Learner strategies

An interview with Steven McDonough

Steven McDonough talks to Alasdair Archibald about learner strategies.

ALASDAIR ARCHIBALD We're here to talk about strategies and we have a choice of terms: learner strategies or learning strategies, which do you prefer?

STEVEN MCDONOUGH Actually I prefer the term learner strategies because for me the term 'learning strategies' is more restricted. There are lots of things that learners do which may not contribute directly to their learning, but do contribute, for example, to their use of the language and to their ability to monitor what they are doing, etc., all of which seem to be characteristic of learners but aren't directly learning strategies in the sense that they necessarily make the stock of language that the learner's got larger at that point.

AA In what ways are learner strategies simply the things that learners do?

SMCD Learner strategies are, of course, things that learners do. Mental activities, by and large, that they use to control the flow of data and to decide how to plan what they are going to do to whatever language area they're coping with at the time. But, when we use the term 'strategies' we're also looking at something that is principled and probably practised. After all a strategic response is essentially something that you know most of the time is going to get you as near as you can to the right answer, probably because of your experience of using it in the past. So it's a characteristic thing that you do that, in your experience, has worked. Therefore, it's a little bit more than just 'something that you do' because, when you've got to that stage, it's part of, what you might call, your own learning persona, it's something that becomes characteristic of your response.

One of the things that people who are good language learners seem to do is have ways of slotting in quite a repertoire of such strategic responses. According to the context they have a certain degree of flexibility and people who are less successful in that respect have less flexibility. One of the things that the strategy research has enabled is for people to go to expert language learners, expert writers, expert readers in a foreign language and try to classify the sorts of things that they're doing in order to explain what is making them such good language learners. And it may be that they're that way because they're idiosyncratic. On the other hand, it may be that there are things we can learn from them.

AA The idea of learner training appears to be that we can learn from the strategies of good language learners.

SMCD There's quite a lot to say about that kind of issue. In the early days people quite deliberately looked at what people who were being successful in classes did and what less successful learners did poorly. And they suggested that we can perhaps transplant what the good people were doing and teach the poor language learners to do that and in some simple sense make them better learners. Hopefully that would then be reflected in their proficiency and there was evidence that that indeed could take place. But, there's an alternative way of looking at that, which came out in some of the research. What seemed to be this distinction between the good and poor language learners wasn't so much that they were using a whole different class of strategies. They were using, in many cases, the same strategies, but the good language learners of course were using them successfully and the poor language learners were floundering about and failing to use them well.

AA There is a question, with learner training, of whether the strategies somebody uses are 'bolt ons' that they do, or whether they're part of their personality?

SMCD If strategies are an integral part of learning then in some simple sense we don't need to teach them because we all go through a development phase and, by and large, we'll develop the ones we use. We do that in ordinary life. It raises all sorts of questions about how you set up a decent theory of strategies and even after 30 years of research we don't have a fully articulated body of theory which answers all the questions we want to ask.

If they are bolt on extras or tricks of the trade, that's not a bad thing. In fact it may be very useful because it may give the language learner a chance to succeed in something without having repeated negative effects of failure. And you've given them a way of seeing how to do it. This has been shown to increase the levels of motivation of learners. It makes them more interested because they feel they can be successful.

AA You appear to see these tricks of the trade as desirable in that they can open up language learning for students where otherwise it might be a blank wall for them.

SMCD Almost a wall of failure. Yes, I would agree with that. There might be a problem because in training somebody to do something that is in the initial stages successful, you may actually be limiting them to doing only that. What is characteristic of a successful strategic learner—one who's maybe learnt quite a lot of language, or indeed learnt several languages—is that they can be flexible and they can then develop and go on.

AA What do you see as the limitations of strategy instruction?

SMCD I think one obvious limitation is that strategy instruction is not actually the same as language teaching. I'm not suggesting it's not a useful feature, but a lot of strategy training is actually conducted in L1 because that's the language you can use, particularly to intermediate and

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beginner learners to explain the actual strategy involved, the mechanics of it, how to use it, when to use it, etc. Now that might well be taking time away from the actual language teaching. And what you've got to demonstrate is that the time taken away can be recouped, or indeed recouped and more so, so that they've actually got time to reach the given standard in the same time as other people not having that kind of strategy instruction.

So that's one kind of limitation. Another kind of limitation gets us into another kind of discussion which is 'what kind of learner are you going to end up with who's been trained in all these strategies?' Is it really an autonomous learner who's running on his own rules? Or is it somebody who's been trained to do certain things—for which, of course, training is the appropriate word rather than education—and is that person then stuck in a bit of a time warp of operating those things that the teacher's trained them to do rather than taking off on their own?

AA What do you see as the role of learner strategies in communicative language teaching?

SMCD When people were developing communicative language teaching and the idea of communicative competence that many people see as the basis of the communicative approach, there were a few different formulations, but there was the idea that one of the things that was characteristic of a successful second language learner was a strategic competence. That's to say they would have ways of doing two kinds of things: planning and accomplishing the language tasks that they had, and also compensating when they recognized that the task was going to be beyond either their own linguistic capability, or indeed of the person they were talking to. Strategic competence, what it was and how to develop it kind of grew with communicative language teaching and there is quite a strong link between them. One obvious link is the notion of communicative strategies and actually teaching people how to manage interaction in the foreign language as a specific language task, rather than just teaching them the language they're going to need.

AA What do you see as the link between these communication or compensatory strategies and language learning and learner strategies?

SMCD In the early days quite a lot of work was done on compensatory and communication strategies. A lot of the work on communication strategies was of a compensatory nature, either compensating for something that you didn't know, or indeed compensating for the growing belief that your interlocutor wasn't quite following you. And there's the question then as to whether doing that kind of thing actually contributes to your learning of a language or whether it's just something that you do in order to practise the language. It's partly a definitional question, but classically people separated the two things off. They said, well communication strategies would not class as learning strategies because they're not something that you're actually learning. You're practising something, you're using something that you learned before, or possibly something that you use in your first language for the same kind of purpose. On the other hand, the more you use that kind of strategy, the

more practised you become at actually conducting a conversation. So you could argue that, in that sense, it is a learning device and a good thing to do because it means that you can become more polished at actually holding a conversation in a foreign language.

AA It's been suggested that a number of these strategies and learning devices are very closely linked to the student's proficiency in the language and the more proficient you are, the more proficiently you can use these strategies.

SMCD That's a very important argument and it has a huge bearing on the training issue. If it's the case that good, extensive use of a strategic repertoire is actually dependent on a certain level of proficiency, then it's not obvious that teaching people strategies is going to help.

There is lots of evidence that strategy use is dependent upon proficiency. There is also evidence that proficiency is dependent upon strategy use as well. That it's quite possible that increasing somebody's strategic repertoire does help them actually learn more language. So it's not obvious which way the answer lies.

It may be that it's different at different stages of proficiency. It's quite clear that there is a cross-over point where in the early stages what people need is as much language as possible and at later stages, when they've got enough language to use the strategies, what they need is a greater strategic repertoire that they can use in lots of different circumstances and be flexible and useful language learners. So it may be that there are points where the argument changes, but sadly there's very little specific research on that.

AA In the early days of research into strategies, many researchers appeared to be simply making a list, a taxonomy, of the different things that learners did. What are your views on the practicality of such lists and the value of making such taxonomies?

SMCD I think that in the early days there was a great value in that kind of taxonomic approach because of the idea that you could deconstruct what good learners, and indeed what poor learners, were doing and what they weren't doing and write it down. And then compare different learners at different stages.

There was lots of research producing huge long lists of strategies both in general terms and also specific sub-tasks And almost all of it consists of very big lists. There are a number of downsides to those lists. One is it's not always easy to see what is actually similar to what and produce a classification system, so identifying superordinate categories was very difficult.

But what's interesting is not so much all the strategies that somebody could use, it's how they use them, when they use them, how they decide, for example, this is not working for them so they use something else, how they deal with the product of that strategy, how that then links into the next bit they want to learn and how it helps them, for example, to take over some of the decision making for their own language learning.

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So the taxonomic approach was a stage that we needed to go through. But what people have been looking at since is things like how are strategies used, what are the limits, how do people make the decisions, how do people learn from it, how do people reflect from it, how do they go on from there in each stage and get some kind of view of how language learning actually develops. That's in its infancy but it's going on.

AA What do you see as the benefits of learner strategy research for the practising teacher?

SMCD I think actually there are quite a lot of benefits. There have been some unfortunate claims in the literature in the past that there are things that every teacher should know. I'm always very wary of suggesting to teachers that there are things they should know. On the other hand how students cope with instruction is something the designers of course materials and teachers in classrooms and in one-to-one instruction, and all that kind of thing, have found quite useful. In other words, one of the things the strategy research was giving us is a much more obvious and practical notion of what learners actually do and how the instruction works from the student's point of view.

That may not sound a very practical outcome, but I have the impression it's quite a useful thing for teachers to be able to read up about. I think there are also practical outcomes. For example, lots of materials have turned up that incorporate the results of strategy research in terms of the kinds of exercises that they suggest are going to help.

AA Presumably with the current interest in self-access centres and independent learning, one of the benefits for the teacher of learner strategies is that they will then take the learning beyond the classroom and into the self-access centre and the real world.

SMCD Yes, I think that's absolutely right. It could shift the locus of learning from what goes on in the classroom to what the student may well do outside classes, or indeed after the end of the course. And there would certainly be a hope that students with that kind of strategic command would be better in that more independent situation than people who are much more dependent on what the teacher does in the classroom.

There are one or two downsides. One would be how a teacher could know that that was actually happening. In some ways they may be able to estimate what is happening through, for example, the quality of the homework that this student does, or the fact that they actually do it rather than not do it. It also may be visible by slightly more devious means in terms of the student beginning to wrest control from the teacher about what the next stage for that student is. It could seem somewhat rebellious, but more likely it could seem as though the student is getting more able to discuss with the teacher where to go next, and the teacher's role then emerges from being that of an instructor to more of a counsellor. And in self-access centres, that's exactly what happens. That's what's intended to happen anyway.

AA If the shift in learner training is away from teaching students to use strategies in the classroom to using strategies in an environment

where there is nobody observing, then the problem of 'good learners use the strategies well and poor learners use the strategies poorly' re-occurs.

SMCD Absolutely. You've got to be very careful that you are teaching people things that are going to make life easier for them and not actually allow them or indeed make them persist in failure. That would mean they won't do it and that could mean in certain circumstances some quite difficult outcomes for those individuals.

AA It actually then becomes very difficult for the teacher to know if the learner training they are doing is having any success or not.

SMCD Yes, I think that's quite true because with the teaching of the language you very possibly have the students take some kind of exam which demonstrates either that they have learned what they are supposed to have learned, or they haven't, or somewhere in between. It would look a little strange to give a test on whether they are using certain kinds of strategies.

There is the question of how they use their strategies. There is also the question of whether they are developing their own strategies. It sounds rather silly, but it is possible to argue that the best test of whether somebody's learning to be an independent and strategically expert language learner is not whether they are doing the strategies you've taught them a few months down the line, but whether they've developed their own for the new circumstances they're in. And that's not something that the teacher giving them the strategy teaching in the first place is usually going to be in a position to see.

There's been very little long-term research on how long such training programmes affect the student. Either looking at them at later stages in a course, or, for example, in language maintenance situations where they have had a course and are then on their own.

AA Presumably there's also a danger of teachers training students to use strategies that look good in terms of the students doing their homework, but, perhaps, do not then transfer into the broader context of language development.

SMCD That's absolutely right. And it is also possible for the students to demonstrate that they're using the kinds of things that they think are what they should be doing. But actually not trying to incorporate them fully and therefore not actually using the strategic training they've received to help them to develop into independent learners.

There's also a danger in some situations where strategies become enshrined in curricula as things that have to be taught, which are then seen by the language learners and maybe even by the teachers as just something else that they have to learn and they don't actually get used in the way that they were intended in the first place.

AA So they become really a strategy for successfully navigating your way through the class. Similar to the testing strategies that are often taught.

SMCD The test-taking strategies issue is a very interesting one. There are certainly lots of test-taking strategies which are the same as the strategies

you would use if you were doing those language tasks not in a test. If you've got strategies for reading comprehension and then you do a reading comprehension test one would hope that the test will pick up the fact that you know how to deal with a reading comprehension. But it will also pick up the fact that you know how to interpret test questions.

There are all sorts of things about different kinds of tests which are perfectly possible to teach students, and in some ways may be important to teach students simply because then you can say that the test is only testing the language. If all students know how to spot badly worded questions or spot the right answer in a multiple choice question, then clearly that's not part of the discrimination of the test. If it becomes part of the discrimination of the test because some of the students know that and some don't then the test is discriminating on something that's not part of the language judgement that the test is really supposed to be testing.

Many teachers are very interested in test-taking strategies and there's quite a lot of research on them precisely because they want to do the best by their students and get them through the tests. And if that means teaching them something that actually is not the language, but is how to cope with tests, well so be it. At least they will get their student through the test and although in some ways one may feel that's inauthentic, you can't blame the teachers.

AA What do you feel is the future of learner strategies? Are there any areas that you feel have not been dealt with adequately or any developments that you are particularly interested in?

SMCD There is the problem of how to develop an adequate theory of strategies. We seem to know what we mean by strategies even if we can't write it out in any clear detail. But there are lots of questions that a proper theory of strategies would raise. For example, one of the things that happens with strategies is that they can combine. Typically people use two strategies together. It's very interesting, they do one thing and then they do another thing. They do that characteristically and typically because that's the thing that gets the answer they like to get and it works for them. How do they combine them? Why have they combined those two and how do they go together? Another question that's interesting and has come up quite a lot is what is a weaker strategy and what is a more powerful strategy? One of the things that happens as learners face more problematic situations and also become more strategically aware, is that they begin to use more powerful strategies. There's a progression as to how students actually learn to operate those more powerful strategies. And that's the sort of thing that a theory of strategy use ought to be able to tell us.

That's one area where I think strategy research is going to go. Another area is actually to shift from the learners and find out the micro-detail of what the teachers are doing. When you talk about teacher strategies most people think of strategies in terms of how they plan their lessons, how they cope with lesson plans, or do without lesson plans, but still actually produce properly sequenced and properly understandable

sessions and be expert teachers. Clearly the kinds of decisions that teachers have to make in the hot atmosphere of a language class have to be made on the hoof, have to be made very quickly and are very often things that are in a sense pre-planned and characteristic of that teacher. They're also very interesting decision sequences. And it seems to me that that's an area where we need lots of information. How do teachers make those extraordinarily difficult judgements as to how to handle this particular student, or that particular student, who are maybe trying to learn the same thing, but who need different treatment?

One can use some of the same techniques that have been used for looking at how people learn things to look at how teachers do those kinds of things. My impression is that we need lots more of that kind of research and it could feed into teacher training in very productive ways. It's being done, but it seems to me that it's an area that could expand quite a lot.

AA Thank you very much.

The speakers

Steven McDonough is now retired. He was formerly Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the University of Essex. He has published *Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching* (Unwin 1981), *Strategy and Skill in Learning a Foreign Language* (Arnold 1995), *Research Methods for English Language Teachers* (with J. McDonough, Arnold 1997), and, most recently, *Applied Linguistics in Language Education* (Arnold 2002). He has also published numerous articles on topics relating to second language learning and the use of strategies.

Alasdair Archibald is a Lecturer in English Language within Modern Languages in the School of Humanities at the University of Southampton. He is currently Head of Linguistics and was until recently head of English Language and director of the Pre-Sessional Courses in English for Academic Purposes. He has studied at the Universities of Swansea, Essex, and Munich and has worked as a language teacher, teacher trainer, and curriculum designer in Japan, Germany, and Britain. His main research interests are in the areas of writing strategies and developing literacy in a second language, discourse analysis, and error analysis and interlanguage theories.