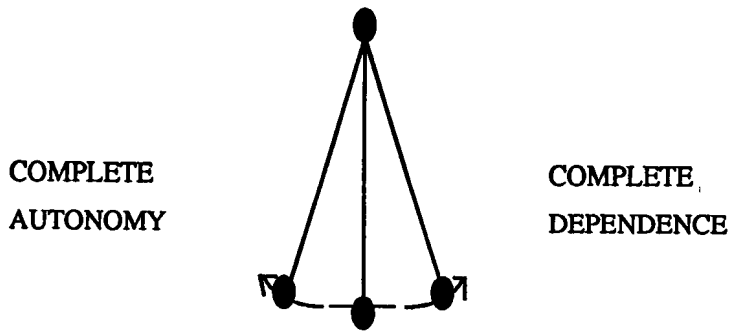
Towards Learner Autonomy: From Study Skills to Learning Strategies

by Luciano Mariani

Introduction

As shown by the title of this paper, three main concepts will be discussed: learner autonomy, study skills and learning strategies. What is particularly important in this title, however, are the prepositions: *towards, from, to*, They all indicate *movement, change, progress*: we will be looking precisely at these concepts in terms of possible new insights.

First, *learner autonomy*: this is obviously the most general term, the one which identifies far-reaching aims, medium- or long-term goals.



One extreme view would maintain that students should be trained to choose what, when, where and how to learn. In practice, we know that this is a statement of principle rather than a feasible policy. At the other extreme, one might envisage the learner's complete dependence on the teacher and the school - hardly a commendable aim for an educational institution! However, reality stands in the middle, so that our students' situations at school could be placed somewhere along a continuum, from total dependence to complete autonomy. And we as teachers could probably place ourselves in different positions too, depending on the various situations we have to face. Positions on the continuum are not static, and the continuum itself seems to be working more like a pendulum, swinging to and fro between the extremes as time and conditions change, and as we change.

This is where the preposition *towards* comes in. In this paper I shall discuss ways and means

to make the pendulum, if possible, swing more consistently and more frequently in the direction of autonomy. I shall do this by looking at the transition that has occurred from the concept of study skills to the concept of learning strategies.

Study Skills Revisited

I have decided to start off by quoting Woody Allen on the subject of study skills - you may have seen or heard this quotation before[1]:

"I took a course in speed reading, learning to read straight down the middle of the page, and was able to read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It's about Russia"

Now, why do we laugh when we see this? Woody Allen is clearly using irony to expose a favourite area of study skills, that is, speed reading. What does he find so controversial about study skills? Probably the fact that you can misuse a technique like speed reading, or apply it so blindly or mechanically that you lose sight of its actual purpose.

In a way, Woody Allen's joke points to the heart of the problem of study skills: can study skills be counterproductive? If so, why? Is there anything we can do to prevent *misuse* of study skills?

Several years ago, when I first started to consider teaching study skills, to me these meant well accepted techniques such as being able to use a dictionary, taking notes, memorising words, transferring information from verbal to non-verbal modes, and so on. We know very well that such skills are rarely - if ever - taught in our schools and universities; and we know by our own experience, first as students, and then as teachers, what it means to lack basic study abilities. Therefore, we are usually ready to recognize the importance of some sort of study skills training. However, in many situations there are some features of study skills which tend to be emphasized, and which require perhaps a word of warning:

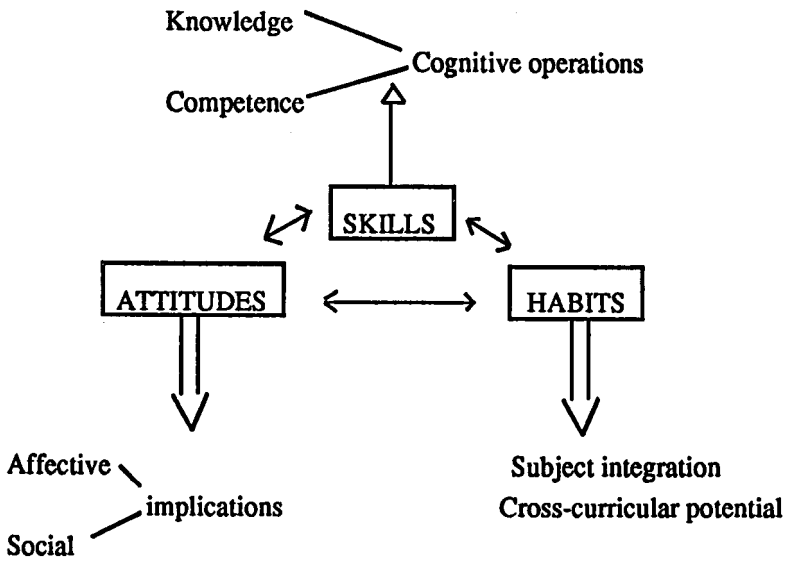
- first, study skills are often seen as sets of isolated *techniques* which seem to be "ready for use" by anybody, and which seem to provide *the* answer to a problem, irrespective of who uses them, where, when and why;

- second, if study skills are seen mainly as techniques, they tend to be associated with specific tasks: writing an essay, completing a diagram, finding the correct dictionary entry - so the focus tends to be on the *product* of an activity;

- third, because products typically refer to specific subjects in the school curriculum, study skills tend to be associated with *curricular* needs, often with little or no consideration given to

the *transfer* of skills across the boundaries of school subjects.

While working with students and colleagues in developing materials and activities, it soon became clear to me that the very concept of study skills needed some kind of redefinition.



Clearly the *skills* component must remain a central concern: training in study skills implies *knowledge* to be acquired and a *competence* to be developed. However, we must go a step further and recognize that knowledge and competence rely necessarily on mental processes, on *cognitive* operations, especially for those skills which call into play complex processing of information - think, for example, of studying a textbook, making notes, synthesizing, summarizing.

But this is not the only dimension of study skills that has become prominent. It is clear as well that skills are not really "learned" if they don't develop into appropriate *study habits*, that is, if they are not maintained, used again, and integrated into the students' learning style. This means that unless skills are actually applied and transferred to other contexts, there is little chance that they will ever become part of a student's range of personal abilities.

What does this imply? On the one hand, it implies that the practice of study skills must be *integrated* into subject-matter content: the student has to feel that these skills are relevant to what

he or she is actually asked to do and learn in the context of a school subject. On the other hand, this also means that the more practice a student gets in different contexts, including different *subject-matter* contexts, the more chances there will be that she or he develops skills into established study habits.

Finally, there is a further dimension of study skills that should not be underestimated. We are all well aware that no learning can really take place if students do not possess positive *attitudes* towards study, the school, and learning itself. This implies, first and foremost, that *affective and social*, and not just cognitive, factors are involved - not just mental processes, but emotional reactions and a positive attitude towards working with others and cooperating in a learning environment.

So developing study skills involves much more than simple techniques:

- it highlights the ways and means through which people go through the stages of learning, and is thus concerned more with *processes* than with *products*;

- it brings into play *cognitive*,*affective* and *social* dimensions;

- it stresses the fact that techniques are at the service of each *individual* student, and not the reverse, therefore requiring a process of growing *awareness* and conscious *monitoring* of personal reactions;

- it calls for a *curricular* perspective, in order to promote those skills that are most suitable for each individual subject; it also benefits from a *cross-curricular* perspective:

- it aims at promoting *autonomy* both in a school situation and for a wide range of present and future personal needs: we are not just concerned with developing successful strategies to cope with a test or pass an exam. I think we are, rather, more concerned with the fundamental question of enabling people to train and retrain themselves, to change and adapt in a world where change, both personal and professional, is the key word.

Language Learning Strategies

Meanwhile, in the past few years, second and foreign language teaching research has been concentrating more and more on the concept of *learning strategies*, which, being a more general term than "study skills", seems to me a very useful label to refer to the kinds of issues we have raised so far.

What do we mean by *learning strategies* when applied to foreign language learning? How do learning strategies relate to the practice of study skills, and, above all, to the comprehensive approach to learning that we have outlined so far? What kind of relationship can we establish

between L_2 learning strategies and wider, cross-curricular issues?

Surprisingly, the answers to these important questions are relatively straighforward. L_2 learning strategies, as researched and applied in many different situations around the world[2], are almost always in line with the considerations discussed so far. This is certainly encouraging because it points to the fact that learning a foreign language tends to be seen as part of the more general process of learning and growing, and opens up new opportunities for effective curricular and cross-curricular research and action.

This point is confirmed when we look at what is usually meant by learning strategies. In a recent book, Rebecca Oxford defines learning strategies (1990:8) as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations"

This definition is fairly comprehensive and straighforward. It is worth, however, stressing a few of its features:

- learning strategies are actions taken *by the learner*: this is a recognition of the fact that learning must be managed by the student, and that all we can do as teachers is to make students aware of their own strategies, offer them a variety of strategies, and provide opportunities for students to experiment with and evaluate the impact of such strategies on their own individual learning styles. Of course this opens up the question of our role as teachers, and of our re-training as facilitators and promoters of strategies; in other words, it opens up the problem of how far learning strategies are compatible with teaching strategies;

- learning strategies are *specific*: they are not generic statements of what one should do, but a set of concrete activities that can be practised in learning situations;

- learning strategies are *transferable to new situations*: they are not focussed on *products* but on *processes*, and thus are applicable not just to the activity in which they have been learnt, but to other learning tasks.

What do we mean by L_2 learning strategies, in practical terms? Most researchers seem to recognize that learning strategies fall into some clearly distinguishable groups, so that the strategies are often identified, for example, as *cognitive*, *metacognitive*, *affective*, *social* and *communication* strategies. As is often the case with typologies and taxonomies, we should try to be flexible and not to take these groups too rigidly.

We have already recognized the importance of focussing on *cognitive* processes in developing study skills, so in a way the identification of a group of strategies as *cognitive* should come as no surprise. Here we are concerned with different modes of reasoning, e.g. inductive vs. deductive, (as in discovering a grammar rule by observing and discussing examples, or applying general ideas in the interpretation of a new text); we are concerned with creating structures for input and output, e.g. by taking notes and summarizing; with different modes of practising the language, e.g. by practising accuracy vs. fluency; with using resources, e.g. by referring to dictionaries and grammar books; and with memorizing and retrieving information, e.g. by using association and other memory aids, or by using reviewing techniques.

One of the most important distinctions we can make within learning strategies is the one between *cognitive* and *metacognitive* strategies. Here again, we come up with another issue which we have already discussed, i.e. the need to make students aware of their learning styles. Basically, we are concerned here with conscious planning, monitoring and evaluating of one's work, by, for example, getting some knowledge *about the language* one is studying and *about the learning processes* and *teaching methods* involved; by setting personal aims and objectives; by organizing time, space and opportunities for learning; by identifying the purposes behind one's activities.

Perhaps the distinction between cognitive and metacognitive strategies needs some further clarification:

- cognitive strategies refer to *specific* tasks or problems: how to make a summary; how to practise patterns; how to scan and skim. Metacognitive strategies refer to *general* ways of managing learning;

- cognitive strategies therefore imply experimenting with the language in task-based activities. They are directly related to subject matter content, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, skills. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, imply *reflection* on how tasks can be carried out or have been carried out. They do not necessarily imply direct use of the L_2: in fact, metacognitive operations can be very fruitfully carried out in the mother tongue;

- cognitive strategies can be conscious, but often they are not. Metacognitive strategies are, by definition, conscious, deliberate actions.

Affective and *social* strategies highlight the need for learners to take control of their motivations, attitudes, emotional reactions. How? For example, by keeping a diary of learning experiences, by sharing feelings and ideas with peers and teachers, by progressively training to take risks in using the language, by developing cultural understanding and empathy.

The book by Oxford (1990), which I have already mentioned, offers many examples of materials and activities that can be used in the classroom to implement all these strategies. You may also have seen examples in Mariani (1987) and Ellis and Sinclair (1989).

One point which, unfortunately, is not often made about the language learning strategies discussed so far, refers to the fact that *all* groups of strategies have a very high *cross-curricular* potential. While we can say that repeating, practising sound systems or translating are specific

to L_2 learning, most other cognitive strategies apply equally well to different subject matter content: just think of abilities such as developing different reading strategies, or studying and taking notes, or using revision techniques. This point should not be overlooked: developing language learning strategies opens up the door to developing learning strategies *across the curriculum.*

There is one final group of strategies which needs careful consideration, and this applies typically to L_2 learning. These strategies are usually referred to as *communication* strategies[3]: using conversational patterns, resorting to mime or gesture, using synonyms, using guessing techniques in listening and reading, and so on. Clearly, what we are concerned with here are *strategies to understand and produce the language despite obvious limitations.* The concept is not new. Let me remind you, as an example, of a famous communication/compensation strategy mentioned in *How to be an Alien* by George Mikes[4]:

> "The easiest way to give the impression of having a good accent or no foreign accent at all is to hold an unlit pipe in your mouth, to mutter between your teeth and finish all your sentences with the question: `isn't it?'. People will not understand much, but they are accustomed to that and they will get a most excellent impression"

Learning Strategies and the Language Curriculum

Today we can rely on a growing body of materials and techniques to help us understand and use language learning strategies. However, our basic problem as teachers at this stage is, I think, to clarify how this approach is different from what we have been doing so far with our students, and how the concept of "learning strategy" can possibly help us.

What seems to me to be of really outstanding value is the focus on the metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning, and, more particularly, the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. What is perhaps most important is the recognition that learners do not just need to *get to know* and *use* a number of strategies; they also need to *become aware* of where, when and why such strategies should be used, and to *experiment* with and *evaluate* the impact of the strategies *on their own individual learning styles.*

In other words, if we want to ensure that learners do not just use a strategy for guessing words on a specific task and then forget about it, if we want to ensure that a strategy for summarizing is *maintained* and *transferred* to other tasks in different situations and in different contexts, then we have to include, throughout the presentation and practice of strategies, an element of *awareness training.* As Joan Rubin once wrote (1987:16), *consciousness raising is not incidental to learning.* We can and do use strategies in a subconscious way, but research, as well as our classroom practice, tells us that conscious monitoring of the learning processes is an ability that

can foster learning - an ability that can be learnt - an ability that we as teachers can teach.

How can we approach the problem of strategy training in our classrooms? Does this imply an additional burden on our already limited amount of time and energies?

Perhaps the most important point to consider is the fact that we don't have to change our teaching approaches in a radical way if we don't feel or want to, and that an emphasis on strategy training does not necessarily imply overloading our syllabus. In other words, we must find ways to *integrate* strategy training into our own daily teaching practice. I would like to suggest five steps to follow in doing this:

1. *make a list of problematic learning situations for a specific group of students*: let's start from the actual difficulties that learners experience with the foreign language. Let's make a tentative map of the problems they face. We can jot down a list ourselves, we can ask colleagues, and, of course, we should ask our students. The map needn't be specific at this stage. Broad problematic areas will be enough, provided they are concrete and practical: for example, using reference materials like grammars or dictionaries; taking notes from written texts; storing and retrieving vocabulary; coping with listening tasks in the classroom; managing group work; correcting mistakes;

2. *establish a priority, that is, select an area for most urgent intervention*, taking into consideration the available time and energies, again by discussing priorities with students and colleagues. We won't be able to cope with the whole picture of our students' problems, but at least we can provide specific help in one or two problematic areas. Besides, we may be comforted by the fact that, as we know, a positive learning experience has powerful side effects on a number of other areas;

3. *analyze the selected area of intervention in terms of the strategies involved.* A useful - and obvious - step to take at this stage would be to assess the strategies already used or not used by students in the selected area. What do they already know? What can they already do? How conscious are they of their own difficulties, habits, attitudes, beliefs? A knowledge and assessment of the students' present learning strategies could be extremely valuable. We would then be able to promote those strategies which would appear to need more careful consideration. Strategy assessment is therefore a prominent topic for classroom research, and can be conducted through our own personal observation of classes and individual students; through interviews and individual students' reports; through the use of questionnaires, surveys, quizzes, discussions.

However, there is a further important aspect of this stage which needs emphasizing. For the more demanding strategies, those which involve for example complex cognitive operations, we need to be very specific in describing what a strategy actually implies. Consider, for example,

notetaking: I am convinced that to say "here's a text, select the most important information and leave out unnecessary details" is not what we would call a useful or productive strategy, mainly because a complex task is not broken down into graded steps that any student - and not just the brighter ones - could reasonably follow. This is why I think that, especially for the more problematic strategies, we need to develop a deeper insight into actual cognitive processes. Turning to our note-taking example, we would have to develop concrete exercises and activities to enable our students to process a text by a series of successive steps:

- recognizing sequences of information within longer texts;
- distinguishing levels of information within each sequence by differentiating, for example, statements from examples, propositions from arguments, facts from opinions, processes from their stages, structures from their parts, categories from their elements;
- clarifying criteria for selection;
- selecting by cancelling; selecting by unifying smaller, concrete, specific items of information into larger, more abstract, more general items;
- rearranging the selected items in order to produce a synthesis which makes the material easier to work with and to memorize.

Of course this approach requires knowledge of and practice with specific techniques - just think of the different ways of producing notes through the use of underlining, lists, outlines, diagrams, charts and tables. More importantly, it requires focus on the cognitive and linguistic operations through which a reader/student interacts with and processes a text. Last, but not least, it requires corresponding metacognitive strategies, because each step in the sequence must become a conscious choice made by the student.

4. *prepare, adopt or adapt materials and activities for use with students, integrating them within the curriculum.* One might very well carry out sessions of strategy training in relative isolation - for instance, one could devote a series of lessons at the start of a new school year to basic study strategies. However, the impact of such experiences is sometimes limited or not up to the expectations, because students find it hard to relate what they have learnt in special sessions to their day-by-day study needs.

On the other hand, one can exploit everyday classroom opportunities. For example, a student of mine recently answered my question "What's your address?" with "My address? Mm ... er ... it's 57 Corso Genova." Nobody had ever taught him to react in this way, to start answering a question by first repeating the question. Now, another student next to him, admittedly a brilliant one, remarked a bit sarcastically: "Ah, you're playing for time!" (She actually said: "temporeggi,

eh?"). I thought this was a good opportunity to throw in a short consideration on the strategy shown by the first student and on the remark made by the second student. The first student had unconsciously used a communication/compensation strategy; the second student had raised it to consciousness for everybody, including myself.

This incident reminds us that when integrating strategy training within specific language learning tasks we still need to show *how strategies can be transferred to other tasks in other contexts*. It also shows that we can integrate strategy training in an informal way, by having students think about how they have completed a task, why this has or has not been successful, and what kind of strategies they have found most useful in the process. More structured integration can be achieved by using materials specifically developed for the purpose - cf. for example Mariani (1990) - but the main point is the fact that students should be invited to choose, experiment with and react to their personal use of strategies.

5. *carry out the training and evaluate the results*. At this stage we should remember that we are dealing not only with content, but also with process; not only with specific techniques applicable to specific tasks, but also with establishing effective learning habits; and we are dealing with the problems of changing attitudes and promoting autonomy, responsibility and self-confidence. These are all medium- or long-term processes, and we can hardly expect results to be highly rewarding for us right from the start. Also, we can hardly expect results to be quantifiable in the same way as the assimilation of a language structure can sometimes be assessed.

One final remark. The fact that cross-curricular cooperation is so difficult in our schools should not ban this kind of considerations from our plans. If you go again through the stages we have been considering, you will find that each step in the process lends itself to wider applications - because we are not dealing *exclusively* with ways to learn a foreign language, but with wider strategies for *learning*. So let's watch out for possible cross-curricular developments: our geography or mathematics colleague might, why not, be ready to be involved ...

Notes

[1]Quoted in Wright (1987:x)

[2]See e.g. Wenden-Rubin (1987), O'Malley-Chamot (1990), Duda-Riley (1990).

[3]See e.g. Faerch and Kasper (eds.) (1983).

[4]G.Mikes, How to Be an Alien, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1966.

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