1. INTRODUCTION

The role that learning strategies play in education, especially languages, is worth going deeper into. The major change in focus that has recently been introduced in the teaching/learning process, by which the learner, not the teacher, has become the centre, has had an influence on learning strategies. In this paper, the latter will be explored, by taking two sources into account: Oxford (1994) and Lessard-Clouston (1997). These scholars’ complementary views provide us with valuable information that I will try to organise and summarise below.

2. LEARNING STRATEGIES: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY

2.1. A GENERAL ACCOUNT: LS IN EDUCATION

2.1.1. Definition and background of LS

As stated by Lessard-Clouston (1997), Learning Strategies (LS) are learners’ techniques, behaviours or mental processes, that is, their tools, when learning. Present-day definitions, such as the previous one, highlight the process rather than the product, which was stressed before. According to Oxford (1994), students need to be actively involved in the process so that apprehension and internalization take place. LS are rooted on Cognitive Science, which defends that learning entails information processing. LS are employed in all settings (not only classrooms but also informal contexts) and for all contents (Maths, History, etc), not only languages (LLS).

2.1.2. Distinction between LS and other terms

Lessard-Clouston (1997) claims that, on the one hand, although they are highly related, LS are not the same as learning styles, the latter being natural and ordinary ways of processing information. On the other hand, despite the major role played by LS in developing communicative competence, communication strategies are not like LS because the former are just a type of the latter.

2.2. A SPECIFIC ACCOUNT: LS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

2.2.1. Features of LLS

According to Lessard-Clouston (1997), despite terminology not being uniform (LLS are also known as “learner strategies”, “learning strategies”, among others), there are certain features of LLS in which all researchers coincide: they are generated by learners, they are helpful in language learning, they may be visible (behaviours, techniques, etc) or invisible (remember they can also be mental processes) and they involve the use of
memory. However, there are other features in which there is not full agreement, for instance, for some people LS imply desire for autonomy on the part of the learner; others defend they can only be conscious, etc.

2.2.2. Types of LLS

Following Oxford’s taxonomy, cited in Lessard-Clouston (1997), we can see that the former scholar makes a distinction between direct (directly involving the subject matter) and indirect (indirectly involving it) LLS. In turn, direct ones can be divided into three groups:

- “Memory strategies” (allow for information storage in long-term memory and later retrieval)
- “Cognitive LLS” (in charge of mental models and the production/reception of messages)
- “Compensation strategies” (overcome knowledge gaps)

Within indirect LLS, we can find:

- “Metacognitive strategies” (allow for learners’ ‘executive control’ in their own learning)
- “Affective LLS” (in charge of controlling learners’ attitudes and feelings)
- “Social strategies” (make the contact with others easier. In turn, they are subdivided: asking questions, cooperating and empathising with other people)

As for the two last ones, Oxford (1994) states they have not been highly researched up to this moment.

All these strategies are interconnected and their orchestration is advantageous. This scholar emphasises the idea that, despite her classification system, just reviewed, a well-accepted one is lacking. She considers that social and affective strategies are as important as intellectual ones. A person is more than just an intellectual machine.

2.2.3. Factors involved in the choice of LLS

According to Oxford (1994), there are different factors involved in the choice of LLS:

- Motivation. The more motivated the learners are, the more strategies they employ.
- Gender. Research indicates that, in general terms, females use more strategies, although some males may surpass them when dealing with a particular one.
- Cultural background. Depending on the culture, certain strategies are promoted. For example, memorization among Japanese learners.
- Attitudes and beliefs. The more negative learners’ attitudes are, the poorest the strategies employed.
- Type of task. Certain tasks/skills are related to given strategies, e.g. guessing to reading.
- Age and L2 learning stage
- Learning style, that is, “general approach to language learning” (Oxford, 1994, p. 2). For instance, while analytic students like analysing words in detail, global ones prefer guessing.
• Tolerance of ambiguity. Students who are more tolerant of ambiguity employ different strategies to those who are not.

2.2.4. The role of LLS

Research has demonstrated that LLS are used by good learners. In Lessard-Clouston (1997), it is stated that communicative competence is one of the main positive aspects of a good use of LLS. Oxford (1994) adds the idea that they improve proficiency, either in general or in a particular skill. Nonetheless, according to the former scholar, suitable strategies will be chosen provided that there is a good assessment of the task in question. To develop this ability, the teachers’ guidance is essential, as seen below.

2.2.5. Teaching of LLS

Lessard-Clouston (1997) upholds the idea that it is helpful that teachers instruct learners in understanding LLS as well as using them and they become aware of why and when they should employ them. As can be seen in Oxford (1994), this teaching of strategies is known as “strategy training” or “learner training”. This scholar states that, given that not all strategy training studies have been determinate, there is further research into them. Anyway, Lessard-Clouston (1997) talks about a variety of courses to integrate LLS:

- “Intensive programmes”, which focus on the language learning process by using well-known manuals.
- “Integrated L2/FL courses”, common, which concentrates on the four skills. The previous manuals are supplementary.
- “Basic L2/FL teaching and learning”, even more common, in which LLS training complements teaching/learning.

For all courses, he suggests a three-step process for the teacher to follow, which he claims having successfully applied when teaching a TOEFL preparation course in Canada:

- Step 1: Study your teaching context: Teachers who pay attention to students’ needs, materials and their own teaching methods will have it easier to train LLS. To suggest students suitable LLS, teachers need to talk to them. In fact, according to Oxford (1994), affective issues, that is, learners’ motivation, interests, etc. are crucial for strategy training. Teachers should also look for materials (hand-outs, videotapes, textbooks, etc) in which LLS are promoted, an idea shared by Oxford (1994). Teachers need to evaluate their own teaching: the degree of learners’ participation, suitable lesson plans, etc.

- Step 2: Focus on LLS in your teaching: Afterwards, teachers should concentrate on particular LLS in their teaching. These strategies should be regularly included in lessons, as stated by Oxford (1994) as well, and they must be suitable for the learners, materials and teaching style in question. Thus, students will become aware of the major role that these strategies play.

- Step 3: Reflect and encourage learner reflection: It is important that teachers reflect on their own language learning and teaching. In addition, they should promote learners’ reflection on their learning and LLS use. Oxford (1994) also agrees with this idea: evaluation is essential in training.

Lessard-Clouston (1997) further states that there is something teachers should not forget when teaching: they should always promote learners’ autonomy to use LLS.
2.2.6. Successful language learners

To succeed, a learner can use different strategies: to be involved in communication with native speakers, to make use of guessing, to monitor one’s and others’ performances, to bear form and meaning in mind, to think in the target language, etc. According to Oxford (1994), although early research suggested that successful learners are confident, later it has been claimed that, due to language anxiety, good learners can feel unconfident. However, they can overcome shyness by means of private practice or positive self-talk.

2.2.7. Suggestions for future research

Oxford (1994) proposes that further research on LLS should be carried out. Besides, she claims that factors affecting LLS choices should also be more thoroughly researched. Lessard-Clouston (1997) suggests that a comprehensive theory of LLS is needed because it is crucial for language teaching/learning. The lack of a complete theory may be due to the fact that L2/FL education is a recent field and there are so many individual agents affecting learning. In addition, this scholar also recommends that LLS must be included in both learning/teaching theory and curriculum.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, going deeper into this subject is particularly interesting as well as rewarding and that is the reason why so much extensive research has been conducted. Anyway, there is still further to go. It is necessary that the world realise the major role that learning strategies play in education.

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