Chapter 10
L2 Strategy Instruction:
Enhancing Research and Practice Through the Mediation of Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the potential of technology-mediated forms of L2 strategy instruction (SI) to enhance not only the design of SI interventions but also SI evaluations and L2 strategy research more generally. The results of an empirical study are used to show how technology can facilitate the delivery of SI in ways supportive of increasingly online forms of L2 learning while at the same time providing remedies for problematic features of SI evaluation, including access to process data showing how learners actually perform strategy-related tasks, the timing and frequency of collection of learner-perception data, and most importantly, data about task definition and metacognitive monitoring, which can position L2 strategies within frameworks for self-regulated learning. The underlying premise of this chapter is the need to revitalize the field of L2 learner strategies with new methods for evaluation and research that can better capture the complex and situated nature of L2 strategy use.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has fundamentally changed the nature of second language (L2) learning, putting more and more power in the hands of the individual learner than ever before, including resources for researching language form and usage, social networks for connecting and communicating with members of target-language communities, and mobile applications for extending language study and use far beyond the L2 classroom. Experts in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have discussed these issues from the standpoint of technology, focusing on the need to prepare learners to thrive in the digital age (e.g., Barth & Klein-Wohl, 2011; Egbert, J., Akasha, O., Huff, L., Lee, H. G., 2011); Hauck, 2005; Hauck & Hampel, 2008; Hubbard, 2004, 2013; Lai, 2013; Lai, Yeung, & Hu, 2015; Winke & Goertler, 2008). However, in the field of L2 learner strategies, whose central concern is what individuals bring to the learning enterprise, one finds little commensurate focus on technology's potential.

This is symptomatic of larger problems. It is an unfortunate fact that the field of L2 learner strategies is moribund at present. After a promising start in the 1980s, it flourished in the 1990s, producing a large body of research, including descriptive, taxonomic, and experimental studies. In recent years, however, disputes have arisen over difficulties in defining the construct of a strategy and the methods with which it can meaningfully be operationalized and studied (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Macaro, 2006; Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006).

The challenges of strategy instruction (SI) in particular, representing the practical application of descriptive L2 strategy research in order to enhance learning, were illustrated in Plonsky's (2011) meta-analysis of L2 SI studies, which found a small to medium overall effect size for SI, with effectiveness moderated by a number of contextual, treatment, and outcome variables. This review of SI research provided further support for the view that

there is still much work to be done on strategy instruction in order to prove to learners, teachers, and the wider SLA research community that such an undertaking in the classroom is worthwhile (Cohen & Macaro, 2007, p. 284).

It also reiterated problems with the quality of L2 strategy research noted previously by other researchers (Chamot, 2005; Hassan et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, many researchers and practitioners have the sense that strategies remain an important focus for understanding success (or the lack thereof) in L2 learning. What is needed is a way to revitalize the field and make it relevant again. According to one prominent strategy researcher,

… many both inside and outside the learner strategy tradition feel we have reached a crossroads. Since we have already established that frequent use of a large repertoire of strategies is positively related to learning results, we need more research investigating the real picture, which is more complex ... We also need more rigorous research designs and practices, and more tangible and useful applications for teachers and learners (Gu, 2007, p. vi).

In this paper, the role and contributions of digital technology to these efforts is discussed. Specifically, the paper attempts to extrapolate from the results of an evaluation of a particular project (Ranalli, 2013a) to wider implications about the potential for technology-mediated SI to contribute to this revitalization by showing how computer-based interventions can facilitate both scaffolding of, and research into, the development of L2 learners' strategic abilities.

TECHNOLOGY IN STRATEGY-RELATED L2 RESEARCH

The L2 literature contains few examples of computers used to deliver SI, and most of those studies that exist are of an exploratory nature insofar as they lack controls (Bull & Ma, 2001; Chang, 2005; O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007), evaluate SI in terms of learner and teacher perceptions rather than learning outcomes (Huang, 2013), or employ technology primarily as a means of organizing and distributing conventional SI materials (Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Tsai & Talley, 2013). More common in the literature are descriptive studies exploring learners' use of strategies in technology-mediated environments (Chapelle & Mizuno, 1989; Huang, Chern, & Lin, 2009; Jamieson & Chapelle, 1987; Li, 2009; Pujolá, 2002; Ulitsky, 2000).

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