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Do Language Learning Strategies need to be Self-Directed? Disentangling Strategies from Self-regulated learning

Introduction

While language learning strategies generally appeal to teachers' intuition about how best to teach languages, the existence of them is difficult to define "at the rigorous scientific level" (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 144). The lack of a "tight definition" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 188) has generated criticism of the concept, both from field outsiders (e.g. Bialystok, 1983; Ellis, 1994) and field insiders (e.g. Macaro, 2006). This paper will posit that movements to implicitly or explicitly link strategies with constructs related to self-directness (e.g. self-regulation, autonomy and agency), continue to muddy definitions. The paper further posits a need to disentangle the concept of self-directed learning from definitions of language learning strategies in order to theorize their relationship more accurately. We will begin by reviewing the concept of language learning strategies and highlighting the main grounds for definitional criticisms. We will then discuss how the inclusion of self-regulation and other related concepts of self-directness have crept into the discourse of strategy research.

The amalgamation of learning strategies and self-regulation with no opt-out for supplementary forms of language learning strategies (e.g. other-regulated strategies)

can be seen in many recent definitions—examples of which are provided in the following section. We will argue that language learning strategies can exist independent from self-directness in contexts where learners cannot, have not, or have not *yet*, adapted to self-regulatory, agentic, and/or autonomous behavior. Drawing on Deci and Ryan's (2000) *Self-determination Continuum*, we introduce our *Regulated Language Learning Strategies Continuum* to show how self-regulation theoretically relates to strategic behavior, but should be conceptually separated in its definitions.

Language Learning Strategies: Definitional and Conceptual Criticism

The concept of language learning strategies has been under attack since its inception. In the early era of research, Bialystok (1983) was not satisfied with the definitions being circulated or the ways in which language learning strategies were being identified. At the start of a major era of research activity (e.g. O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), Skehan (1989) claimed that language learning strategies research was underdeveloped, and Stevick (1990) could not justify accrediting the observable actions produced by students to their abstract, internal cognition. Later, Ellis described definitions of learning strategies as "ad hoc and atheoretical" (Ellis, 1994, p. 533), and Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) observed that language learner strategies remained "rather inconsistent and elusive" (p. 608). Dörnyei (2005) further noted that:

In the absence of a tight definition, it is unclear what different researchers mean by the term language learning strategy and the actual language learning strategy measures presented in the various studies tend not to have sufficient psychometric properties (p. 188).

Throughout the 2000s, there was a steady decline in prominent language learning strategies research in exchange for, or in combination with, other concepts such as self-regulation, language learning autonomy, and strategic learning (Gu, 2012; Rose, 2012a). This trend would later see Rebecca Oxford, a name synonymous with language learning strategies, introduce the Strategic Self-Regulation Model (Oxford, 2011). The convergence of language learning strategies with other concepts has been given support (see Cohen and Macaro, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005; Gao, 2007; Gao & Zhang, 2011; Macaro, 2006; Rose, 2012b; 2015; Rose et al., 2018; Tseng, Dörnyei, Schmitt, 2006) but an agreed upon definition has yet to surface. Moreover, the reinterpretation of language learning strategies as part of the 'second wind of strategy research' described by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015, p. 148) has done little to rectify the existing definitional issues.

In striving for consensus, Oxford (2017) conducted a content analysis of definitions for language learning strategies and semantically related words/phrases. 33 existing definitions were compiled, analyzed, and then coded. A list of 19 finalized thematic categories were distilled into eight master themes based on frequency of appearance and relatedness. Using the findings from her in-depth analysis, Oxford proposes a new, integrated, and highly inclusive definition. Oxford's (2017) definition stemming from the prototypical features identified in her analysis is as follows:

L2 learning strategies are complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts

in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. Strategies are mentally guided but may also have physical and therefore observable manifestations. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively; combine them in various ways, such as strategy clusters or strategy chains; and orchestrate them to meet learning needs. Strategies are teachable. Learners in their contexts decide which strategies to use. Appropriateness of strategies depends on multiple personal and contextual factors (p. 48).

While it is outside this paper's scope to report on every aspect, we would like to highlight one aspect of Oxford's (2017) definition that can be observed by tracing the chronological trajectory of the definitions included in her study. The early definitions appear largely simplistic when compared with the majority of those appearing later. One similarity in these early definitions is the utilization of phrases that do not imply an integration of self-directedness with language learning strategies. When stating how strategies are realized, these definitions include phrases such as 'which a learner may use' (Rubin, 1975); 'employed by the language learner' (Stern, 1983); 'that a learner engages in' (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986); 'that students take' (Chamot, 1987); 'used by the learner' (Chamot, Kiipper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1988); 'which students use' (Chamot & Kiipper, 1989); 'which learners use' (Oxford, 1989); 'that individuals use' (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); 'used by learners' (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992); and 'used by language learners' (Okada, Oxford, & Ado, 1996).

The focus of defining how language learning strategies will be realized is clearly on *use* but not *who* is regulating this use or how the strategies being used have been selected. Oxford (1989, 1990) included the phrases "self-directed" (p. 235) and "more self-directed" (p. 8) in early definitions, which suggest that learners are either already self-directed or that there is a push for the learners to become self-directed. When acknowledging the evolution of definitions in the years that follow, there is a noticeable trend that muddies the field while attempting to clean it up. Self-directedness is implied in most definitions, but it is not until later years that the agency of learners in selecting strategies is included in definitions, either through explicit, conscious inclusion by researchers or perhaps subconsciously as influenced by the literature at that time. This inclusion of self-directedness suggests that learners using language learning strategies are doing so independently, through self-regulation, and at their own volition. We argue that this is not always the case, and such narrow definitions fail to capture the diversity in which learners deploy strategies.

Self-regulation and Self-directedness

In most early definitions of language learning strategies, there is no dichotomy inferred between other- and self-regulation or a sense of implied agency and/or autonomy. Strategies were simply *used* by learners. Looking forward, the majority of more recent definitions have assumed self-directedness (especially agency and autonomy) to be inherent in learners, as can be seen in extracts from their definitions: 'selected by the learner' (Cohen, 1998); 'selected by learners' (Gao, 2003); 'chosen by learners' (Griffiths, 2008; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014); 'that learners choose' (Oxford, 2011); 'chosen and operationalized by learners' (Cohen, 2011);

'that can be employed autonomously' (Plonsky, 2011); 'chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating' (Griffiths, 2013); 'chosen by a language learner' (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014); 'chosen by learners' (Griffiths, 2017); and 'selected and used by learners' (Oxford, 2017).

When comparing the former with the latter, it would appear that the earlier theoretical conceptualizations of language learning strategies, as gleaned in their definitions, are, generally, neutral on the role of agency in choosing strategies. Conversely, the majority of definitions analyzed by Oxford (2017) post-1997 appear to contain metatheoretical presuppositions about the presence of self-directedness within language learning strategies. This inclusion is not surprising, though, if we acknowledge the growing interest in self-regulated learning in educational psychology in the 1990s (e.g. Zimmerman, 1990). As the criticisms of language learning strategies increased, it appears that more concepts began to get pulled in: self-regulation, agency, autonomy, self-efficacy, mindsets, resilience, hope, and internal attributions, all aspects which Oxford (2017) considers "the soul of learning strategies" in her updated Strategic Self-Regulation Model (p. 65).

Other-Regulated vs Self-Regulated language learning strategies

It has been argued in Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) that exerting purposeful effort in the continued use of learning strategies is more important than the precise characteristics of each strategy or group of strategies. The authors call for a linking of language learning strategies and self-regulation in which the latter is viewed as a "dynamic construct that connects strategic capacity, intent, and learning behavior within the self-regulatory learner" (p. 169). It appears Oxford's (2017) definition has done that.

Mak and Wong (2018) used qualitative analysis of data collected over one academic year to evaluate the effect of using portfolio assessment for nurturing self-regulation development among elementary students in Hong Kong. One key finding is that "the ability to self-regulate requires scaffolding" (p. 12). This finding echoes the view of another recent article that suggests learners may be unlikely to continue their learning "unless care were taken to facilitate the internalization of regulation through support of the learner's autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (Lou, Chaffee, Lascano, Dincer, & Noels, 2018, p. 57). Lee (2017) argues, that from a self-determination theory perspective, self-regulation must come from intrinsic motivation but from a language learning autonomy perspective, self-regulated learning does not require the same self-driven motivation. What these ideas tell us in relation to learning strategies and self-regulation is that despite appearing complimentary, the source of action (decision of choice and then implementation) and motivation for usage is different.

If students have been instructed to complete an exercise using a specific strategy, and they do so because of the teacher or another extrinsic factor, are these students self-regulatory? According to Lee's (2017) interpretation of self-determination, they are not. Are these students agentic or self-directed? Certainly not. What if a group of students are new to choosing/using strategies and are still heavily dependent on the teacher? What if they are experienced but prefer to rely on their teacher to direct them? Are these students not using language learning strategies? Tao & Gao (2017) describe how a large percentage of highly teacher-dependent university students in

the Chinese context find the freedom and competitive nature of university study counterintuitive to their autonomy. Many of these students remain other-regulated even late into their studies; some may remain perpetually dependent, yet by many definitions they do deploy complex strategies when learning, even if they are not self-directed.

The answer to such issues may necessitate a rethinking of current conceptualisations of strategies to allow definitions to encompass both self-regulated strategy use and other-regulated strategy use. This would also align strategies with other concepts where regulation is viewed as transformative. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which represents the construct of motivation on a continuum based on the source of regulation, seems to be an apt model upon which to map regulated strategy use, not least because it “has been an important conceptual framework for understanding motivation across diverse domains” (Lou *et al.*, 2018, p. 210). As Deci and Ryan (2002) note:

From this perspective, then, it is possible for individuals to internalize regulations without having them become part of the self. Regulations that have been taken in by an individual but not integrated with the self would not be the basis for autonomous self-regulation but would instead function more as controllers of behaviour (p. 15).

By viewing language learning strategies as being both other- and self-regulated, we not only better understand the relationship between strategies and self-regulation, but we can decouple definitions of strategies from a need for learner agency. We can also better conceptualise the role of strategy training (an area of intense interest in the field) in moving students along this continuum in order to become more self-regulated in their strategic behaviour. Of course, this idea is yet untested, thus we put it forward for consideration and future testing by researchers.

[INSERT Figure 1: The Regulated Language Learning Strategies Continuum]

Conclusion

In his investigation of the metatheoretical suppositions of metacognition, self-regulation, and self-regulated learning, Dinsmore (2017) analyzed empirical research and theoretical papers, acknowledging that a published article only represents what a theorist believes at a static point in time. He notes that, “It would be quite interesting to track the development of these theories themselves over time” (Dinsmore, 2017, p. 1138). On a very small level, this is what we have attempted to do with learning strategy definitions.

Oxford’s (2017) definition is the best we have right now, and it certainly does a lot for the field to tease apart the central issues associated with strategy use. Still, we cannot assume that language learning strategies are selected and used by learners who are self-regulated, agentic, and autonomous; while this is an ideal scenario, it is not representative of all contexts. Some learners may still be other-regulated, non-agentic, and/or dependent on the *other* to choose, teach, scaffold, or monitor their use of strategies. Despite this, they do however deploy strategies and should be seen as strategic learners. In distinguishing between ideal and less than ideal conditions, the definitional scope of language learning strategies has been narrowed

with the introduction of self-regulated learning and other related concepts, even though research has been liberated in other areas. In movements to align language learning strategies with self-regulation, autonomy, and agency, we may have lost an ability to explore how strategies are taught, scaffolded, and influenced by others—concepts at the core of strategy research. Because previous research has attempted to marshal all learners and contexts into one inclusive definition, new issues emerge as strategies become conflated with these other concepts. By decoupling self-directedness from strategy use, and creating an alternative perspective, language learning strategy research can be strengthened by becoming truly representative of the varied contexts and learners that use them. We can use the Regulated Language Learning Strategies Continuum to understand how self-regulation relates to strategies but is not necessarily essential for their existence. The continuum also illustrates that becoming a strategic language learner is a transformative process, for which others can play a vital role. As a conceptual paper, the legitimacy of viewing strategies on a continuum according to their source of regulation is still open to substantiation, and we thus invite alternative views from strategy theorists, as well as future research to support or refute this yet untested notion.

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENTS

Nathan Thomas is a postgraduate researcher in the Department of Education at The University of Oxford. He has researched TESOL in the contexts of Thailand and China, where he has taught for many years. His research interests are wide-ranging but current projects pertain to language learning strategies and self-regulation.

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