

LEARNING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING METHODOLOGY: A PRACTICAL SPECTRUM

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ABSTRACT

This experimental research deemed to understand and explain the learning process with a purport to analyse the teaching of learning strategies in the classroom in order to make the learners conscious of their learning abilities. The teacher presented herself as a model to use the think-aloud-strategy in order to monitor that how the variety of learning strategies are deployed by the learners during learning a new language.

Keywords: language acquisition, learning strategies, long term memory, short term memory, translation

INTRODUCTION

The language acquisition and learning a new language is a complicated mystery and the neurolinguistics, psychiatrists and linguistics are struggling to understand this mechanism.

According to Ellis (1985) the learning process takes place in three stages: first is *hypothesis formation* in which learning strategies help the learners to infer the new language by comparing with languages the learners know. Second stage is the *hypothesis testing* which tests the hypothesis or rules for validity and finally *automisation*, when the learners practice these rules. It means that in this process ‘the prior experience of language’ (Slieght, 1911), cognitive and the learning behaviour from the controlled (short term memory) to the automatic process via practice (repeated activation)’ (Mitchell and Myles, 1998) play pivot role.

Macaro (2001) and O’Malley and Chamot (1990) believe that learning strategies highly depend on cognitive (inferring, deduction and repetition) abilities where the learners use direct (subconscious strategies: memorising and cognitive processing) and indirect (conscious) strategies (Oxford, 1990). It means that learning strategy is the universal behaviour to obtain, learn and remember any new information (Panhwar, 2010) and it is ‘the set of operations, steps, plans, routines, used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information’ (Weden & Rubin, 1987:19). In ESL it is ‘an attempt to linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language’ (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 67). There is a difference between effective and ineffective learners in terms of their awareness of different types of learning strategies (Rubin and Thomson, 1983) but if they are taught the deployment of strategies then, it will not only enhance their autonomy but it would be a more pragmatic method of learning as well as teaching (Panhwar, 2010). No doubt the lack of grammatical knowledge can hamper their

learning process but the learners always tried their best to ‘holistically take the text to comprehend it and attack it as a problem-solving activity’ (Panhwar, 2010).

Think aloud protocols (TAPs) is a psychological technique and it is widely used in ESL classrooms. In PTAs the participants verbalised their own thoughts during doing any task (Panhwar, 2010) and they say whatever goes in their mind (Rankin, 1988) but speakers’ behaviour is not analysed as in introspection (Cohen, 1987).

My Vignette

As a teacher of English, I always feel the need to understand the learning strategies of my students in order to improve their ability to tackle English as a foreign language because a teacher only gets the product but how the learners succeed in learning a new language, is a mystery. Therefore, to understand this process, I offer myself as a model (subject) and will give a running commentary during learning a foreign language by applying TAP in which the learners accept challenges to learn a new language (Macro, 2001). I hope this technique will allow me to understand the Interlanguage processing. The running commentary will identify my strong and weak areas as a FL learner and will help me improve those areas.

I am selecting a few verses Omer Khayyam’s Rubayyat (stanza of four verses) from Persian poetry to test my Interlanguage learning. I do not know Persian, although it is my maternal grandfather’s language. I never read Persian before, although it is near my Sindhi (L1) and Urdu (L2) which share almost same alphabetical script of Persian and Arabic. My choice of Persian is based on the reason that I can read it easily, unlike Chinese, French and German etc, where I would not be able even to recognise the letters. The other reason to choose poetry is based on the general assumption that poetry contains nouns, pronouns and adjectives, rather than express the perfect grammatical structure. The complete grammatical text would encounter me with serious difficulties as my linguistic level is concerned. I don’t know the Persian grammatical rules, so I am sure that main and auxiliary verbs, their location and use, preposition, adverb, tense or any other grammatical component may upset my learning process because I know that the knowledge of grammar is also important in comprehending any new language. so let me admit that I am starting my experiment where I feel comfortable and know that my L1 and L2 will be a great helping source because a good portion of Sindhi and Urdu vocabulary is derived from Persian. I will not take any outside help during comprehending.

To prove the validity of the vintage is not my contention, as it is up to the linguistics scholars to prove or disprove me as a good language learner but as a teacher I believe it is a very valid approach.

Let me begin the Vignette

آن قصر که جشید را و جام گرفت
 آبرو چه کرد و زنده آبرو گرفت
 بهرام که گور میگردنی بهر عمر
 دیدی که چگونه گور بهرام گرفت

I am attempting to understand the opening line of first Rubbae. I find some similar vocabulary od L1 and L2. Let me seek help of my languages which I know. I don't understand the first word *Aan* but the meaning of *Qasr* is 'palace' and *Jamshed* is a noun in my L1 and L2, which means 'king'. My linguistic knowledge says that word *ke* may mean 'of', though I am not sure. My guess is based on the knowledge of Urdu word *ke* which is a helping verb. If I consider the first word *aan* as preposition 'in' or adverb 'where' due to its position along with the subject, then perhaps I can interpret it as 'in the palace of king', or 'where palace of king.' Let me try other portion of the verse. '*Jam*' is same in my L1 which means cup. It is also used for wine in Sindhi and Urdu poetry. *gerift* sounds near my L1 which means 'grip'. I have no idea what is *daraow* but through its syntactic position, I guess its descriptive value, though I believe I have heard it before. The grammar illiteracy obstructs me. I don't know whether *gerift* means 'held' or 'hold.' I am not certain because both meanings are possible. I am confused whether the verse is in present tense or past but my literary knowledge says that it means 'held', as mostly poetry is written in present tense. If I apply my prior language knowledge, then means of this verse may be that 'in the palace, king holds cup' or 'in the palace where king holds wine.'

The opening diction of the second verse puzzles me. My L1 and L2 are not helping. I don't know the meaning of first cluster *aaho bacha kar do roba*. It may be a combination of some nouns, which I have never heard before, with some verbs and prepositions. I guess unsuccessfully. I recall the sound of first word *aaho* sounds same in my L1 and L2 which means 'alas' but I cannot infer the exact meaning. Let me try the second cluster so some sense may develop. *Aaram* means 'rest' and if *gerfit* means 'grip' then it must refer to some subject. But what is that subject? I think it may mean that 'in the grip of rest.' It is not making any sense. I guess the first cluster of words, which I could not infer, is the subject or subjects. My linguistic knowledge and innate tendency are paralysed here, although my guesses say that it is related with someone who is in the peace after doing something.

Let me move to the third verse. It is also causing troubles but hope some familiar words will help me. *Bahram* is a male name in my L1 and I am sure that it must be a name of a person in Persian. *Gor* probably near to Urdu word *gor* which means 'grave', or if I get literary meaning of this word, then it may be 'death.' *Magerfatee* is new word. It sounds as a compound word. I cannot decipher it. Let me get help from next phrase. In Sindhi *Hum umar*, means 'of same age' or 'whole life.' Now let me rationalise the meaning by combining the two chunks together. '*Bahra*' whole life grave. No, it is not a logical meaning and sentences. It means I am failing to recognise verb, preposition or adverbs. The missing meaning of words poses difficulty in extracting gist. It means the missing words are some verbs or prepositions. Let me rephrase this translation and give it a grammatical structure. '*Bahram* lived his whole life in the grave.' It is not rational but an acceptable explanation. Or it may be 'he sends the others into the grave for whole life.' It sounds rational. But who is *Bahram*; a grave digger, a killer, or a hangman; who sent others to the grave. I am not sure that I am on the right track to tackle this verse but I think the last inference is making some sense.

Let me try the last one. *Deede* sounds near to Urdu which means 'look, glance or glimpse'. I have absolutely no idea for second phrase *chago na*. The last phrase *gor bahram girft*, may mean that when '*Bahram* is griped in grave or death'. Next I am checking whether by putting the two verses together would make any sense, as there is a continuity of thought. Let me try it. I think it does. '*Bahram*, who sends other to the grave is in the grip of death.' I am not sure. Or it can be either way. Now try to guess the first unsolved cluster of words of last verse. I am trying to use

my common sense to work out, though the mystery of the character persists. Perhaps it could mean that ‘he was looking or not looking’ or if I deploy my experience of literature then it may be inferred ‘when he was not conscious but death griped him.’ Now I am joining the both chunks together ‘Bahram, who sends other to the graves, is in the grip of death, when he was not conscious.’ I think this is more appropriate and logical. My experience of teaching literature is cognizance me to decipher it. I am using my worldly and academic knowledge.

My first attempt was not successful, although I got the gist but some vocabulary and grammatical structure hammered me to get complete meaning.

Let me try the second *rubae*:

خیام اگر زباده مستی خوشباش
 با ماه رستی اگر نشستی خوشباش
 چون عاقبت کار جهان نیستی است
 انگار که نیستی چه هستی خوشباش

Comparatively it seems easy as the shape and sounds of some words are familiar. It means translation of vocabulary and linguistic knowledge will assist me. *Agar* sounds same of Urdu, which means ‘if’, and this conditional adverb starts a conditional clause. I never heard word *zabada*, but *musti* means ‘intoxication’, *khoshbass* is a simple cognate for Sindhi compound word which means ‘happy or enjoy.’ Sense is clear. Although one word I cannot decipher but I can infer meaning of verse through translation, ‘*Khayyam* if you are intoxicated enjoys it.’

Like first verse, I automatically translated second through word strategy, context and similarity with first verse. I don’t understand first word, *ba*, I use long term memory and recall word *mahrunki*, which I have read in Urdu and Sindhi poetry, which means ‘beautiful woman,’ *nishti* sound near Urdu word *nisht* means ‘seat’. I guess *nishti* is with past participle which may mean ‘seated’. I am not sure but I cannot find the more appropriate option for this word. It gives a clear clue to my meaning. I suddenly recollect the meaning of unsolved word keeping in mind the grammatical structure of the sentence; *ba* is either ‘to’ or ‘with.’ I think subsequently following translations would be suitable that ‘if seated next to beautiful woman, enjoy.’ or ‘when you seated with a beautiful woman, enjoy.’ This shows the returning to the unknown words of the text by working hard to get the meaning through referring back to the grammatical knowledge and extracting the complete sense through sentence structure. I can verbally infer the third verse through vocabulary recall strategies. First word *choon* I never heard before but next phrase *aaqibat ka jahan* is a common in my L1 and L2, which means ‘end of this world’ or ‘world after death’. Next word is *niasteas*, sounds near to my L1 phrase *neest-o-nabod*, which means ‘destroy’. I can infer the meaning of whole verse through context and try again using top-down processing, that ‘in the end when world will be destroyed’.

I continue reading, though last verse is posing more troubles. Initial word *angar* sounds similar of Urdu word *angare*, means 'fire', *neastee* I already described means 'destroy' but *chohastee* is an absolutely new word for me, and its position is so strong that if I don't understand it, I am scared that it would may destroy my attempt. I am looking at the morphology of the word, *hasti* I am sure means 'personality' as it is same in my L1 and L2, but its prefix *cho* unable to guess. It may be a pronoun, I guess, as it point out something, or a verb to describe the state or position of a noun or adjective. Let me identify from the syntax. It is acting as adverb to describe the manner. It may mean 'this'. The missing meaning could ruin my attempt of translation but I feel that as a good reader I am giving myself a best possible chance to find the correct explanation. The Interlanguage learning process has another characteristic: that is, variability, which means the learner, dwells between correct and incorrect forms of language in a time frame (Towell and Hawkins 1994 and Ellis 1985). Let me try to get meaning through context that 'when fire will destroy this/his/her personality, will be happy.' But whose personality, self or other? This does not make a complete sense. The second last single word of this last verse destroys the whole meaning. I reckon that I am missing meanings of some important words verbs, prepositions or adverbs, which I never knew before or some nouns which I never heard before. Under normal conditions, I would have searched the dictionary for quick solution but here I want to use my learning strategies which were running in my mind during solving this task. Though dictionary is the best source to augment vocabulary treasure but at this stage I feel to check my intuition and understanding of how I deploy the various learning strategies to decipher a new language.

ANALYSIS

In this think aloud experiment my purpose is not to translate but to comprehend a foreign language, but I assume that best possible way to understand a new language is through translation. Yet the literary-styled text has drawn me in to the translation process to extract the meaning. My L1 and L2 are helping me a lot in translation-approach.

In acquiring just eight small verses a number of strategies and techniques I operated in a small span of time. In this introspective method of 'TAPs I am not abetted by any dictionary or person. The whole understanding depended on my help of L1 and L2, my behaviour to acquire it, prior knowledge of languages as a human, academic knowledge and teaching experience of language and literature. I can say that my linguistic competence remained a major source to decipher the text of a new language. It is a fact that the deployment of various strategies highly depends on the learners' abilities as well as his academic knowledge (Willing 1989). A proficient learner applies these strategies different from those who are less proficient (Oxford, 1989). I fully understand these strategies are not for every learner as my experience, academic knowledge and linguistic knowledge helped me while for the learners, even at advance level they don't know and neither teaches them to get assistance in SLA.

In this little piece of poetry as a common learner, I was translating to understand it and practically it was interesting to know each word, although to get the sense of the complete verse was my target. However, without understanding words it was impossible for me to understand the complete verse. In some cases where I failed to infer meaning of a single word than the whole passage was beyond my comprehension. And sometimes whole verse enabled me to guess the meaning of the unsolved words. I strained a lot of energies to understand the meaning of verses, intention of writer and its figurative meaning.

I applied almost all the skills, consciously and unconsciously because a good ‘learners certainly try to apply their existing linguistic knowledge to new language’ (Grenfell 2000, p. 7). I have divided the verses into manageable chunks, eg: *aaram gerft*; cognate with L1 and L2, e.g. *qasar*, *jamshed*; prediction, e.g. *nishistee*; syntactical clues, e.g. *cho* and *ba*; translation word by word, e.g. *angar gerft etc*; scan and skim for procedural knowledge (Ellis,1985), e.g. *Bharam*; help of fixes, e.g. *nishistee*; deploying morphological technique, e.g. *hastiest*; identification from sentence position, e.g. *aan*; recalling words (from short term memory retrieve long term memory) e.g. *mahrunki*; through words I already know, top-down, e.g. verse no. 3 and 4 of second verse and bottom-up, e.g. *nishistee*; forming hypothesis and testing chunks using my meta cognitive knowledge, e.g. *chon aqbat ka jehan neistias*; inferring unknown vocabulary, through critical assessment about the truth of text, e.g. *Behram ke gor megar fatee hum umar*; looking back to the whole text and summarising it, and connecting it with previous passage to get complete sense and confirmation, e.g. the first and second verses of first *rubaae*.

But the most effective strategy I deployed is translation. I can say that I was transferring my knowledge of this kind of text to draw the word knowledge but, consciously I was applying the translation approach to reach the meaning, which was my task. I concentrated less on verbs and preposition as it is predicted that I don’t know whether it was verb or adverb, my intuitive knowledge helped me to decipher that how person feels when he seated with wine and woman (e.g. 1 & 2 *rubayyat*). In a way I applied the comprehensible output hypothesis (Swan, 1985) that without paying attention on the grammatical rules. Although grammar is a dynamic system one must see the holistic aspects rather than discrete part but I concentrated on the message of the writer.

Another strategy I consider important is to know the meaning of unknown diction through the help of known words. Although top-down (get sense, intention of writer) and bottom-up (infer words, phrases, sentences) also helped me in grappling with meaning. Like a good learner I deployed various strategies as in-depth literary understanding.

CONCLUSION

This demonstration suggests that learning is a complex and dynamic process in which an individual uses variety of information and apply many strategic modes of operation. This small research explores very important issues related to teaching methodology and failure of teaching learning strategies to the learners is curbing their abilities of learning. It means there is a dire need to construct a teaching framework that would enable the learners to use effective learning strategies in various combinations and monitoring and reconstructing these strategies for better results.

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