THE IMPACT OF STRATEGY TRAINING ON ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY'S LEARNERS OF FRENCH

Romain Benassaya[1]

Abstract: Research in second language learning has shown that learners who use learning strategies are more likely to achieve effective learning, and has highlighted the importance of strategy training in language education. The principal objective of this research is to evaluate the impact of a 14 hours training module to language learning strategies integrated in a conversation class for the benefit of Assumption University's students of French. The research was organized in three stages: (1) an identification of the language learning strategies used most commonly by a sample of 25 Assumption University's learners of French. The data were collected through the Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL) questionnaire. (2) The implementation of strategy training elaborated from the Cohen's (1998) Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) model and adapted to students of French. (3) An evaluation of the impact of the training through a second administration of the SILL questionnaire to the participants at the end of training. The evaluation showed an overall increase in the mean scores strategy uses. It is hoped that this research will provide teachers with tools that will enable them to help students become more effective and independent language learners, and offer new perspectives on strategy training in second and foreign language clas**s.**

Keywords: French, Language Learning Strategy (LLS), Strategy Training, Learner-centered Approach, Quantitative Approach, Second and Foreign Language Acquisition, SILL, Strategies Based Instruction (SBI)

Introduction

Since their conception by Joan Rubin in 1975, it is recognized that language learning strategies (LLS) play a significant role in second and foreign language acquisition. In order to learn and use a second or foreign language, learners use a wide range of conscious and unconscious strategies that help them learn more efficiently, and become more independent learners.

The LLS research has shown that it is crucial to improve learners' ability to learn a second language through the use of efficient and suitable strategies. According to this view, it appears that a strategy training class is an essential component of any language instruction class, and deserves special attention.

This research focuses on the use of LLS and on the impact of LLS training on Assumption University's (AU) learners of French.

Three observations are at the origin of this research:

1. No research on use of LLS has been conducted in AU's Business French department;
2. No work of integration of LLS in class has not yet been carried out in AU's Business French department;
3. A certain number of AU's Business French department's students experience difficulties in learning French. We can observe these difficulties are most often due to a lack of how-to-learn skills, or learning methodology.

Objectives

Based on these observations, this research aims, at identifying what LLS are used by students of the AU's Business French Department, and how frequently.

It aims at organizing a LLS training with the purpose of helping students to use more strategies more efficiently and possibly to remediate the lack of LLS.

It proposes, finally, to evaluate the effectiveness of the LLS training that has been implemented in class.

The research has been divided into three steps:

1. A first collection of data at the beginning of the semester, in order to determine the strategic behavior of AU's learners of French, and their needs in matters of LLS;
2. The implementation of the strategy training;
3. A second collection of data in order to evaluate the impact of the training on learners' strategic behavior.

The two first sections of the article examine the body of work related to LLS and strategy training and outline the conceptual framework of the research. The third section provides a description of the chosen methodology and of the designing of the LLS training. The third section reports the results of the quantitative data collected in the research, and is followed by a discussion of these results.

Literature Review

Within the field of second and foreign language education, various researchers have provided definitions of learning strategies and have studied their impact on learning process. With the emergence of the learner-centered approach, the notion of LLS and LLS training gradually became a central aspect of language education.

In their research on good language learners, Rubin (1975), and Stern (1975) suggested students who succeed in their learning use learning strategies (for example seize opportunity to speak with native speakers). Later, Rubin (1987) defined learning strategies as a way to "contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly".

Oxford, (1990a) provided a definition and a classification of LLS. She stated that LLS enhance language learning, help develop language skills, and

---

[1] Lecturer of French, Department of Business French, Faculty of Arts, Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand
romainbenassaya@hotmail.fr

allow learners become more independent. Oxford also stated that LLS expand the role of language teachers, and that LLS can be taught.

With the emergence of the learner-centered approach in the field of language teaching, the idea that the success of learning depends in a large part on the learner's ability to take advantage of their learning (Cohen, 1990) has become central and has initiated a large amount of research related to LLS training.

Various researchers focused on the impact of strategy training on learner's strategic behavior and language performances (Wenden A, 1987, O'Malley, J. M, 1987). Cohen (1998) proposed a Strategy-based instruction model that aims at providing teacher with a canvas for LLS training.

Conceptual Framework

This research takes place in a learner-centered approach. The learner-centered approach resulted in a shift in conception of teaching and has redefined the teacher as a guide who helps students build their own knowledge, at their own pace and according to their own individual needs, rather than a provider of knowledge.

In this approach, the teachers' role is to facilitate the learning and trains the students to become independent learners, who are able to take charge of their own learning process, to determine their needs, to set objectives, to use techniques that help them learn and use a language.

Cohen (1990, pg. vii) stated that "(…) much of the responsibility for success at language learning rests with individual learners and with their ability to take full advantage of opportunities to learn."

This approach has initiated a large amount of research related to LLS and LLS training. In effect, it is by using strategies that students will be able to take charge of their learning process.

The Concept of Language Learning Strategies
According to Oxford's (1990) definition, LLS refers to a set of actions, behavior and techniques that learners can use to improve their learning and using of second language. "Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence." (Oxford 90, p.1)

Further, (1990, p.8), Oxford stated that LLS are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situation."

Oxford (1990) distinguishes 6 large overlapped categories of strategies:

1. The memory strategies. These concern the memorization of target language aspects (pronunciation, words, grammar forms, *etc.*). These include rhyming, pairing, association with pictures, *etc.*

2. The cognitive strategies. These concern the handling and usage of the target language. These comprise note-taking, summarizing, practicing, *etc*.

3. The compensatory strategies. These are used to overcome a lack of knowledge. These include guessing (according to context), the use of gestures and periphrases.

4. The metacognitive strategies. These are supposed to help regulate student learning. These comprise students scheduling time to study, auto-evaluating techniques, *etc*.

5. The social strategies. These concern social, relational or cooperative aspects of language learning. These comprise asking question, cooperate with other students, but also learning about the target language, *etc*.

6. The affective strategies. These are used to self-encouragement, for example by self-rewards, and also to control stress and anxiety.

All these strategies participate in the language learning process and can be observed.

The Strategy Training Model
The strategy-based instruction (SBI) model elaborated by Andrew Cohen (1998) contributed to the elaboration of LLS training I set in French classes and evaluated. Cohen's SBI is a characterized by:

1. A learner-centered approach
2. An explicit and implicit integration in the course content.

The bases of this model are the following:

1. Describe, model, and give examples of potentially useful strategies;
2. Elicit additional examples from students based on the students' own experiences;
3. Lead small-group/whole class discussions about strategies;
4. Encourage their students to experiment with a broad range of strategies;
5. Integrate strategies into everyday class materials, explicitly and implicitly embedding them into the language tasks to provide for contextualized strategy practice." (Cohen, 1998)

In this approach, students are lead to systematically apply the strategies to the learning and the use of the target language. They are also encouraged to reflect on their own use of strategies, to evaluate the effectiveness of specific strategies, and to experiment new learning techniques.

Based on Cohen's (1998), I identified the four following steps for designing our LLS training:

1. Set training goals and determine the resources available for the training.
2. Select the strategy to be taught.
3. Prepare the training plan, materials and activities;
4. Evaluate and revise the strategy training

Step 1: set training goals and determine the resources available for the training.

The LLS training was integrated in two 14 hours conversation classes, during the semester 1/2012 and consisted of a one-hour class per week.

The LLS training was organized with three objectives:

1. Raise students' awareness of the usefulness of LLS;
2. Help them develop a repertoire of LLS;
3. Help them transfer the use of strategies for learning in general.

Step 2: elect the strategies to be taught.

The results of the SILL questionnaire's first administration help us identify the students' needs, and set up a teaching plan adapted to their needs. (cf. section Results)

Step 3: prepare the training plan, materials and activities.

The lessons plan was set up as follows:

Lesson 1: Concept of LLS, first submission of the SILL (class 1)

Lesson 2: Compensatory strategies: using circumlocutions to overcome a lack of knowledge/vocabulary (classes 2 and 3)

Lesson 2: Cognitive strategies: using French words in different ways (class 4 and 5)

Lesson 3: Memory strategies: using rhymes to memorize new French word/physically act out new French word (class 6 and 7)

Lesson 4: Metacognitive strategies: diagnosing weaknesses, setting clear goals to improve French skills (class 8 and 9)

Lesson 5: Social strategies: Asking other students to correct themselves when speaking (class 10 and 11)

Lesson 6: Affective strategies: managing anxiety/relaxing before using French (class 12 and 13)

Lesson 7: Second submission of the SILL, conclusion, general evaluation and feedback

According to the SBI model, during a class, the steps were usually the following:

- Discussion on a particular type of strategies;
- Explicit teachings
- Contextualized strategies practice
- Group discussions and personal feed back

An example of lesson followed.

Lesson 1: Compensatory strategies.

Category of strategies: Compensatory strategies

Strategy taught: Using circumlocution to overcome a lack of knowledge

Discussion. The training began with a class discussion focusing on the following issues: how communication could be ensured if you don't know a word?

Explicit teaching and awareness' raising. This step is designed to show students the usefulness of this strategy, contextualize it and provide them with example of applications.

Two application ways were proposed to them:
● the use of synonyms or circumlocution
● the make-up of new words

Practice. In order to train students to overcome a lack of knowledge in a situation of communication, I suggested the following activities:

Ask students to describe a word, in order others students could guess it.

Realize a discussion without pronouncing one word (compensation, use of synonyms or circumlocution, overcome a lack of knowledge in order to insure communication)

Organize a role play with the following instructions:

By groups of two people, play the following situation: Student A must buy an object but he has forgotten the word, so he must describes the object and make Student B understood what he wants.

Discussion/evaluation. The training for this strategy ended with a class discussion focusing on the following issues: What is the usefulness of this strategy? How to use it in class? How to use it outside the class? How to transfer it to another subjects or situation?

Lesson 4: Metacognitive strategies.

Category of strategies: Metacognitive

Strategies taught: Diagnosing weaknesses, setting clear goals to improve French skills

Discussion. The training for this strategy began with a class discussion focusing on the following issues: do you set goals when you revise a lesson or prepare an exam? Are you more efficient when you work with goals?

The objective is to raise student's awareness on the importance of setting goals in the learning process, and on the different methods to set goals and reach them.

Explicit teaching and awareness' raising. This second step is designed to show the usefulness and methodology for setting goals efficiently, and contextualized the strategy.

Three steps are proposed to students:

1. Analyze weaknesses and needs (for example: vocabulary), determine what must be done in priority.
2. Write down a goal and identify the various steps necessary for achieve this goal.
3. Organize an agenda, set a date for each step

Practice. In this step, I asked students to try to diagnose their weaknesses and needs, then to select what they think they must focus on, in order to remedy to these weaknesses and needs. Secondly, I ask them to write down their learning objectives for the French class, then to set steps, and a date for each step. Then, I asked them to keep a journal in which they set their learning goals, list the steps necessary to achieve this goal, and valid regularly their level of acquisition for each step.

In parallel, I asked them to set the same process for another class, preferably a class in which they face difficulties.

Discussion/evaluation. Every class following this session, I encouraged students to give feedbacks on their

use of this strategy and its impact on their learning abilities.

The training for this strategy ended with a class discussion focusing on the following issues: Is this strategy useful for you? Why? Do you feel you learn more efficiently when you set clear goals? How setting goals help you to reach your objectives?

Step 4: Evaluate and revise the strategy training.

The participants completed the SILL questionnaire a second time, at the end of the training, in order to evaluate the impact of the LLS training on their strategic behavior. The results for this step are presented in the next section.

Methodology

Population and sample
25 Assumption University's students of the Business French Department (*n* = 25) participated in the research. The students are learners of French from two classes: FR2501 (intermediate level), FR2502 (upper intermediate). The classes were respectively composed of 12 and 13 students.

Research instrument
In order to collect data, I used the Oxford (1990) SILL questionnaire adapted to French language. The SILL questionnaire is designed to evaluate the frequency of use of language learning strategies of the respondents. It is made of fifty questions and divided into six parts (A to F) that focus on each category of strategies:

A: Memory strategies
B: Cognitive strategies
C: Compensatory strategies
D: Metacognitive strategies
E: Affective strategies
F: Social strategies

Each part of the questionnaire is divided into items that refer to a specific strategy. All items have a five-point scale answer.

1. *Never of almost never true of me*
2. *Usually not true of me*
3. *Sometimes true of me*
4. *Usually true of me*
5. *Always or almost always true of me*

In analyzing the frequency of use of learning strategies, the following key was employed to understand the means of the survey.

- High use = 3.5 to 4.4 (usually used) and 4.5 to 5.0 (almost always or always used)
- Medium use = 2.5 to 3.4 (sometimes used)
- Low use = 1.0 to 1.4 (never or almost never used) and 1.5 to 2.4 (usually not used)

Procedure
The approach chosen was quantitative. An experimental research design was employed. The respondents completed the SILL questionnaire in class at the beginning of the semester.15 minutes were allowed to them in order to fill the questionnaire. The questionnaires were filled anonymously in order to ensure honest answers. For each step, on a total of 25 questionnaires distributed, 25 questionnaires were return.

Results

Results data collection
As shown in table 1, the AU's students participating in this study had a mean of 3.2 of overall strategy use on the 5-point scale at this moment of the research.

44.1% of the participants reported high strategy use (*usually, almost always, or always used*) while 31.7% reported a medium range (*sometimes used*) of use and 24.2% a low use range (*never, almost never or usually not used*) of use.

Table 1: Mean Scores for Use of Students from The SILL before Training (N=25)

Category of strategies	Mean	Standard deviation
Memory strategies	3.1	.48
Cognitive strategies	3.3	.44
Compensatory strategies	2.9	.42
Metacognitive strategies	3.4	.50
Affective strategies	3	.40
Social strategies	3.5	.48
Total	3.2	.42

These results show that the strategic profile of AU's learners of French, at this step of the research, was characterized as follows:

1. A widespread but non-systematic use of most strategies. This aspect of the AU's learners of French's use of strategies is particularly noticeable in the fact that, if about 5 percent of responses relate to a very low or inexistent use of strategies, only less than 15 percent relate to a systematic use. The most frequent responses are "3" (*Somewhat true of me*).

2. A high use of social strategies. The strategies in the social category are the most frequently used, with a mean of 3.5.

3. A lower use of memory strategies, compensatory and affective strategies. The memory, compensatory and affective strategies appear to be the less frequently used, respectively with means of 2.9, 3.1 and 3.

These data have allowed us to identify the following students' needs:

- Need to raise awareness about the usefulness of learning strategies
- Need to learn and master more memory, compensatory and affective strategies
- Need to systematize the use of all classes of strategies.

The LLS training has been designed in this light.

Evaluation of the strategy training's effectiveness
The comparison between the results of the data collected before and after the LLS training showed an increase of the frequency mean from 3.2 to 3.5.

Table 2: Mean Scores for Use of Students from The SILL after Training (N=25)

Category of strategies	Mean	Standard deviation
Memory strategies	3.4	.60
Cognitive strategies	3.4	.53
Compensatory strategies	3.7	.59
Metacognitive strategies	3.7	.61
Affective strategies	3.2	.48
Social strategies	3.5	.50
Total	3.5	.50

We can observe an unequal increase of the different classes of strategies. As shown in Table 2, the classes of strategies whose frequency increased the most are the memory strategies (A) (+0.3) the compensatory strategies (C) (+0.8) and the metacognitive strategies (D) (+0.3).

On the other hand, the results for the cognitive (B) affective (E) and social (F) strategies are more limited (respectively +0.1, +0.2 and +0). These strategies appear to be used slightly more after the training.

encourage their use. Generally, the training helped strengthen the use of all classes of strategies.

During the first step, only the social strategies were reported to be usually used, while others strategies were reported to be sometime used. After the training, three strategies (compensatory, metacognitive and social) are reported to be usually used. The general mean also attests of a shift from an occasional use of strategies to a usual use. At the end of the training, it appears that the students have a globally more strategic behavior than before the training.

These results indicate an overall efficiency of the training, but also highlight the need to develop and pursue LLS training all along students' curriculum. If in one semester, significant results can be attained, better results could surely be attainable on the longer term.

Therefore, at the end of this research, I recommend implementing LLS training, at least for the first years of study, as a mandatory and evaluated part of the language instruction provided by the Department of Business French, fully integrated in the curriculum. Integrate LLS training in language curriculum, as a component of every language instruction, should enable students to develop their strategic behavior and demonstrate a high and systematic use of LLS at the end of their instruction. Students of French therefore should be enabled to improve their learning performance, and to systematize their use of strategies for learning purposes in general.

Table 3: Comparison of The Mean Scores for Use of Students from The SILL (N=25)

Category of strategies	Mean before the strategy training	Mean after the strategy training	Difference
Memory strategies	3.1	3.4	+0.3
Cognitive strategies	3.3	3.4	+0.1
Compensatory strategies	2.9	3.7	+0.8
Metacognitive strategies	3.4	3.7	+0.3
Affective strategies	3	3.2	+0.2
Social strategies	3.5	3.5	+0
Total	3.2	3.5	+0.3

Discussion
The increase in use of memory and compensatory strategies is explained by the fact that the training focused on the needs of students. The memory and compensatory strategies had the lowest of use before the training. The training has had a significant impact of the use of these strategies, especially regarding the compensatory strategies, whose increase is 0.8 point.

The training also had a significant impact on the use of metacognitive strategies (+0.3), which demonstrates the effectiveness of the training for this class of strategies. Regarding the cognitive and social strategies, the slight increase could be explained by the fact that the strategies of these classes were already frequently used before the training.

It appears that the training I proposed could be improved by focusing on these strategies in order to enable students to understand them better, and to

This research has proposed an approach to LLS training in AU's Department of Business French's context. This LLS training had aimed at equipping students with LLS that would improve and facilitate their learning process and make them more independent learners of French. It was also a first step in the integration of LLS training in AU's Department of Business French courses.

I hope that the findings of this research will provide insights into how LLS training can impact the students' learning abilities, and also open the door to further investigations.

I believe it would be beneficial for students to pursue this research by focusing on the following tracks:

1. A comparative evaluation of the language performances of students having followed the LLS training with students who didn't;

2. A transfer of the approach to other language class,

but also to non-linguistic subjects.

These efforts should help to improve and complete curricula in order to train independent learners, able to achieve their language learning performance and to learn all their lives long.

References

Abraham, R. G., & Vann, R. J. (1987). Strategies of two language learners: A case study. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner Strategies in language learning* (pp. 85-102). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Cohen, A. D. (1990). Foreword. In R. L. Oxford (Ed.), *Language Learning Strategies* (pp. vii-viii). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies for learning and using a second language*. Essex, U.K. Longman.

O'Malley, J. M. (1987). The effects of training in the use of learning strategies on acquiring English as a second language. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner Strategies in language learning* (pp. 133-144). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Oxford, R. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury/Harper Collins.

Oxford, R. L., Crookall, D., Cohen, A., Lavine, R., Nyikos, M., & Sutter, W. (1990). Strategy training for language learners: Six situational case studies and a training model. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22(3), 197-216.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, *9*, 41-51. http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3586011?uid=3739136&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21102713338147 [accessed October 4, 2013]

Rubin J. (1987) Theoretical assumptions, research, history and typologies. In A.L. Wenden and Rubin (EDS), *Learners strategies in language learning*, 15-30 Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall

Rubin, J., Chamot, A. U., Harris, V., & Anderson, N. J. (2007). Intervening in the use of strategies. In A. Cohen & E. Macaro (Eds.), *Language learner strategies.* (pp. 141-160). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wenden A. (1987). Incorporating learner training in the classroom. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner Strategies in language learning* (pp. 85-102). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.