Making a case for skills/strategies-based instruction for L2 listening development

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that a skills/strategies approach remains one of the many possible and effective approaches that can help L2 learners to improve their listening skills if classroom teachers implement it based on a good understanding of its cognitive as well as pedagogical underpinnings. Strategies are a series of events and might not be reportable in the listening process due to the heavy cognitive demand of the task. Nonetheless, this article posits that the difficulty in reporting on the cognitive processes does not mean that listeners are not using cognitive and metacognitive strategies to process the live language data. As long as care is taken, as psychologists have maintained, complete data collection is possible (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Opponents such as Reese-Miller's (1993) and Ridgway's (2000a, 200b) overemphasis that strategies (including listening strategies) are not easily reportable should not prevent teachers from adopting a skills/strategies approach to L2 learner/listener training. In fact, research findings are well synthesised (e.g., Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Goh & Yusnita, 2006; Pressley & Harris, 2006; Zhang, 2008a) which indicate that strategies-based instruction is one of the effective practices of pedagogy in classroom instructional situations, especially in this era when the concept of "best methods" can be explored in more than one sense of the term after decades of methodological searches for the best methods ended with a non-unitary solution.

KEYWORDS: *learner strategies, skills, listening, learner-training*

Introduction

At first sight, readers unfamiliar with the literature on language learner/learning strategies (LLS) and learner training might wonder what I am aiming to achieve in this paper given that among classroom teachers teaching learning strategies for achieving success is too normal a way of doing things in classroom procedures to deserve any special mention. However, for the majority, including those "in the circle" of learner strategy research, this is a significant topic of contention which warrants a discussion in some detail. For clarity, I start with a brief historical account before I spell out my proposal as a way of advancing the field in addition to explicating my points in clear terms as a way of reflecting on this pedagogical approach. Interested readers who are keen to be informed of the latest in the field of language learner strategy research findings are referred to Cohen & Macaro's (2007) recent edited volume that carries chapters contributed mostly by leading scholars whose major research interest is in LLS.

Feasibility of learner training in L2 teaching

Anita Wenden's paper (Wenden, 1986) emphasizing the need for learner training through a metacognitive approach and her book (Wenden, 1991) that outlines learner training procedures have offered useful ideas for the language teaching practitioner (see also Oxford, Cohen, Crookall, Lavin, Nyikos, & Shutter, 1990). Ten years after her seminal works were published, some scholars still remained unconvinced that learner training is possible. For example, Reese-Miller (1993, 1994) and Ridgway (2000a) both questioned the validity of such an innovative pedagogical approach. Exactly because of these arguments against a skills/strategies approach to learner training, Field's (1998) proposal for a skills/strategies approach to learning the receptive skill of listening as one of the many learner-centred options available to language teachers was rejected by Ridgway (2000a). Ridgway criticised Field's proposal for a pedagogical shift in classroom procedures towards skills/strategies-based instruction and branded it as "jumping on the bandwagon." As is understood, like Reese-Miller (1993), Ridgway's (2000a, 2000b) argument against the teachability of listening skills/strategies through a skills/strategies approach is based too much on an overemphasis of the text-based approach. It might also be attributed to a lack of awareness of the overlaps between listening and reading comprehension processes. Contextual variability in L2 instructional practices could be another feature that has suffered from such neglect. This paper intends to review recent developments along this line to update readers on this important area of second language development in this era when listening skills/strategies play such a vital role in an increasingly dynamic communicative environment of globalized human interaction (Chamot & Rubin, 1994; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Gao, 2003; Goh, 2002; Goh & Yusnita, 2006; Oxford, 1993; Zhang, 2008b).

Teachability of listening strategies

Strategies are a series of events and might not be fully reportable in the listening process due to the heavy cognitive demand of the task (Anderson, 1991; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993), but difficulty in fully reporting on listening strategies does not exclude the feasibility of using verbal reports as data (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Overlaps between listening and reading comprehension processes suggest that listening strategies are teachable. Ridgway argues against the teachability of listening strategies on the ground that listening and reading are two different modes of language processing. I can only partially agree. In fact, in opposition to what Ridgway posits, the close relationship between reading and listening comprehension processes is confirmed. Danks & End (1987, p. 272) argue that "listening and reading can be both similar and different processes. They are different to the extent that the two modalities impose different demands on the cognitive processing system" (see also Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Rost, 2002; Zhang, Gu, & Hu, 2008). They are similar because they use the same knowledge base during comprehension. Danks & End (1987, p. 274) also argue that "listeners and readers have to use whatever strategies available to complete their comprehension tasks. These strategies cannot be *directly observable*,

but can be *inferred* from different patterns of results." Verbal reports as a format for data collection have already been adopted by many researchers in language education. In fact, psychologists have already used this well-established method for at least two decades (see Ericsson & Simon, 1993). All this suggests that listening strategies, even if they are not directly observable, can be consciously deployed and inferable through other means. Once these listening strategies are inferred, like reading strategies, they can be taught. If listening strategies can be taught, then teachers can tap on this pedagogical procedure to expedite the learning of listening strategies and skills, as shown in the work of Flowerdew & Miller (2005), Goh (2002), and Goh & Yusnita (2006). It might be necessary to make it explicit that the skills/strategies approach is best practiced based on understanding students' strengths and weaknesses in a particular aspect in L2 listening development (see e.g., Cohen, 1990, 1998; Goh, 1998; Vogely, 1995; Zhang & Goh, 2006).

Strategies are learners' deliberate attention to their comprehension processes in order to construct meaning (Cohen, 1998). When a skills/strategies approach is adopted, teachers' attention is focused on helping language learners to listen effectively. This emphasis is also aligned with the learners' particular learning styles in relation to a particular learning task carried out in a specific learning context (Cohen, 2003). Some strategies are generalisable across tasks, but others are particularly applicable to specific tasks. So, in teaching students through the skills/strategies approach, teachers can do this by helping learners to construct meaning through a range of effective strategies. Once these strategies are automatized, learners will save them in their skills bank (Carrell et al., 1998; Chamot & Rubin, 1994; Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Zhang, 2001, 2008b). In other words, efficient and effective practice under the guidance of the classroom teacher and frequent use of strategies can help learners to use them effectively and flexibly, and, more often than not, automatically (Zhang, 2008a) for optimal learning results. This means that the transition from strategies to skills is a gradual one, and often it needs sufficient practice and cognitive modification in the learner (L. Zhang & D. Zhang, 2008).

Those who argue against the skill/strategies approach posit that listeners do not have enough memory capacity for reporting their use of listening strategies while listening. Therefore, there is no ground that listening instruction based on the skill/strategies-based approach is feasible. As a matter of fact, research shows that listeners are able to report their use of listening strategies while engaged in a listening task, and this means that listeners are using listening strategies (Vandergrift, 2004). So, the fact remains that as one listens, one employs strategies for comprehension if you ask any listener. The use of listening strategies can take place before listening (pre-listening), during listening, and even after the listening task is finished in the extension activities that the teacher has designed. This is particularly the case for good listeners. Vandergrift's (1997, 2003) research shows this clearly. So far, researchers have come to a consensus that effective use of learner strategies distinguishes good learners from poor ones. Good learners (especially, listeners) tend to "monitor" the incoming input. They "regulate" and thus able to "control" their own listening processes. They adjust their listening

strategies in order to arrive at an understanding of the message being heard (Danks & End, 1987; Vandergrift, 2004; Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007). "Anticipating" and "inferencing" are another two strategies deliberately used by effective listeners. They help listeners to interact with the text being heard to negotiate meaning. All this happens at the pre-, while-, and even post-listening stages. Because these strategies are inferable, it is highly possible and feasible for classroom teachers to adopt the skill/strategies approach, and hence my argument is that the skills/strategies are teachable.

Listening strategies are more often taught than caught

Contextual variability indicates that listening is more often taught than caught, and so are listening strategies. This is particularly true of L2 contexts. Scholars such as Cohen, Crookall, Lavin, Nyikos, Oxford, & Shutter (Oxford et al., 1999) started their training program based on solid understanding of the utility and teachability of learner strategies in language learning. O'Malley and colleagues had already started strategies-based instruction in L2 listening development in the 1980s (O'Malley et al., 1985). Gao (2006) reported on differences in strategy use of a group of EFL learners from China studying in a UK university and argued that strategy training should be provided so that these learners can get the guidance for effective language learning. It is fundamentally wrong of Ridgway to make the claim that listening is more often caught than taught. It is widely accepted that there are stark differences between *second* language acquisition and *foreign* language learning due to drastic differences in target language input both in terms of quantity and quality. Therefore, Ridgway's argument confounds his readers and muddles the concept. How many *foreign* language learners' language skills are caught when learning environments lack sufficient input, if at all? I would assume that if teachers incorporate skills/strategies based training in the listening lessons, then the improvement of students' listening skills will be more noticeable than if a text-based approach was adopted.

If *foreign* language learners were not given any instruction on how to listen in the language, then the development of their listening skills would be dubious. Even at the intermediate level, foreign language learners still need instruction in listening, though the instructional procedures may vary. Intentional or unintentional reference to just one language learning context makes Ridgway's (2000a, b) argument weak. Is it possible to make claims based only on West European experiences? Ridgway (2000b) says: "Conversation or other interactive speech situations are great ways to practice listening comprehension and to get away from texts that are ideational in character." But where can listeners in L2 acquisition-poor environments (e.g., China, Mongolia, or Russia, without any sense of discrimination in any political terms) easily find such "conversation" or "interactive speech situations"? Learners are reliant on audio materials, if they are available at all, and teacher instruction in relatively better-equipped schools. Those in poverty-stricken countries cannot afford to think in these terms. Ridgway's argument is incomplete. He does not take into consideration the contextual relevance, practicality and generalisability of his own proposal.

Scholars like Ridgway focus the whole argument on the lack of research findings about the effects of strategies-based instruction on listening comprehension. This argument, albeit faulty, is more sustainable in the early 2000's than it is today. Nonetheless, this does not mean that a skills/strategies approach should be ruled out completely (Chamot, 1995, pp. 18-24; Chamot & Rubin, 1994). Given that L2 listening research is a vibrantly fast-developing area of inquiry from one of "Cinderella" to that of a "favoured baby" nowadays (cf. Chamot, 1995; Rubin, 1994; Vandergrift, 1997, 2004), sufficient empirical research findings from studies that examined the effects of strategy training on listening comprehension have now been easily accessible (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Goh & Yusnita, 2006; Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007; Mendelsohn, 1998; Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Rost, 2002). Making strong claims against a skills/strategies approach to L2 listening development does not offer teachers any avenue to developing students' listening ability. This is because, as a cognitive process in the human brain, listening is much more complicated than is usually assumed to be (Danks & End, 1987; Gu, Hu, & Zhang, 2005; Rubin, 1994; Vandergrift, 2004). More studies on a larger scale than what is reported in the literature are needed to fully reveal the true nature of the listening comprehension process and the relevance of skills/strategies-based instruction for L2 listening development. However, we should not delay the process on the pretext that we have to wait for future findings.

Conclusion

Opponents' complete denial of a skills/strategies approach is not recommendable. L2 listening development through a skills/strategies approach is feasible because strategies are inferable and that it provides a practical solution to solving student difficulties in the learning process. This approach provides learners with a reliable and steady crutch in their attempts to learn to listen. Once they develop highly proficient skills/strategies for effective listening, learners will no longer bank on a deliberate use of them. Instead, automatized use of skills/strategies will become the norm. Different learning contexts show that L2 learners in acquisition-poor environments need skills/strategies instruction in order to develop their awareness of the listening process and the useful strategies of which they want to declare ownership so that they will make them ready in their future learning tasks and contexts. This awareness will enhance both their listening ability development in the long run as well as boost their confidence in language learning that is immediately needed. A text-based approach might be useful for helping learners to achieve automatic decoding, but a skills/strategies-based approach may facilitate the acquisition of both language ability and skills for life-long learning (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Mendelsohn, 1998; Scarcella & Oxford, 2000). In fact, skills/strategies-based instruction has already been widely advocated in many contexts (see e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Goh, 2002; Grabe, 2004; Hudson, 2007; Pressley & Harris, 2006; D. Zhang & L. Zhang, 2008).

However, opponents such as Ridgway over-emphasize the importance of text/practice, which is actually strongly challenged by modern human learning

experiences and will be rejected by classroom teachers in this era when language teaching has been endowed with rich and meaningful communicative activities intended to develop students' language competence, of which skills/strategies are just an essential part (Zhang, 2008b). Acceding to such an emphasis equates returning to the behaviourist approach that relies too heavily on stimulus-response routines. It could ultimately marginalise L2 learners' roles in the language learning process, especially their freedom and power to exercise agency in learning a foreign language (Cohen & White, 2007; Zhang, 2008b). In order to enhance second or foreign language learning, classroom teachers are in a better position if a skills/strategies-based instructional program is implemented. In fact, the very laudable efforts by Cohen and others (e.g., Cohen, 2002) in initiating a systematic training program intended to prepare teachers for skills/strategies-based instructional interventions to help expedite student learning have already offered classroom teachers to do self-training for a skills/strategies-based pedagogy. Well-informed teachers should be encouraged to take this approach, and this will surely generate rewards not only to teachers but also to students in the long run.

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