited. For example, the use of linguistic clues to guess the meanings or by inventing words to the use of linguistic clues to guess compensates their lack of vocabulary.

- **Metacognitive Strategies:** Metacognitive strategies are employed by the students to help them coordinate the learning process by centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating their learning, this help learner to control their own learning. Students will also be able to plan what their learning strategies should be and change them if they are not suitable. For example, overviewing with already known material and deciding in advance on what to pay attention to.

- **Affective Strategies:**   Affective strategies are techniques to help the   students control their emotions, attitudes, motivations and values.   These strategies have a powerful influence on language learning because they allow the students to manage their feelings. For example, students may use laughter to relax and praise to reward themselves for   their achievements.

- **Social Strategies:** social strategies are activities that students engage in to seek opportunities to be exposed to an environment where practice is possible. These strategies are important because language learning always involves other people; it is a form of social behaviour. For example, questioning for understanding or facts and work together with peers or speakers of the target language including native and native like speakers in order to upgrade their language skills.

Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies divides these strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect strategies according to their contribution in the process of language learning. The first class is direct strategies employed by language learners. Direct strategies include memorization, cognitive and compensation strategies.

6. Good Language Learner

For many people, learning a second language is one of the most important and demanding tasks they will need to accomplish. This is particularly true in some countries where a student's English abilities are often

more important for their career success than their university marks. For these reasons, an awareness of how to learn a language, not just what to learn, is very important. Knowledge of the characteristics of a good language learner can help students increase their language learning efficiency (Sewell, 2003). According to Sewell (2003) the interest in language learning strategies originated from a desire to understand the characteristics of the good language learner. The concept emphasizes the active role of the learner in the learning process. The use of proper strategies for language learning plays a very effective role in the learning process. The good learner represents the use of good and proper strategies that lead to accurate acquisition. For this reason the study of characteristics of good language learner is a crucial need to achieve successful learning which results in successful acquisition.

Early researchers tended to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all "good L2 learners." (Rubin, 1975) suggested that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning.

Rubin (1975) observed in her study the strategies used by the good or successful language learner. In her observation of the language learning process of good language learners, she identified that there are certain strategies employed by the learner to enhance learning. She identified the following strategies used by good language learners:

- Making reasoned guesses when not sure.
- Making an effort to communicate and to learn through communication.
- Finding strategies for overcoming inhibitions in target language interaction.
- Practicing the language whenever possible.
- Monitoring their speech and that of others.
- Attending to form (i.e., grammar)
- Paying attention to meaning.

Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco (1975) went beyond (Rubin, 1975), they made a list of strategies used by successful L2 learners, adding that they learn to think in the language and address the affective aspects of language acquisition. They state that self-Directed learners need to identify the strategies that make them more effective language learners. These strategies will vary according to the goals and objectives of the learner. They described a language strategy as a conscious thought or behaviour used by a learner to improve understanding of the target language.

Naiman et al. (1976) differentiate between 'Good' and 'Poor' language learners and they noted that "good" language learners appeared to use a larger number and range of strategies than "poor" language learners, the implications of understanding strategy use have seemed increasingly important. Naiman et al. (1976) concluded there are still many questions to answer. Does strategy use actually aid language learning, or is it just something that good learners do? Are some strategies better than others, or is it the number and range of strategies used that counts? Are there "bad" strategies that actually making learning or performance worse? Can "poor" language learners' benefit from being taught the strategies that "good" learners use, or do you need to be a good learner already to use some of the strategies? Does strategy training affect language learning?

In 1978, Naiman et al found six types of strategies, which were common in good language learners (cited in Cook, 1996) as to find a language learning style that suits you, involves yourself in the language learning process, develop an awareness of language both as system and as communication, pay constant attention to expanding your language, develop the L2 as a separate system and take into account the demands that L2 Learning.

In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on "identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language." Rubin and Wenden (1987:19)

Oxford (1994) agreed with Rubin and Wenden (1987) that the study of good language learners' characteristics got primary concern in the field of studying language learning strategies. He argued that a number of good language learners' characteristics have been validated by subsequent research. The "uninhibited" aspect has not been confirmed as part of all or most good language learners. Because of language anxiety, many potentially excellent L2 learners are naturally inhibited; they combat inhibition by using positive self-talk, by extensive use of practicing in private, and by putting themselves in situations where they have to participate communicatively.

Claus Gnutzmann (2005) states, "Most researchers have rejected the notion of a single profile of the "good language learner" because over the years research studies have shown that there can be remarkable differences among equally successful language learners. Rather than limiting the description of the good language learner to one that is prescriptive and ignores learner differences, the more recent and inclusive view is

that there are various ways that language learners can be successful. For the most part, these learners are strategic in their learning".

7. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the concept of language learning strategies in a general overview. It presents definitions of the concept by different scholars who are giving various definitions yet they are mostly agreed that language learning strategies are steps, behaviours and techniques used by learners to enhance and facilitate the language acquisition. The concept of language learning strategies has received a considerable amount of significance since early 1970s for the crucial role they are playing in the processes of language learning and acquisition. When scholars defined language learning strategies differently they were focusing on the way used by learners to deal with the information they receive and the kind of the strategy they use.

Language learning strategies vary widely and they are divided into different categories. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified LLS into three headings: cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective. Oxford (1990) also classified LLS; she divided these strategies into two main classes direct and indirect strategies which are further subdivided into 6 groups. Direct strategies include memorization, cognitive, and compensation strategies and indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. In relation to the concept of language learning strategies the paper defined the notion of good language learner who represents the use of proper strategies that lead to accurate acquisition.

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