

Language learning strategies: An holistic view

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Abstract

The language learning strategy question has been debated on a number of levels, including definition, the strategy/success relationship and strategy coordination. In addition, awareness has been steadily growing of the importance of taking an holistic view of the strategy phenomenon and examining strategies not just in isolation but as part of an overall picture which includes learning situation, learning target and individual learner characteristics. This article will first of all review the literature and the previous research on these controversial issues, and suggest a workable definition. Then, in order to illustrate the importance of such an holistic view, the results of a small scale study which looks at the strategies used by 16 successful language learners who were all either teaching English or teaching in English at university level will be reported. The quantitative results indicated that these successful learners used many strategies, especially those that suited their goals and their situations; they also frequently used and carefully orchestrated strategy repertoires which suited their own individual needs. The responses of one highly successful respondent were also examined qualitatively. The implications of these findings and the importance of viewing learners holistically are discussed and suggestions are made for ongoing research.

Keywords: learner differences, learning target, learning context, orchestration, number, frequency

1. Introduction

When Rubin (1975) identified seven learning strategies which she believed to be typical of good language learners, it was optimistically anticipated that in order to learn language effectively, all that was necessary was for all learners to adopt the strategies used by good learners, and a great deal of effort was put into discovering what these strategies might be. Unfortunately, in the years since, this initial optimism has been shown to be overly simplistic, and controversy has raged on a number of fronts, beginning with the basic question of the very nature of strategies themselves.

2. Definition: What are strategies?

Rubin (1975) defined learning strategies as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (p. 43). Over the next decade, however, this very broad and general definition was interpreted in various and sometimes conflicting ways (e.g., Stern, 1975; Hosenfeld, 1976; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Cohen & Apeh, 1980; Bialystok, 1981) until by 1985, O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) were lamenting the lack of consensus regarding a definition which, they felt, was causing “considerable confusion” (p. 22) and impeding progress with research. Nevertheless, the controversy continued, until by 2003 Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) had gone even further and recommended abandoning the term *strategy* in favour of the “more versatile” (p. 610) term *self-regulation*. This was followed by Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt (2006), who proposed a “new approach [which] . . . highlights the importance of the learners’ innate self-regulatory capacity” (p. 79), leading Gao (2007) to wonder anxiously: “Has language learning strategy research come to an end?”

However, as Griffiths (2013) puts it, “the slippery strategy concept hangs on tenaciously and refuses to be so easily dismissed” (p. 6). This is evidenced by renewed conference interest worldwide and numerous publications on the strategy subject (e.g., Cohen, 2011; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Gao, 2010; Griffiths, 2008, 2013; Oxford, 2011; Oxford and Griffiths, 2014). This may be partly because the idea of replacing strategies with self-regulation entirely was never really a viable option. Even an early advocate of self-regulation such as Winne (1995) emphasized the idea that in order to self-regulate, learners need strategies. More recently, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) concede that “neither self-regulation nor learning strategy has to become a casualty of the controversy, caught in the cross-fire of the various arguments” (p. 169). In other words, “movements towards self-regulation are not incompatible with language learning strategies” (Rose, 2012) since strategies and self-regulation are mutually interdependent.

In the face of controversies raging at the time, by 2006 Macaro had abandoned the attempt to achieve a decisive definition and opted for listing defining characteristics instead. Gu (2012) adopted a similar position when he examined strategies in terms of prototypes. Griffiths (2008, 2013), however, argued, as O'Malley et al. (1985) had done more than 20 years before, that definition is necessary for meaningful research. From an extensive review of the literature she distilled a definition of language learning strategies which consists of a number of essential elements:

1. They are active. They are what learners *do* (Rubin, 1975). For this reason, they are typically expressed as verbs (usually the gerund, e.g., *asking for help*, or first person present tense, e.g., *I look for opportunities*). This helps to distinguish strategies from styles, with which they are often confused. Styles are a learner's preferred ways of learning, typically expressed as adjectives (e.g., *auditory, visual*, etc.). The use of the term *activity* in Griffiths's (2008) definition, however, invites confusion with the way the term is used in activity theory (Leontiev, 1978), where it has a specific meaning including a subject, an object, actions, conditions and operations. For this reason it may be better to use the term *actions* when defining strategies, since this is a term which can be used to describe whatever a person is doing, both physical (e.g., *highlighting*) and mental (e.g., *thinking of relationships*).
2. The "consciousness" dimension remains problematic, in as far as it is used by different people at various times to mean different things, and it is, therefore, in itself, almost impossible to define. Even in a medical environment with specialist equipment, it can be difficult to determine if someone is conscious or not. McLaughlin (1990) therefore concludes it has "acquired too much surplus meaning and should be abandoned" (p. 617). Perhaps Wenden's (1991) distinction between "deliberate" and "automatic" is more useful from our point of view. As she points out, novice learners (whether learning a language, to drive a car or whatever else) need to think about each step deliberately. After some time, when learners are more expert, much of what they do becomes automatic, to the point where they are hardly aware of their actions any longer.
3. Strategies are chosen (e.g., Bialystok, 1981; Cohen, 2011). Clearly, actions which are dictated by others (e.g., the teacher) are not strategic, and are unlikely to be used beyond the immediate task. Conversely, good learners have a repertoire of strategies from which they can select the most useful ones to suit the current need.
4. Strategies are goal-oriented (e.g., Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 2011). Actions chosen at random for no particular purpose cannot be considered strategies. It

is the goal which distinguishes strategies from skills, another concept with which they are often confused. *Skills* refers to the way language is used, for instance, to read, write, listen or speak (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Skills can, however, be used as strategies as well. If, for instance, a learner reads in order to expand his vocabulary, he is using the reading not so much for its own sake but as an action which he chooses for the purpose of learning, and it is, therefore, by definition, a strategy. This is, of course, a somewhat circular argument, but in fact this is not unusual in a complex activity such as language learning, where relationships often exist in a state of mutual interdependence rather than being strictly distinct and linear.

5. The use of the term *regulating* in Griffiths's (2008) definition also requires further explanation. *Regulation* is commonly used more or less synonymously with other terms such as *management*, *control* and the like. In other words, regulatory strategies might be considered what others (e.g., Anderson, 2008; O'Malley et al., 1985) call *metacognitive*, or what Oxford (2011) terms *metastrategies*. But not all strategies are "meta." Many of the most commonly used are, in fact, cognitive: They are used to engage directly with the language to be learnt (e.g., *looking for patterns*, *using words in a sentence*, etc.). It may, therefore, not be strictly correct to use the term *regulating* to apply to all strategies.
6. Language learning strategies are, exactly as the term suggests, for learning language. There are other kinds of strategies, of course, such as communication strategies or teaching strategies, and the different kinds of strategies may become intertwined and difficult to distinguish. Nevertheless, the basic goal of a language learning strategy is to learn something. Other kinds of strategies may present an opportunity for learning. Communicating with a shop assistant at the check-out counter, for instance, may provide an opportunity to practice or learn new language. However, it is also possible to engage in such encounters (sometimes for years) and learn little or nothing. It is not until the customer makes the effort to engage with the learning opportunity, to remember what has been said, to check and use it later, that learning will actually take place. Up until this point is reached, all the wonderful communicative opportunities will count for little or nothing in terms of learning.

In view of the above, let us suggest an updated definition: Language learning strategies are actions chosen (either deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language.

3. Relationship of strategies to successful learning

Rubin (1975) recommended learning strategies as a means to promote successful learning. Many researchers (such as Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kyungsim & Leavell, 2006) have discovered a positive relationship between frequency of strategy use and successful learning. In addition, Griffiths (2003, 2008, 2013) discovered that the higher level students in her studies used many more strategies than lower level students.

Successful strategy use, however, may depend on more than merely how many or how often. As Porte (1988) and Vann and Abraham (1990) noted, although their unsuccessful language learners were very active strategy users, they appeared to be unable to choose strategies appropriate for the task at hand; in other words, they were unable to orchestrate their strategy repertoires effectively. Anderson (2008) discusses the importance of strategy orchestration, pointing out that strategies are not an isolated phenomenon: They are interdependent, and it is important that learners are able to integrate their strategies so that they work well together if they are to achieve positive outcomes.

In addition, effective strategy use needs to be seen as part of an overall picture which includes the individual characteristics of the learner, the learning target/goal, and the learning context/situation.

3.1. Individual learner differences

Strategy use is often believed to be associated with learning style, defined by Reid (1995) as “an individual’s natural, habitual and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills” (p. viii). In turn, learning style may be influenced by personality, a broader concept defined as “those aspects of an individual’s behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, thought, actions and feelings which are seen as typical and distinctive of that person” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 431). Furthermore, personality may be at least partly determined by a range of other individual characteristics such as gender (e.g., Nyikos, 2008). Strategy choice may also be affected by students’ age (e.g., Griffiths, 2013); by their beliefs (e.g., Horwitz, 1987; White, 2008); and by their ability to exercise autonomy (e.g., Cotterall, 2008; Wenden, 1991), defined by Holec (1981) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Students’ affective states may also have a major effect on how they go about learning (e.g., Arnold, 1999; Krashen, 1982), as may their degree of aptitude or natural talent (e.g., Ranta, 2008). And all of these factors may be more or less influential depending on motivation, often considered to be the most powerful variable since

it may impact on an individual's desire to achieve a given objective, and, therefore, the drive and perseverance in the face of other possible disadvantages, such as gender discrimination, age, or low scores on aptitude tests (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). All of the individual characteristics noted above contribute to a learner's sense of identity, which was, perhaps, first raised as an issue in language learning related to the question of investment by Norton Peirce (1995). In recent years, identity has become a major area of study (e.g., Gao & Lamb, 2011; Lo Bianco, 2009; Norton, 2014; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Soruç & Griffiths, 2015). It is possible that all of the factors which contribute to identity (e.g., level of motivation, gender, whether they have introverted or extroverted personalities, their beliefs, how old they are, etc.) may influence a learner's choice of strategies. In addition to individual characteristics, however, strategy choice may also be influenced by the learning target (goal) and the learning context (situation).

3.2. The learning target/goal

Goal orientation—or, as Rubin (1975, p. 48) calls it, “the task”—is another variable that good language learners must deal with in order to achieve success. Strategies will vary, for instance, according to whether students are aiming to develop skills, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation or pragmatic competence. Students studying General English may need to adopt different strategies if their goal changes to passing an international exam. Issues of strategy selection and deployment, learner identity, and context will also need to be considered if students are to successfully complete a course in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), designed to prepare them for any of the “perceived needs and imagined futures” (Belcher, 2006, p. 133) for which such courses have been developed. In more recent years, CLIL (content and language integrated learning) courses have become popular (e.g., Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013). The dual focus of such courses may well require students to adjust their familiar strategy repertoires in order to deal effectively with both content and language goals at the same time.

3.3. The learning context/situation

Recent discussions of psychology in language learning highlight contextual factors, and this is something that can be traced as far back as Rubin (1975), who also acknowledged the importance of context in successful language learning. Indeed, the central role of the sociocultural environment in which a student must try to learn has long been recognized (e.g., Oxford, 1996). But it was, perhaps, Norton and Toohey's (2001) article which really highlighted the concept

of the situated learner, pointing out by means of two case studies that successful language learning is very dependent on the learner's ability to maximize the affordances of a particular cultural context. Learning situations can vary in a number of ways. For instance, whereas face-to-face classroom teaching would once have been considered the norm, increasingly distance learning is gaining popularity because it eliminates the waste of time and money spent commuting. However, successful distance learning may require different strategies from classroom learning: According to White (2003), successful learners in a distance programme were those who were frequent users of metacognitive (self-management) strategies. The study abroad context is another which may well require adjustments to familiar patterns of thinking and behaviour (e.g., Irie & Ryan, 2015). Others who have examined the role of context in language learning and strategy deployment include Ryan (2006), who considered the effects of the global context on language learning; Takeuchi, Griffiths, and Coyle (2007), who examined the effect of individual, group and contextual differences on strategy choice; Gao (2010), who compared the role of agency and context in relation to strategy use; and Griffiths et al. (2014), who took a narrative view of strategy use in East Asian contexts.

From the extensive literature briefly summarized above, it would seem that successful strategy use may be related to a complex amalgamation of how many strategies are employed, how often, and how well they are orchestrated. In addition, successful strategy selection may depend on the learner's own individual characteristics, the learning target, and the learning context. Since all of these factors are inter-dependent and cannot be meaningfully separated from each other, they need to be considered holistically if a meaningful picture is to be achieved. A study was therefore set up which aimed to explore the following question: How do successful language learners use language learning strategies effectively within the constraints of their own individual characteristics, their learning goal, and their learning context?

4. Method

4.1. Participants and setting

In order to investigate this question, 16 successful learners were identified. The participants were deliberately chosen to be from different places (Participant 1 = Brazil, 2 = China, 3 = the Czech Republic, 4 = Finland, 5 = Greece, 6 = India, 7 = Iran, 8 = Japan, 9 = Kazakhstan, 10 = Kenya, 11 = South Korea, 12 = Kyrgyzstan, 13 = Pakistan, 14 = Poland, 15 = Russia, 16 = Turkey.) in order to minimize the possibility of cultural bias. Furthermore, half of them were male and half female in order to minimize the potential for gender bias.

The participants were all either teaching English or teaching in English at tertiary level, a position which, by its nature, requires a reasonably high level of English. In addition, they were all personally known to the first author (an experienced examiner of international exams), who is able to confirm that they were all productively competent, that is, they were all capable of speaking and writing with high levels of fluency, accuracy and appropriacy.

4.2. Data collection

In order to investigate the research question, a questionnaire was constructed including items on strategy quantity, frequency and orchestration, plus the way strategies were chosen according to individual characteristics, learning goal and learning situation (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to rate each item according to how strongly they agreed from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and there was also space allowed for comments. Since the participants were widely scattered geographically, delivering the questionnaires in person was simply not practical; they were sent out by email and returned at the participants' convenience.

4.3. Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires was entered into SPSS and a ratings total for each participant was calculated. Since Likert-scale data is nonparametric, the ratings were analysed for medians and sums. Additionally, as strategy use is often thought to vary according to gender, and the gender balance of the sample was exactly 50/50, differences were also calculated for gender using a nonparametric test of differences (Mann-Whitney U).

The numerical data was then used as a background to a further qualitative analysis of the responses of Participant 16, who scored Band 9 IELTS (the only participant to have such a standardized measure of proficiency). His extensive comments were examined for the richer insights they might provide into the strategies used by successful learners.

5. Results

5.1. Questionnaire results

The total ratings for each item indicate that the participants were most strongly in agreement that they used strategies frequently, and that they chose their strategies to suit their goals (for both, sum = 66, median = 4). They were least in agreement

about the choice of strategies so that they worked well together (orchestration: sum = 49, median = 3). These results are set out in Table 1 in Appendix B.

The differences between male and female levels of agreement were not significant except for Item 2 (“I used strategies frequently”), with the females more strongly agreeing that they used strategies frequently than the males (Males = 30, Females = 36, Mann-Whitney U: $p < .05$). Actually, more frequent use of strategies by females is commonly reported in the strategy literature though it is not always significant, as in the case of this study.

5.2. Qualitative results

In order to further explore individual strategy use, we can examine the comments contributed by Participant 16, whose total rating over all 6 items was 29 out of 30, a rating only equalled by Participant 12, a multilingual teacher from Kyrgyzstan, fluent in her own language plus Russian, Turkish and English. In other words, both of these participants were very successful language learners. However, it is only Participant 16 for whom we have a standardized exam score, so we will confine our further exploration to the extensive comments that he made in addition to the questionnaire ratings. These responses are as he wrote them, though occasionally abbreviated in order to keep within the prescribed word limit.

5.2.1. Item 1: “I used many strategies: Which strategies did you use?”

It all depended on the skill/area. For phonology, I wrote down the pronunciation of every word I learned in IPA. For vocabulary, I kept a notebook where I wrote new words and their forms (as in manner-ism-s). I used writing as a strategy for syntax as well. I had notebooks for new sentence structures, which I tried to use in my essays. The meaning component of learning had a life of its own. I would buy thesauri and dictionaries that explained nuances of meaning. Sometimes I asked native speaker colleagues. As for skills, I challenged them one by one. I remember when I was a sophomore I decided to make sure I could understand any passage I read. I started reading the book line by line, which we did not have to do in class, highlighted every new word, and read sentences that did not make sense over and over again. In whatever I studied I always included a strategy not directly related to the topic of study. For example, when I studied words from word cards like many other people, I took up crossword puzzles that I thought would help me organize my mental vocabulary and establish meaningful relationships between words. (I still do crossword puzzles almost every day). Or when a professor suggested reading a dictionary from cover to cover, I would immediately set to it, but also underline and highlight unfamiliar words that could be useful along with their pronunciation and meaning.

5.2.2. Item 2: "I used strategies frequently"

Indeed, I did. Every time I needed to learn something, I had to make it meaningful for me, a common 'superstrategy' but the strategies were a form of writing, repeating, and memorizing. I think the strategies were something like:

1. *Identify a problem (phrasal verbs, for example).*
2. *Find a book that addresses the topic.*
3. *Devour the book.*
4. *Try to identify what you've learned.*
5. *Try to remember them when you do writing or speaking.*
6. *If you cannot remember, go back to the book or refer to a dictionary.*

5.2.3. Item 3: "I chose my strategies so that they worked well together"

Orchestration is a difficult skill. When for example I had to discuss a book chapter I'd read, I had to underline it if the discussion was with a friend or write down what I would say if it was for a class. To be able to discuss a reading passage, I applied all the strategies typically for reading, but bringing reading into a new life in the form of speaking was hard. I had to understand the writer's purpose and form of organization as well as way of thinking. When listening was put into the equation, I remember times when my mind went blank. For these tasks I had to practice and find my own way through the jungle. For example, I'd started putting a dot next to every entry in the dictionary that I looked up. When I saw – after several years – that some entries had a dozen dots next to them, I felt that I had to 'quarantine' such words that refused to sink in. I started to pay more attention to the way they were used in actual sentences.

5.2.4. Item 4: "I chose strategies to suit my individual characteristics: Which characteristics?"

5.2.4.1. Style/personality

I certainly am an introvert who finds it unnecessary to socialize, especially to learn a thing such as language. I acknowledge that language is essentially a form of communication between people, yet I don't want to accept that I need others to be good at it. When you want to be better than others, a desire I believe to be an essential part of personality, you have to know what others do (in this case, their strategies) but also do something extra, or at least personalize it in some way. So it is a kind of competition between me and others, although they may never know about it. But sometimes I transform it into a game. For example, years ago when I started working at a language school where there were more than 70 teachers with quite a few of whom I got along well, I would play vocabulary games with my colleagues, asking the meaning or pronunciation or usage of a word. Once the game went viral, I would sit back and enjoy it as I secretly studied more words.

5.2.4.2. Gender

I never felt a strategy could be feminine or masculine, though I heard others imply (or express) they might be. Speaking in front of a mirror is an example. When I talk about it in front of a group of learners, especially some males find it abominable and laugh it aside. Or keeping extremely neat notebooks may seem girlish, but I don't care. I'm proud of every effort I spend.

5.2.4.3. Age

I had to use different strategies as I got older but it was the circumstances rather than age per se that demanded such a change. As an undergrad, being a proficient reader and writer was the entire requirement. As long as I could read the course material and write essays in the exams or projects, no one seemed to expect higher proficiency levels. Therefore, I used to focus on vocabulary learning strategies which were mostly at recognition level. When, however, I had to put whatever competence I had into performance in actual teaching, I needed new strategies, as the previous ones did not work. Now I had to be a fluent writer and speaker, for which I had no training. I remember thinking about what my teachers had done to help us improve, yet I could find no path to tread on. All I remembered was suggestions like "Force yourself to speak" or "Keep a journal." It was not until I was about thirty that I actually knew what I was doing. Till then, I would try to adopt every strategy I'd heard of. Later I started to judge them by their merits. Memorizing entire passages, for example, was out of the question, although they seem to have helped in some way.

Age might still have a say in the type of strategies I use. After thirty-five, I'd rather listen than read and speak rather than write. It might have something to do with my deteriorating sight or boredom with the written word. So lectures and documentaries on YouTube turned into a pastime, dethroning the supremacy of vocabulary notebooks. Now I believe I have an arsenal of strategies that can target a variety of needs.

5.2.4.4. Beliefs

I believe anyone can do anything they aspire to do but the problem is whether it is worth the effort and the time. By the time I was thirty, I knew more than enough to continue teaching until I would retire. I really could have taken other paths or taken up other hobbies. Yet once you cannot have a full grasp of your job (and nonnative teachers are at a disadvantage), you cannot get satisfaction from it and keep working like a robot on an assembly line. When "full grasp" becomes the objective, you only have your strategies. In fact, strategies act as your war tactics. If you want to conquer a language, first you need a map of the enemy territory (OK, this is a terrible analogy. I have to say there is no hostility in this battle). You also need to know the correct inventory of your weapons (i.e. strategies), the number and ability of soldiers (i.e. your competence in the form of language skills), what to do during your march into the foreign territory along with means of communication (i.e. measuring your advancement). And each requires a strategy.

5.2.4.5. Autonomy

I like learning by myself. Whatever strategy I use should include no one else if possible. I should develop as follows: first I should identify the problem, study it like any other student, and test my knowledge. For example, once I realized I had problem paraphrasing but even the best writing books could only provide some superficial information. I certainly needed a human teacher (in contrast to a computer program), but there had to be a roundabout route because such teachers are not available at every corner or when you happen to find them they are usually too busy to offer a helping hand. Then I found what I was looking for in several language exams that directly tested paraphrasing, though in a more rudimentary and controlled way. Now I had a way of assessing my performance by some external, objective measure.

5.2.4.6. Affect

As a Libra, I have to make the journey of learning at the extremes, depending on how I feel at the moment. I still have a feeling that studying means writing, probably a cultural heritage. When I first started teaching, I realized mastery of the written word would not suffice and I had to focus on performance skills, for which I had not developed many tools/strategies.

Studying English has become an escape strategy in times of distress. At such times, when for example I have to read a book but cannot because of emotional turmoil, I get a new notebook and start reading the book as if I am trying to learn the language and write down new words and study word etymology along with example sentences. I think I have developed some kind of therapy out of language study.

I've had to take classes from all kinds of professors in my undergraduate and graduate studies. I always felt my knowledge of the language would empower me against all teachers, especially mean ones. The same was true about my feeling of rivalry with friends, although I always looked the most uncompetitive person. What they knew, I had to know, but I also had to know something extra.

5.2.4.7. Aptitude

I don't believe I have an aptitude for languages: I simply believe in the power of brute force, that is putting in as much time as possible. Someone more talented would be much better than what I am now. An individual factor might be an internal drive to be better than all others, maybe a log to hold onto in the gushing waters of life. I tried almost every strategy I heard about. Memorizing was such a strategy. Or making word cards. I made such cards even for Turkish because at times I felt I was ignoring my mother tongue. It may be irritating to know more about a second language than your first.

5.2.4.8. Motivation

One of my greatest fears has probably been being embarrassed in front of others. And making mistakes or performing poorly means embarrassment. So what prevents mistakes? Yes,

perfection, which I know is impossible to attain but also which I can't help to aspire to. Nothing is worse than running after a mirage. Yet it provides continuous motivation.

I feel bad when I do not know what others do. When a friend knows a word I don't, I get nervous. This motivates me to avoid such disappointment.

5.2.5. Item 5: "I chose strategies to suit my learning goal: What was your goal?"

My goal was the full mastery of the target language. So I divided language into components and attacked them. Yet the more I learned, the more I realized that what I knew was dwarfed by what there was to learn. So I developed an appetite for reading. I chose a novelist (Jeffrey Archer, for example) and read all his books (at least all I could find). For listening I remember times when I would sit by the radiator, earphones on, listening to BBC or VOA with a shortwave radio, when my friends in the dorm went to sleep.

5.2.6. Item 6: "I chose strategies to suit my learning situation: What was your learning situation?"

At eleven I started middle school, where I had science classes in English in addition to English classes. In those years memorization was a great part of our working schedule. We had to memorize conversations and reading passages and had to rewrite any miswritten sentence a hundred times. The Head of English would give crossword puzzles and offered prizes for those who solved them first. Oh I loved it then (and still do). I did not do much for English in high school as we had to prepare for university entrance exams. I almost never had to communicate in English until university years, when we were supposed to write (which I could do fairly easily, unless the topic was unfamiliar) and speak (which I found most difficult, for we no longer talked about simple personal problems). I had to review my strategies. I could write what I had in my mind but I did not know how to find ideas and put them in order. Then I went after writing books that neatly showed how I should start a paragraph and continue it. Interestingly, no one was of any help. Teachers would correct grammatical errors mostly and friends – when I asked them to edit my paper – said it was just fine. The same was true for speaking.

For two years after graduation I worked for a publishing company where I had to write, edit, and publish English teaching materials (audio or paper). Now I needed strategies for more advanced learning. Then I started teaching at university, I also started doing a Master's degree in English literature. Now I needed better reading strategies since I needed to read and understand more. I found a book for fast-reading. Yet reading fast did not work by itself. There were too many new vocabulary items. I started underlining words and writing their meanings on the margins. This is a demanding task, yet several years ago I got a novel and underlined all the unknown words as I read it. Then I wrote them down in a notebook along with the sentence it appeared in. There were exactly 100 of them.

The learning context is also inevitably affected by the culture in which it is situated. The effects of culture as a whole on language learning strategies are hard to measure, yet subcultures like those between peers and colleagues or within institutions seem to play a part.

6. Discussion

Much of the effectiveness of the account of the strategies used on the way to becoming a highly successful language learner lies in the empathy generated by the creative use of figurative language, which lifts the narrative from the mere academic to a human level to which we can all relate. We all know how it feels to “devour” a book in an attempt to find a “*way through the jungle*,” and to hold on desperately “*in the gushing waters of life*.” Especially evocative are the military metaphors which talk of using an “*arsenal of strategies*” as “*war tactics*” and maintaining an “*inventory of your weapons*.”

Also insightful are the comments about the anxiety at the feeling of “*ignoring [the] mother tongue*,” the “*cultural heritage*” involved with equating studying with writing, and that “*non-native teachers are at a disadvantage*.” These insights are important when trying to understand and explain the complicated psycho-affective and socio-cultural tensions which accompany the process of trying to learn a language other than the first.

Perhaps most importantly, the commentary, along with the results of the survey, underline the reality that language learning is a highly complex process, and it is not enough to look just at strategies, or individual differences, or target or context. All of these factors interact with each other in complex patterns which render them effectively inseparable, and it is essential to take an holistic view if a meaningful picture is to be constructed.

It is to be hoped that the example of an extremely active strategy user and highly successful language learner presented here might be examined by those who also wish to become highly proficient. By means of this examination, patterns might be discovered which could be adapted to other situations and goals according to individual needs.

This study has produced some useful findings, but it has looked at just a small sample scattered around the world, and is therefore very limited in terms of numbers, both overall ($N = 16$) and in terms of having just one participant from each location. Both greater breadth and greater depth are required. In terms of obtaining a broader picture, a useful way to follow up this study, in line with recent calls for greater contextual sensitivity, would be to use the survey with larger numbers in just one location, thereby providing a more detailed examination of the individual contexts. When this has been done in a number of different places, a metaanalysis could be undertaken to investigate the generalizability of findings across various contexts. As for greater depth, more qualitative investigation of the type presented in this paper may provide us with deeper understandings of the strategy use of real individuals in actual contexts.

7. Conclusion

As we can see, Rubin's (1975) article has given rise to a great deal of controversy over four decades. As O'Malley et al. (1985) put it, there has been little consensus over important issues such as definition, the question of how strategies are related to successful learning, and the relationships among strategies, individual differences, learning targets and contextual variables. Nevertheless, although self-regulation threatened at one point to put an end to strategy research (Gao, 2007), the baby has refused to be thrown out with the bathwater (Rose, 2012), and language learning strategies have continued to engage research interest worldwide.

The challenge for today is to continue with efforts to achieve consensus on important issues such as, especially, definition, but also underlying theory, strategy assessment and data analysis with which this article has had no space to deal. We also need to continue with attempts to find ways to help students "improve their performance" (p. 41), as Joan Rubin put it 40 years ago. In order to do this, we need to find ways to investigate how learners with a complicated mixture of individual characteristics, from a wide variety of situations and aiming at diverse learning targets can effectively utilize language learning strategies in order to maximize their chances of success.

Of course, no single study can investigate all of these variables at once, and in the interest of feasibility, the research task may well need to be broken down into manageable chunks. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that any one result, however interesting, will only be one piece of the overall picture. Language learning is an extremely complex undertaking, and learners are multifaceted; it is therefore important when interpreting insights from research that they are viewed holistically and that all relevant individual, contextual and target variables are taken into account.

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APPENDIX A

The questionnaire

NAME: _____

NATIONALITY: _____

FIRST LANGUAGE: _____

Dear Participant. Would you mind reading the statements below and indicating whether you personally agree or disagree with them on a scale of 5 to 1.

5=strongly agree 4=agree 3=neutral 2=disagree 1=strongly disagree

Could you also please add any other ideas you have in the comments box.

When learning English	5	4	3	2	1	Comment		
1. I used many strategies (activities consciously chosen to regulate learning)						Which strategies did you use?		
2. I used strategies frequently								
3. I chose my strategies carefully so that they worked well together								
4. I chose strategies to suit my individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, culture, style, personality, etc.)						Which characteristics		
5. I chose strategies to suit my learning goal						What was your goal?		
6. I chose strategies to suit my learning situation						What was your learning situation?		
Any other comments								
Many thanks for your time								

APPENDIX B

Table 1 Participants' ratings of strategy items (refer to Appendix A for original wording)

No.	Gender	1 Number	2 Frequency	3 Orchestration	4 Individual characteristics	5 Goal	6 Context	Total
1	F	4	4	3	3	3	3	20
2	F	5	5	4	2	5	5	26
3	F	3	4	3	3	4	3	20
4	F	2	5	2	1	2	2	14
5	M	4	4	1	5	4	5	23
6	M	4	4	4	5	5	5	27
7	M	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
8	M	5	3	2	3	4	4	21
9	F	5	5	4	5	4	3	25
10	M	3	3	3	5	5	3	22
11	F	5	4	2	5	5	5	26
12	F	4	5	5	5	5	5	29
13	F	3	4	3	3	4	4	21
14	M	4	4	3	5	5	5	26
15	M	3	3	2	2	2	4	16
16	M	5	5	4	5	5	5	29
Median		4	4	3	4	4	4	
Sum		63	66	49	61	66	65	

Note. Participant origins: 1 = Brazil, 2 = China, 3 = Czech Republic, 4 = Finland, 5 = Greece, 6 = India, 7 = Iran, 8 = Japan, 9 = Kazakhstan, 10 = Kenya, 11 = Korea, 12 = Kyrgystan, 13 = Pakistan, 14 = Poland, 15 = Russia, 16 = Turkey