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Outline

Hsiao and Oxford (2002) explain that researchers studying strategy use among language learners have yet to agree upon a clearly defined strategy definition and classification system. The goal of their research was to provide empirical data that would support one of three classification systems: Rubin's (1981) direct/indirect dichotomy, Oxford's (1990) six-part expansion of Rubin's (1981) dichotomy, and O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) three-part system. Hsiao and Oxford administered the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to more than 500 undergraduate students at a university in Taiwan in order to determine which classification system best matched the students' actual strategy use. The data was analyzed using statistics in order to perform a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which found that the six-factor model devised by Oxford (1990) best fit the results of the SILL despite any limitations of the research. This model divides language learning strategies into two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation categories, and indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social categories. Hsiao and Oxford conclude their article by offering five suggestions for furthering their study in order to help refine the three strategy classification systems they examined, including Oxford's (1990) system that was best supported by their results.

Comments

Understanding learning strategies is important for teacher-candidates because many students have never thought about how they learn nor about the implications of using effective learning strategies. This article, as well as chapter five in our textbook, provides information about language learning strategies and data to support the belief that successful students are the ones who know which learning strategies work well for them. Hsiao and Oxford cite earlier research supporting this claim, which is also supported by the findings of their study. Personally, I know that I make better grades

and feel like I have a deeper understanding of material when I use learning strategies. I was able to identify many strategies that I use as I read our textbook's descriptions of Oxford's (1990) strategy classification system. I know that the Hsiao and Oxford article did not have space to fully describe each of the three classification systems they studied, so finding this information in our textbook helped me appreciate their research. Our book also describes O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) classification system in more detail, and again, I found myself checking off strategies I use.

Although Hsiao and Oxford indicate limitations to their study – choice of participants, nonspecific questions on the SILL, etc. – their conclusion that Oxford's classification system is a closer match to the strategies learners use probably will be supported by future studies. Figure 5.1 in our textbook offers a detailed description of Oxford's system, and her six categories seem to align with the strategies I've used as a student and ones I've taught students in my own classes. There are also clear connections between the strategies described in her system and methods for differentiating instruction. The descriptions in our textbook, for example, offer suggestions for visual learners (the direct cognitive strategy of highlighting text), auditory learners (the indirect affective strategy of using music to lower anxiety), and interpersonal learners (the indirect social strategies of cooperating and empathizing with others). Overall, I believe Oxford's system is the most thorough yet easiest to understand of the three systems presented in the article.

Excerpts

1. “Exactly how many strategies are available to learners to assist them in L2 learning and how these strategies should be classified are open to debate” (p. 368).
2. “Each existing classification system in and of itself involves an implicit theory about the nature of L2 learning strategies and even, to some degree, about L2 learning in general” (p. 368).

3. “In sum, strategies are the L2 learner’s tool kit for active, conscious, purposeful, and attentive learning, and they pave the way toward greater proficiency, learner autonomy, and self-regulation” (p. 378).

Questions

1. How do language learning strategies affect language acquisition?
2. Which classification system described in the article do you prefer? Explain your answer.
3. If you had to design your own language learning strategy classification system, what categories would you include and why?

References

- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. (4th ed.). White Plains, N.Y.: Longman.
- Hsiao, T.-Y. & Oxford, R. (2002). Comparing theories of language learning strategies: A confirmatory factor analysis. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(3), 368-383.