

Reconceptualizing strategic learning in the face of self-regulation: Throwing language learning strategies out with the bathwater.

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This forum article examines the conceptualization of strategic learning over the past 30 years, focusing on recent conceptualizations that shift toward the notion of self-regulation. In recent years, scholars have argued the language learning strategies are too general, undefined, and incoherent and the questionnaires designed to measure language learning strategies are inaccurate and unreliable (see, for example, Dörnyei 2005; Tseng, Dörnyei and Schmitt 2006; Woodrow 2005). Instead Dörnyei proposes a new theory to replace language learning strategies based on psychological concept of self-regulation encased within his own model of motivation control. This paper will argue that this reconceptualization might be a matter of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, in that it throws out a problematic taxonomy and replaces it with another one, which is also problematic—including the same ‘definitional fuzziness’ for which previous taxonomies have been criticized.

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC LEARNING TAXONOMIES

In seminal research in the field of strategic language learning Rubin (1975) set out to study the good language learner and observed:

The differential success of second/foreign language learners suggests a need to examine in detail what strategies successful language learners employ. In addition to the need of research on this topic, it is suggested that teachers can already begin to help their less successful students to improve their performance by paying more attention to learner strategies already seen as productive (Rubin 1975: 41)

Learning strategies, therefore, are seen as tools that language learners can use to accelerate or aid their second language learning. Rubin (1981: 42) defines language-learning strategies as ‘the techniques or devices that a learner may use to acquire language’. A further definition is ‘the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information’

(O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 1). Later research argued that learning strategies promote learning by aiding the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information and also make learning "easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford 2001: 166). Researchers in this field, therefore, widely agreed on the theoretical benefits that learning strategy research provided for foreign language education. Methods to classify and record these strategies, however, have been more varied and contested.

After Rubin's (1975) examination of learning strategies, research began to investigate a wide range of different strategies for different aspects of language learning, such as overall strategies, vocabulary learning strategies, cognitive strategies and social strategies (see, for example, Naiman, Frolich, Stern & Todesco 1975; Hosenfeld 1976; Selinger 1977; Bailstok 1979). The need for a classification system of newly identified strategies emerging from this research soon became apparent leading to the development of the first taxonomy of language learning strategies by Rubin (1981). Research continued into the 1980s, with particular emphasis on cognitive strategies for ESL learning (see for example Chamot & Kupper 1989; Chamot & O'Malley 1987; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Menzanares, Kupper & Russo 1985a, 1985b), leading to the O'Malley and Chamot classification of language learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

Despite these moves to integrate cognitive theory with language learning strategies, O'Malley and Chamot's classification system was overshadowed by Oxford's taxonomy (1990). According to the Oxford model of strategy classification, language-learning strategies can be classified into six strategy types. Oxford noted that distinctions could be made between these six categories, 'however, the boundaries are fuzzy, particularly since learners sometimes employ more than one strategy at a time' (Oxford 2001: 167). Even though there have been notable attempts at introducing new taxonomies of strategic learning, because of the sheer magnitude of research conducted under the Oxford umbrella, it remains the most widely applied classification system of strategic learning research—and the most scrutinized.

CHALLENGES TO THE VALIDITY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY TAXONOMIES

Challenges to the categorizations of strategic learning have spanned the past 22 years, although support for criticism has grown in strength in more recent years. Back in 1989, almost immediately after the O'Malley and Chamot and Oxford theorizations were gaining steam, Skehan (1989) noted there were few hard findings in the field of language learning strategies due to conflicting methodologies and results, calling for re-theorization within the field. However, Skehan's calls were instead met with an explosion of language learning strategies studies in the 1990s, which helped perpetuate the current theories of the time.

In more recent years, Dörnyei (2005) has challenged the definitional 'fuzziness' of the classification of language learning strategies and the instruments researchers use. In regard to the O'Malley and Chamot classification system, Dörnyei (2005: 168) claims:

The odd one out in O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy is clearly the last group, 'social/affective strategies', which includes such diverse behaviours as 'cooperation', 'questioning and clarification', and self-talk'. These strategies are not related to the cognitive theoretical basis outlined by the authors, and they admittedly represent a broad grouping.

In a further example, Oxford's inclusion of a category for compensatory strategies in her taxonomy has prompted criticism from Dörnyei (2005) that these strategies are related to language use rather than learning. Thus, 'the two processes are so different both in terms of their function and their psycholinguistic representation that they are best kept separate' (Dörnyei 2005: 168). A further criticism of definitional fuzziness is in the separation of cognitive strategies with mnemonic strategies, when it has been argued mnemonic strategies 'constitute a subclass of cognitive strategies' (Dörnyei 2005: 168). Thus it is clear, definitional fuzziness of the major learning strategy classification systems is a point of ongoing criticism, and is a point that will be returned to later in this paper.

In summary, language learning strategy classification systems have been subject to growing criticism regarding definitional fuzziness and invalid research instruments. Based on these criticisms, Dörnyei (2005), like Skehan in 1989, called for re-theorisation of language learning strategies, and Woodrow (2005) called for moves to more qualitative methods. It is important to note, however, that there have been a number of refutes to Dörnyei's criticisms on the basis that he generalises across all language learning strategy research on the basis of critiques to certain out-dated models and instruments. For example, it is Grenfell and Macaro's conviction that "Dörnyei may be setting up a straw man in order to knock him down" (2007: 26). Nevertheless, the criticisms made by Dörnyei still resonate in language learning strategy research today as the concept of self-regulation continues to make inroads into strategy research.

RETHEORIZATION TOWARDS SELF-REGULATION

In 2005, in the wake of criticism of language learning strategy paradigms, Dörnyei offered a new model of strategic learning based on the concept of self-regulation – a term used in educational psychology (see Dörnyei 2005; Tseng et al. 2006). This taxonomy of strategic learning is based in the framework of motivational control strategies (Dörnyei 2001) and consists of five categories. Dörnyei (2005) notes that his system was based on Kuhl's (1987) and Corno and Kanfer's (1993) taxonomy of action control strategies. The categories are defined below:

1. *Commitment control strategies* for helping preserve or increase learner's goal commitment.
2. *Metacognitive control strategies* for monitoring and controlling concentration and for curtailing unnecessary procrastination.
3. *Satiation control strategies* for eliminating boredom and adding extra attraction or interest to the task.
4. *Emotion control strategies* for managing disruptive emotional states or moods and for generating emotions that are conducive to implementing one's intentions.
5. *Environmental control strategies* for the eliminating of negative

environmental influences by making an environment an ally in the pursuit of a difficult goal.

(Dörnyei 2005: 113)

In a later publication, Tseng et. al. (2006) apply the conceptualization to the task of vocabulary learning in the form of a questionnaire designed to measure the self-regulatory capacity of vocabulary learning (SRCVoc). In the study, items on the questionnaire were developed from focus groups with students, and fit into the above framework, 'because of the theoretical problems surrounding the existing learning strategy taxonomies' (Dörnyei 2005: 186).

However use of this instrument alone would only provide an understanding of the underlying self-regulatory capacity of a learner, rather than strategy use itself. Dörnyei (2005: 184) explains 'the SRCVoc does not measure strategy use but rather the learner's underlying self-regulatory capacity that will result in strategy use'. In fact, Gao (2006) suggests that models of strategy use and Dörnyei's model of self-regulation are not incompatible as they are measuring the beginning and end product of the same event. That is, self-regulation is looking at the initial driving forces, while learning strategies examines the outcome of these forces.

DISCUSSION OF MOVEMENTS TOWARDS SELF-REGULATION

However, as the motivation control taxonomy has been applied to other language learning tasks, such as in my doctoral research into Japanese language learning, the taxonomy seemed to suffer from the same definitional fuzziness for which the Oxford model is criticized. In the study, it was reported:

Not one instance of environmental control was reported in the study where it was not being used to regulate another form of motivation control. Such results indicate environmental control may not be a separate category of control in itself, but a self-regulatory mechanism or strategy to control other forms of motivation. Participants, for example, reported regulating their study environment in order to alleviate boredom (by changing the study environment regularly) or stress (by working out while studying), or factors that may lead to procrastination (by creating an environment free of distractions). (Rose, 2011: 218)

Therefore, participants in this study reported using environmental control strategies for the sole purposes of regulating satiation, metacognitive and emotion control.

In addition to this, the study also found there to be a complex relationship between the other four categories. That is, a breakdown in any category of motivation control had a clear impact on other categories, as illustrated in figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

Such intricate relationships, therefore, suggest the proposed model of motivation control, may indeed suffer from the same definitional fuzziness for which previous models of strategic learning have been criticized. It also warns of the dangers of replacing an old system too hastily with a new one that is still in its infancy in terms of research conducted within its paradigms.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize movements towards paradigms of strategic learning that include models of self-regulation. Indeed, many of the criticisms of language learning strategy models are justified. Also, movements towards clearer definitions of strategic learning, and towards more justifiable and qualitative instruments to measure them are welcomed. This paper argues, as Gao did in 2006, that these movements toward self-regulation are not incompatible with language learning strategies. That is, it is possible to examine strategic learning both in terms of a learner's self-regulation of the learning task, but also in terms of the cognitive and behavioral strategies they employ. Thus, in order to understand the bigger picture, research frameworks that incorporate both self-regulation and strategy use need to be explored and theory needs to remain malleable to new findings in order for a new model of strategic learning to emerge.

Indeed, this is the direction many researchers in the field of strategic learning are moving in. In addition to my own model (Rose 2011), which merged elements of cognitive and memory strategies from SLA and language cognition theory with motivation control and self-regulation theory, there have been movements in a similar direction. Lin and Oxford (2009) developed and applied a model of strategic learning that incorporated self-regulation into a framework that examined strategic learning from psychological and socio-cultural theories from micro and macro perspectives. In addition to this, Oxford (2011) published her Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) model earlier this year. Another model, developed by Weinstein (2008) examines strategic learning from perspectives of learner skills, learner will or motivation and self-regulation. The use of the term self-regulation in all four of these models makes Dörnyei's impact on the shift of research into strategic learning clear. However, it is important to realize that models that incorporate theory from both areas to research a language learning task are still in their infancy, and thus research that applies these models to various language learning tasks are needed to develop them to their full potential.

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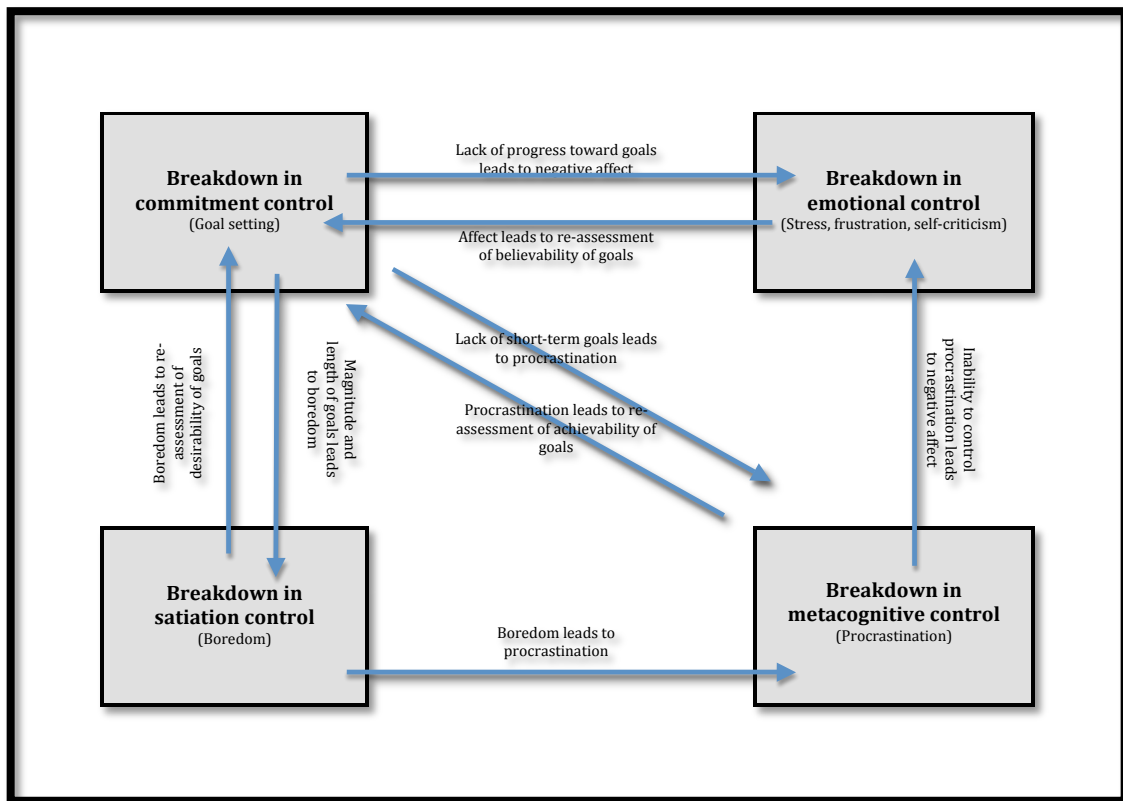


Figure 1: Relationships between categories of self-regulation (Rose 2011)