Research paper

Towards a Strategy-Based Instruction Approach to ELT in Morocco: Why and How

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ABSTRACT

Learning strategies encompass the techniques and approaches individuals use to achieve their learning goals. Research indicates that providing instruction on learning strategies can be particularly beneficial for less proficient language learners. Extensive research has also cataloged the learning strategies employed by students learning various second and foreign languages. This article discusses the current challenges in language learning strategy research that impact both foreign language learners and teachers. It delves into the definition of language learning strategies, their categorization, their recognition, the use of language learning strategies to foster learner autonomy within the Moroccan EFL context, and models for instructing language strategies. These five topics are explored through a review of previous research that sheds light on them while also suggesting areas that justify further investigation.

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Introduction

The primary goal of education is to promote student self-sufficiency. Jerome Bruner's (1966) work in 'Toward a Theory of Instruction' shifted education toward a learner-centered approach, highlighting the importance of learning strategies. This shift is global, but it's essential to consider the unique challenges in different regions, such as Morocco. In Morocco, education is often straightforward, emphasizing information transmission and comprehension testing, but educators recognize complexities, particularly in language instruction. It is suggested that language teachers in Morocco incorporate systematic inquiry into their teaching to assess methods and monitor student progress, focusing on diverse learning strategies.

Learning strategies, according to Mayer (1988), are behaviors that impact how learners acquire and use information and are relevant across subjects, including language learning. Rebecca Oxford's 'Language Learning Strategies' (1990) defines them as learner actions aimed at enhancing learning in various ways. Early studies by Rubin, Stern, and Naimen (1975) identified effective language learning traits that can benefit even struggling learners.

This paper's focus is to examine current research concerns in language learning strategies, drawing from previous studies. It will also discuss the implications for foreign language teachers and learners, especially in the Moroccan TEFL context. The ultimate goal is to offer valuable recommendations for future research, aiming to improve language learning strategies to make students more effective language learners in Morocco.

1. Defining Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies, extensively studied, are viewed from various angles. Ellis (1989) defines them as internal processes aiding rule development, with prior knowledge playing a crucial role. Others, like Weinstein and Mayer (1986) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990), see strategies as encompassing both behavioral and mental activities, aligning with the view that they are dual in nature.

Definitions of language learning strategies emphasize their social aspect, with Tarone (1983) seeing them as tools for linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in various contexts. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define strategies as thoughts and behaviors that affect information encoding. Rubin (1987) notes that strategies shape the language system and affect learning. O'Malley et al. (1985) describe them as operations for information acquisition and use, vital for problem-solving and language production.

Rubin (1987), Richard & Schmidt (2002), and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) indicate that the choice of language learning strategies significantly influences how students learn and handle language challenges, making them essential for research on their impact on the learning process. In fact, many definitions stress awareness and choice. Oxford (1992) defines them as conscious actions by students to enhance L2 skills. Cohen (1998) emphasizes the importance of choice. Richards and Platt (1992) describe strategies as conscious behaviors and thoughts aiding comprehension and retention.

A growing interest lies in autonomous learning through effective LLS use. Hsiao and Oxford (2002) view strategies as tools for purposeful learning, leading to proficiency and self-regulation. Madrid (2000) highlights learner autonomy and the need for clear objectives. In the late 20th century, scholars shifted focus to effective learners, considering both the quantity and quality of strategies. They found that success doesn't necessarily come from using many strategies but from a well-chosen set. In brief, language learning strategies are deliberate mental and behavioral processes chosen by learners to simplify and self-direct their learning, ultimately improving outcomes.

2. Categorization of Language Learning Strategies

Various researchers have delved into language learning strategies (LLS) and their categorizations. Bialystok's 1978 model identifies four LLS types: functional practice, formal practice, monitoring, and inferencing, focusing on cognitive and metacognitive aspects while excluding social and emotional elements. Naiman et al. (1978) categorized effective language learners' strategies into five groups: managing emotions, understanding language as communication, recognizing language as a system, adopting an active-task approach, and monitoring language performance. However, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) questioned the theoretical basis of cognition and second language acquisition in this classification. Ellis (1989) likened the search for LLS to finding something in a dark room, highlighting diverse expert focuses that challenge creating a unified classification framework. Dornyei (2005) criticized the lack of clear categorization, especially for memory and cognition strategies.

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Hismanoglu (2000) discussed inventories of LLS created by O'Malley, Oxford, and Rubin. O'Malley et al.'s (1990) classification comprises metacognitive strategies (planning, reflecting, assessing, and measuring learning), cognitive strategies (activity-specific control of learning resources), and socio-affective methods (addressing social interactions). In contrast, O'Malley et al.'s (1985) system categorizes LLS into metacognitive and cognitive, combining social and affective aspects into a single socio-affective category without specifying their direct or indirect impact on language learning.

Table 1: Categorization of Language Learning Strategies (O'Malley et al., 1985)

Meta-cognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Socio-affective Strategies
Advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self- monitoring, self-evaluation	Repetition, note-taking, translation, grouping, imagery, key words, contextualization	Cooperating with others, asking questions for clarification, self-talk and self-reinforcement

A thorough taxonomy of language learning strategies is given by Rubin (1987):

- Learning strategies: Make a direct impact on the evolution of the linguistic system.
- Cognitive learning strategies: These include guesswork, practice, memory, deductive reasoning, monitoring, and clarification. They are applied in the process of learning and solving problems.
- Metacognitive learning strategies: goal-setting, preparation, and self-management are all part of this approach to managing and self-monitoring language acquisition.
- Communication strategies are used in conversations to clear up misunderstandings or difficult topics.
- Social strategies: promote language use but do not instruct language learning directly.

Rubin (1987) divides language learning processes into three categories (cognitive, meta-cognitive, and combined) in Figure 1. Rubin presents communication strategies, but he excludes emotive strategies from his classification, in contrast to O'Malley et al.
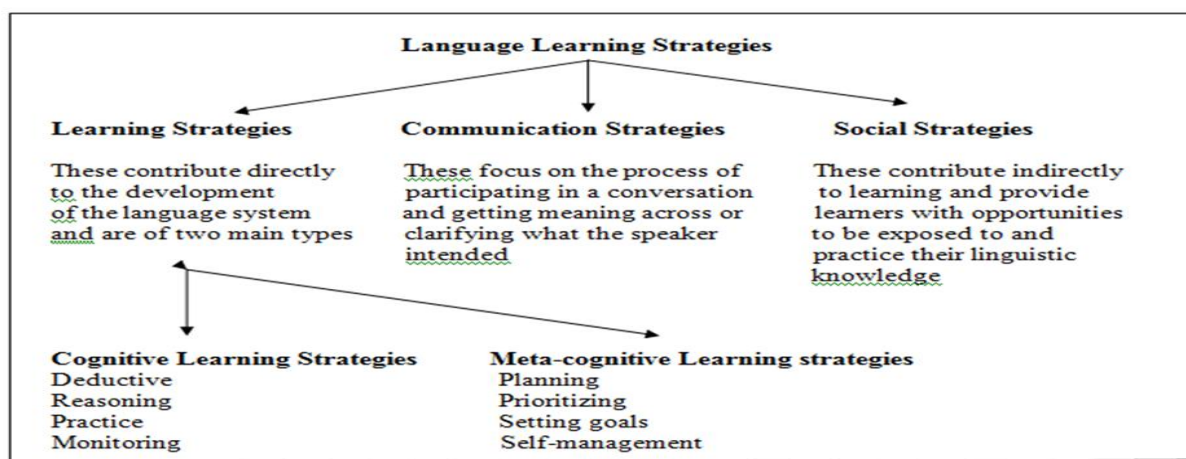

Figure 1: Classifications of Language Learning Strategies (Rubin, 1987)

Language learning strategies are divided into two primary categories by Oxford (1990): indirect and direct. She lists cognitive, memory, and compensatory strategies under the direct group. She lists social, affective, and metacognitive strategies under indirect. This framework addresses several aspects of language acquisition by taking into account both the direct and indirect consequences on language learning. It also offers a thorough breakdown of techniques into six groups and nineteen sets.

Table 2: Classifications of Language Learning Strategies (Oxford, 1990)

Direct strategies		
Memory strategies	Cognitive strategies	Compensation strategies

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• Creating mental linkages • Applying images and sounds • Reviewing well • Employing action	• Practicing • Receiving and sending messages • Analyzing and reasoning • Creating structure for input and output	• Guessing intelligently • Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

<div align="center">Indirect strategies</div>

Meta-cognitiv Strategies	Affective Strategies	Social strategies
• Creating your learning • Arranging and planning your learning • Evaluating your learning	• Lowering your anxiety • Encouraging yourself • Taking your emotional temperature	• Asking questions • Cooperating with others • Empathizing with others

Classifying language learning strategies (LLS) is challenging due to their intricate and interconnected nature. However, this diversity offers flexibility, allowing researchers to select a classification that suits their specific area of study. Various classifications have led to the development of assessment tools like the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is based on Oxford's (1990) system. Ellis (1994) commends Oxford's comprehensive approach, noting the effective organization of strategies into hierarchical levels. Teaching language learners different categories of LLS can lead to positive outcomes. Oxford's research (1990) suggests that instructing direct strategies can enhance learning and task performance, while teaching indirect strategies, especially meta-cognitive strategies, is valuable for promoting autonomous learning.

3. Recognition of Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are primarily identified through self-report, with self-reporting being the sole method to reveal learners' mental processing. Verbal reports, as defined by Anderson and Vandergrift (1996), offer insight into the hidden processes used by language learners to achieve their goals. Chamot (2004) employed "think-aloud protocols" to investigate students' mental processes during language classes.

Ericsson and Simon (1980) introduced the concepts of "introspective" and "retrospective" verbal reports. "Introspective verbal reports" involve students describing their thoughts before and during language exercises, typically used in reading and writing activities. "Retrospective verbal reports" require students to reflect on their information processing during language activities, particularly communicative skills like speaking and listening. For in-depth analysis, both introspective and retrospective verbal reports are often used, with teacher guidance playing a crucial role in helping students articulate their cognitive processes. Despite their value, verbal reports have limitations, including students offering idealized responses and facing challenges in recalling cognitive processes, especially in retrospective reports for listening and writing tasks. To address this, 'immediate retrospective reporting is recommended' (Cohen, 1998). Well-collected and interpreted verbal reports, when used alongside other research methods, can offer insights into mental processes.

Questionnaires, a popular quantitative method for studying language learning strategies, efficiently collect and analyze data from a large population of language learners due to their structured format. However, questionnaire limitations include the potential for students to struggle to recall previous strategies, claim tactics they don't use, or misunderstand strategy descriptions. Some studies address these issues by using questionnaires based on recently completed tasks, although this approach lacks standardization and hampers cross-study comparisons. A dependable method for assessing learner strategies is Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which offers two variants tailored to different levels of language proficiency. This inventory presents strategies in the form of statements, categorized into six groups. Educators can employ this valuable instrument to gain insights into their students' approach to learning.

Student diaries and journals have been used to collect data on language learners' strategies over time. However, as with other verbal reports, students may not always describe their strategies accurately. These diaries can enhance metacognitive awareness and promote learner autonomy. They've also been employed to study the impact of academic majors on language learning strategies.

Tools for identifying language learning strategies have practical applications for teachers. They can help teachers understand their students' existing strategies before introducing new ones. Teachers can engage students in discussions or use age- and proficiency-level-appropriate questionnaires after language tasks. As students become more independent in using strategies, teachers can encourage them to maintain diaries or journals to document their strategy use in various contexts and promote skill transfer. Additionally, teachers

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can model their own thinking processes by "thinking aloud" while working on tasks, discussing their strategies, and helping students develop metacognition about their role as strategic learners.

4. Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy in the Moroccan EFL Context

Morocco has been dedicated to improving its education system since gaining independence in 1956, and the National Charter for Education and Training (NCET) in 1999 played a significant role in reshaping the educational landscape. This reform, outlined in Article 110, emphasized the need for enhanced foreign language instruction, particularly English, to facilitate global communication and leverage Morocco's strategic cultural and geographical position. The reformation extended to the English curriculum in Moroccan secondary schools, aligning with pedagogical standards for teaching English. The introduction of the standard-based method and competency-based approach emphasized learner-centeredness, leading to substantial changes in teaching strategies, roles of students and teachers, and assessment practices. EFL teachers were expected to transition from knowledge providers to facilitators, engaging students in practical tasks and problem-solving, promoting learner autonomy, and incorporating alternative and innovative assessment methods alongside standardized tests.

The language policy aims to enhance education quality, urging teachers to adapt to this new educational landscape. Historically, teachers have been responsible for student achievement, but the importance of nurturing learner autonomy in the teaching and learning process has been overlooked. Fullan (2000) emphasizes the need for teachers to actively participate in the change process and promote language learning strategies to foster learner autonomy. Oxford (1990) highlights that language learning strategies (LLS) are valuable tools for effective learning, motivating learners to become autonomous. Learners require guidance on accessing information, interacting with teachers and peers, managing emotions, and developing awareness and automaticity in language learning. Autonomy and learning strategies have been closely associated since the 1990s, with scholars like Wenden (1991) underscoring the connection between learner autonomy and effective LLS use. LLS are instrumental in achieving language autonomy, as suggested by O'malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Wenden (1987). Thanasoulas (2000) clarifies that autonomous learning results from acquiring cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, motivation, attitudes, and meta-language, highlighting the strong link between LLS and learner autonomy. Language learning strategies also impact learner motivation and affective variables, aiding learners in overcoming setbacks. Affective strategies, classified as indirect strategies in Oxford's taxonomy, aim to overcome language challenges and enhance learner motivation. The literature has demonstrated the correlation between autonomy and motivation (Chamot et al., 1999).

In summary, there is a clear connection between language learning techniques and strategy training and factors such as self-awareness, motivation, willingness to learn, and meta-cognition enhancement. These characteristics are key to characterizing and identifying independent learners.

5. Models for Language Strategy-Based Instruction

Strategy-based instruction, as defined by Cohen (1998), focuses on teaching learners language learning and language use strategies in the foreign language classroom. This instruction includes explicit and integrated strategy training, prioritizing the learning process over teaching output. This approach signifies a shift towards learner-centered education, promoting student autonomy and shared responsibility for learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) advocate for strategy training that is both direct and embedded, stressing the importance of informing students about training objectives and the strategies being taught. Multiple frameworks for strategy instruction share similar characteristics. Chamot and O'Malley's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) is a teaching method centered on the idea of learning through thinking. CALLA features five stages that provide teachers with a framework to integrate language, subject matter, and diverse learning methods. It also outlines the roles of teachers and students during the learning process. CALLA combines teacher-led activities with student-driven ones, all focused on tasks and the learner's needs (Chamot, 2007).
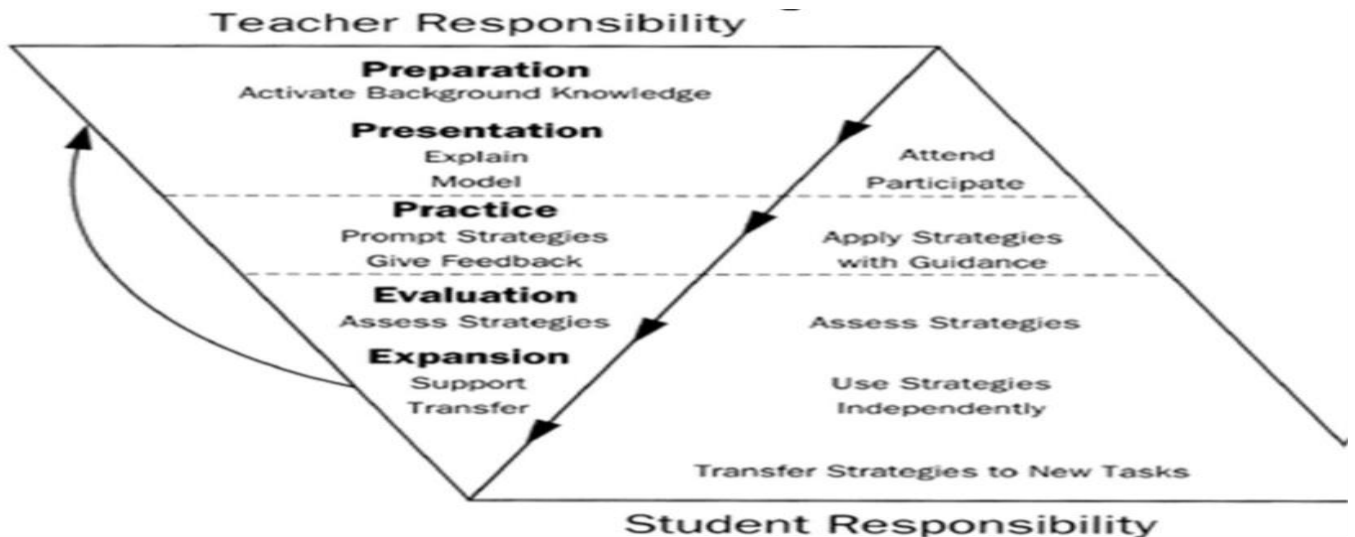
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Figure 2**:** A Framework for Strategies and Instruction Adapted from Chamot , Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins (1999, p. 36)

The CALLA model emphasizes initial instructor support, gradually reducing it as learners become more independent in using strategies. It focuses on helping learners employ appropriate strategies and individualizing strategy education when needed. This concept is structured in five distinct stages: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

The Oxford model, known as 'Completely Informed Training' or 'Strategy-Plus-Control Training,' is an eight-step program introduced in 1990. The model includes five initial steps focused on planning and preparation, followed by three steps dedicated to conducting, reviewing, and adjusting strategy training.

Table 3: Completely Informed Training or Strategy-Plus-Control Training (Oxford, 1990)

Stages	Steps to be followed in Oxford's (1990) Strategy Training Model
1	Determine the learners' requirements as well as the amount of time available.
2	Choose your strategies carefully.
3	Incorporate strategy training into your plan.
4	Consider the issue of motivation.
5	Prepare materials and activities ahead of time.
6	"Completely Informed Training" should be implemented.
7	Assess the strategy training program.
8	Re-train on the strategy.

Oxford's (1990) model involves various assessment strategies, such as checklists, interviews, questionnaires, conversations, and self-reports, to evaluate students' current practices, particularly for long-term strategies. This approach addresses the distinction between explicit and implicit teaching of strategies, with steps 3 and 6 highlighting this difference, unlike O'Malley and Chamot's model, which does not specify whether strategies are taught overtly or implicitly during various stages. Furthermore, Oxford's model underscores the impact of motivation on strategy training, whereas O'Malley and Chamot emphasize instructor encouragement and support during the expansion stage.

Grenfell and Harris (1999) introduce a six-step cycle model that starts with identifying students' existing strategies and then introduces new ones through modeling. The practice stage is unique in that learners are tasked with creating personal action plans to enhance their learning autonomy. The cycle concludes with learners assessing the effectiveness of their action plans. The phases of this concept are depicted in the table below.

Table 4: Strategy Training Model of Grenfell and Harris (1999)

Phases	steps

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Awareness raising	Students complete their tasks in order to identify current strategies.
Modeling	The teacher shows new strategies, explains their worth, and creates a strategy checklist for future use.
General practice	Learners practice their new strategies on a variety of assignments.
Action planning	Learners identify their language difficulties and adopt solutions to overcome them.
Further practice	Learners practice utilizing specific strategies while the teacher fades prompts until they can use strategies independently.
Evaluation	Before defining a new action plan and beginning a new cycle, the teacher assists and supports learners in evaluating the success of their strategy use.

Conclusion

In summary, this work has explored six critical aspects of research and teaching related to language learning strategies. It started by providing a comprehensive grasp of language learning strategies and how they function. The subsequent part centered on categorizing these strategies, offering a structured framework for understanding the diverse approaches to language learning. The third section delved into the theoretical underpinnings of language acquisition systems, establishing an academic foundation. The fourth segment concentrated on the identification of specific strategies, elucidating assessment methods and tools, and providing valuable insights into the learner's process during language activities, catering to both researchers and instructors. In the fifth section, the importance of language learning strategies in fostering learner autonomy, particularly in the Moroccan EFL context, was discussed, emphasizing a learner-centered approach. The final section scrutinized various frameworks for instructing language learning strategies, highlighting the numerous techniques instructors can employ to enhance students' language proficiency. In essence, this comprehensive exploration contributes to a deeper comprehension of language learning strategies, their significance, and their effective integration into language teaching.

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