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THE ROLE OF THEORY IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS RESEARCH: A study of vocabulary learning strategies

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Abstract: *The role of theory in research in general, and in applied linguistics in particular, appears to be a matter of making decisions as to 'what data would be relevant [to the investigation of a research issue] and how such data will be best obtained' (Johnson and Johnson, 274). Such decisions involve the researcher's position with respect to a choice between a theory-first and/or a data-first approach to research. This paper examines both these positions in relation to the investigation of vocabulary learning strategies. The paper concludes that whether the researcher adopts either of the two positions or both, this will have an impact on the whole research process.*

Key words: *vocabulary learning strategies, SLA theory, interpretive approach, Grounded theory.*

1. Introduction

This paper first introduces the philosophical approach which a study of the vocabulary learning strategies of Romanian learners of English has followed, i.e. an interpretive approach (Cohen and Manion; Ellis). This study, guided be the overarching research question: 'What do experienced learners of English who are studying to become English teachers, Romanian English major and minor undergraduates, do to learn (or improve their knowledge of) vocabulary?' is an investigation of the vocabulary learning strategies reported by university undergraduates in language learning diaries and interviews.

We then consider some aspects of cognitive theories of language learning and their relation to learning strategies. And finally, some of the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Straus) will be discussed since the analysis of the data in the aforementioned study was partly guided by this form of analysis of qualitative data.

2. An Interpretive Approach to Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Firstly, having decided that the study was to be an exploratory investigation of language learner behaviour, an interpretive approach appeared to be the most appropriate. Ellis maintains that in this tradition, unlike in the 'confirmatory research tradition', in which there seems to be a distance between research and the teachers as practitioners due to a hierarchical top-down relation:

'The beliefs, values, and perceptions of teachers are not ignored (or controlled) (…) but are given a constitutive place in

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the research. The traffic of ideas between teacher and researcher is, potentially at least, two way.' (Ellis, 1997, 19-20)

Ellis's words seem to be a good example of why we decided to place our research with the interpretive paradigm. This is so mainly because both my experience and position as a language teacher and my recently assumed task of a researcher into language learning are seemingly complementary.

Our claim that the research presented in this paper is of the interpretive type also seems consistent with Hughes (94), who sees the interpretive approach as:

'a reaction against the very strident claims of positivism and its "scientised" conception of the social actor which they [representatives of positivism] see as embodied in orthodox social science of a positivist persuasion.'

For Hughes, in the interpretive paradigm, the argument is about 'the character of the objects of social scientific inquiry'. The use of the positivist correlational apparatus in the empirical description of social action, he claims, would not get at 'the proper subject-matter of social science', that of giving a plausible interpretation of patterns of interaction in terms of their occurrence, their time and place so that it is 'faithful to its status as a human product' [10] p.94. It is this type of 'human product' that this study of vocabulary learning aims to describe, explain and understand, primarily through the expressed views of students which we interpret as an informed analyst.

Relevant to this approach are the notions of meaning, subjectivity vs. objectivity and intersubjectivity, and verstehen (Hughes; Sayer). Meaning, notes Hughes, is the main concern of interpretivists as their study of the human society aims at understanding such phenomena as history, society, art, all products of the human mind and 'not at all like material things', as 'lived experience of others [which can be] grasped through the apprehension of their inner meaning; the meaning that led to their production' (Hughes 90). For him the essence of social interaction lies in the meanings that social actors give their actions and so this is what social analysis must be directed at. This entails eliciting data, e.g. through questionnaires and interviews.

Sayer states that meaning in everyday life is contestable in that not just any interpretation of a given phenomenon is acceptable. Moreover, since the meanings that:

'social actors use and understand are embedded in practices and relations, [they] can establish descriptions and evaluations of people and their circumstances, they can influence our identities and what we can do in society.' (Sayer 222).

Sayer (27) adds that social practices are 'text-like' and have to be 'read and interpreted' and such data as those obtained by the use of verbal reports, answers to questionnaires or interviews or manuscripts 'can never be taken unproblematically as "brute data" but require interpretation by the analyst'.

This is the kind of data that we have collected for our research into vocabulary learning strategies and that we have interpreted in order to see whether my respondents can bring new insights to the understanding of the many highly unobservable strategies used by learners to acquire/learn a foreign language.

Sayer acknowledges one of the virtues of interpretivism as the researcher's sensitivity to the 'frame of meanings' (28) she/he is using and the possible differences existing between this frame and those of the researched. This encourages the researcher to consider these differences and to avoid imposing "alien" frameworks on respondents in interviews and questionnaires (28). The question here may be whose view the researcher finally sees as privileged.

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Another way of 'regarding meaning' is to consider it as a subjective or internal element of behaviour. Hughes (95) argues that such a view of meaning would 'draw a contrast between the objective features of social action and its subjective elements'. Sayer (27) also elaborates on the concept of subjectivity of meaning in social science and states that 'constitutive meanings are not wholly reducible to individuals' beliefs about what they are doing'. The concern of the social scientist is not so much with subjectivity (the term implying something private to the individual) as it is with intersubjectivity (i.e. between researcher and researched), 'which is social'.

Our research in this respect is likely to be intersubjective because it involves my attempts to construct meanings when doing analysis of the main set of data, i.e. language learning diary data. Moreover, prior to the collection of interview data, i.e. the supporting data set, we involved our respondents in an evaluation of our understanding of what they reported in the diaries in relation to their learning of vocabulary.

Linked to the study of social actors' subjective experience within the framework of interpretive social science is the concept of understanding and interpreting and even attempting to reconstruct this experience, what both Hughes and Sayer call verstehen. Hughes (93) sees this as an interpretive understanding 'which gives social observers a method of investigating social phenomena in a way that does not distort the social world of those being studied'. This seems rather unlikely because, according to Labov's famous 'Observer's paradox', perfect lack of distortion of the 'social world' of the observed cannot be achieved. However, since this 'method' is subjective (probably in the sense mentioned before), Hughes notes that it must be supported 'by data of a scientific and statistical kind'. This does not entirely apply to our study since the statistical elements in it are restricted to counting numbers of main types of strategies and calculating percentages necessary to the discussion of the results of the analysis. Sayer (28) on the other hand, does not see verstehen as a 'method' but rather as a 'piece of the ordinary process of understanding others in everyday life'.

The interpretive approach is however problematic for our own research. As, Sayer puts it, one of the problems of interpretivism is that it deals 'with the material side of society'. My study does not, really, deal with the material but with behavioural aspects of the interaction between individuals and the language they are striving to learn with the aim of communicating in this language for various purposes. On the other hand, however, actual or imagined material contexts and referents are essential for the learning processes. A case in point would be an individual learning to ask for directions in the street in a foreign language and needing to know the material referents of the particular expressions and the material contexts in which they are used.

Another limitation of the interpretive social science is that, according to Sayer, it exaggerates the cognitive side of behaviour as opposed to the social because it seems to be all about individual understandings. We believe however that the cognitive aspect of language learning strategies in our study is not overestimated since these strategies also focus on social-affective aspects of learning such as co-operation in learning or encouraging oneself when in difficult learning situations.

3. The Role of SLA Theory

We now examine the role of SLA theory in the study of language learning strategies as cognitive processes. This precedes the

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relationship between this domain of language study and cognitive psychology theory in the description of learning strategies as complex cognitive skills.

The theoretical developments that have characterised work in second language acquisition in recent decades addressed general cognitive processes mainly in terms of various aspects of cognitive style or other learner predispositions towards language learning. In this respect, Ellis's consideration of how learners learn a second language addresses factors that are both external and internal to the learner in an attempt to answer the question: 'How do learners acquire a second language?' (Ellis, 1994, 15-16). The external factors involve a consideration of 'the role played by the social situation in which learning [takes] place and how the language learner is exposed to [it]' (16). Among these factors, social language learning strategies (see, for example, Rubin or Oxford) might account for language acquisition in terms of their being useful to the learner both in her or his dealing with new language input and with language production. Secondly, the internal factors which affect second language acquisition, equated by Ellis with 'the mental processes that the learner use[s] to convert input into knowledge' (Ellis, 1994, 16), can be thought of as learning processes by means of which the learner uses existing knowledge to improve her/his knowledge of a foreign or second language. In using these processes, the learner may be using strategies which can help in the learning process both by directly handling new knowledge and indirectly managing this process itself (i.e. most of Oxford's direct and indirect language learning strategies). As regards the investigation of external factors, Ellis considers that researchers need to make use of ideas and methodologies from sociolinguistics. In the study of internal factors (e.g. strategies), he maintains that help could come from cognitive psychology.

In this respect, it seems appropriate to briefly pay attention to some aspects of cognitive psychology such as the two major kinds of knowledge: declarative knowledge (facts, definitions, rules, images and sequences) and procedural knowledge (skills, such as applying and using rules) identified by Anderson. That both knowledge types are helpful in language learning, especially for adolescents and adults, was a matter assumed by such linguists as Ellis, Faerch and Kasper, Johnson, O'Malley, Chamot and Walker, and O'Malley and Chamot. Declarative and procedural knowledge are stored differently in memory. Anderson (1983) assumes that declarative knowledge is stored as nodes, associated by links of various types, while procedural knowledge is stored via "production systems" (if-then systems involving conditions and actions) in three stages, ranging from conscious to automatic. In relating this to language learning, Ellis (1994, 533) maintains that declarative knowledge means 'knowing that', whereas procedural knowledge is 'knowing how'. If the first type of knowledge consists of internalised rules and memorised chunks of knowledge, the latter is represented by the strategies (and other procedures) that the learner employs to process second or foreign language data for acquisition and for use. Ellis comes to the conclusion that, for research purposes, 'strategies can be defined as production sets that exist as declarative knowledge and are used to solve some learning problem' (1994, 533). O'Malley and Chamot (43) also treat language learning strategies in relation to Anderson's theory, noting that since strategy use is similar to any other complex skill, strategies can be 'described as a set of productions that are compiled and fine-tuned until they become procedural knowledge'.

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4. The Role of Grounded Theory

According to Cohen and Manion (23), interpretive researchers:

'begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. Theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations; it should be "grounded" on data generated by the research act (Glaser and Strauss 9)'.

As already indicated, my research is of the interpretive type and its main aim is to understand how my respondents approach the learning of vocabulary. The term of 'theoretical sensitivity' is frequently associated with grounded theory (see Glaser and Strauss and Strauss and Corbin) which has partly guided this research into vocabulary learning strategies. According to Strauss and Corbin, (41-42) 'theoretical sensitivity (…) indicates [the researcher's] awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data (..) [which] can also be developed further during the research process'. It was during the process of analysing our data by means of an existing analytical framework (Oxford) that we gradually became aware of the fact that it did not 'fit' our data (Glaser and Strauss), i.e. that these data appeared to 'say' more than the analytical framework could accommodate. By investigating the data from the perspective of grounded theory, we attempted to alter Oxford's analytical framework for the use of strategies in language learning and to include in it certain additional strategies that emerged from the data in the process of collection, analysis and interpretation. The sources of this theoretical sensitivity, Strauss and Corbin note (42-43), can be traced in the literature, professional and personal experience and in the 'analytic process itself' as the researcher interacts with her/his data. In this study, such sources might be:

- our extensive reading in the field of second language acquisition in general and in that of language learning and vocabulary learning strategies in particular;
- our experience as teachers with both success and failure in helping our students learn and retain vocabulary;
- our experience as learners still trying to improve our own knowledge of vocabulary and that of users of strategies and,
- our attempt to develop our 'small theoretical framework' while 'asking questions about the data, making comparisons, [and] thinking about what [we could] see in them (Strauss and Corbin 43).

5. Conclusion and Implications for the Study

In this paper we have drawn a general picture of how theory plays a role in research in a language learning area: that of language learning strategies and, more specifically, of vocabulary learning strategies. In doing so, we have located our investigation the wider picture of interpretive research and placed ourselves in the position of researchers who have decided to approach their data from both the theory-first and data-first perspectives.

One important result of reviewing the literature in the field was to realise the implications of our understanding of this relevant literature for the study referred to in this paper. The definitions, taxonomies and factors which pertain to language learning strategies and which are present in the literature have clarified the concepts and helped in the data analysis, i.e. in the identification and coding of the strategies reported by the respondents and later in the interpretation of the findings. Next, the methodological issues reviewed have informed the decisions of what research instruments to choose, how to use them

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and to evaluate both their advantages and disadvantages in terms of research objectivity and also in terms not only of time and space constraints but also of subjectivity issues and questions of how to approach and select respondents. Finally, the examination of the role of theoretical approaches to research in social sciences and in second language acquisition enabled us to locate this study within the two respective fields.

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