

Types of Learning Strategies. How to Cope with a Foreign Language

Cătălina Ecaterina Bălățeanu

Scoala Gimnaziala Tutora, Iasi

Abstract: Being an EFL teacher means providing our students with knowledge, but also teaching them how to learn, monitor their performance and assess the outcome of their learning. We have the role to facilitate, support and improve students' learning by making them autonomous and responsible for their learning, by giving them the freedom to take initiative and create their own learning opportunities. In fact, our ultimate goal beyond the classroom experience is to give to our society autonomous individuals, capable of taking responsibilities and risks, knowing how to work more efficiently, finding solutions and applying learning and working strategies in everyday situations. This article is on how to build learners' autonomy and their capacity of making choices about what and how they learn, through training and strategy instruction.

Keywords: learning strategies, compensation strategies, social strategies, affective strategies, metacognitive strategies

Language learning strategies have been defined as specific mental procedures used to cope with problems or tasks, mental processes used in order to understand, remember or use a foreign language, ways of acting in order to achieve a goal, or conscious plans for managing information or emotions (like developing self-confidence and lowering anxiety). For Rubin, they are "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information"¹. Another definition was provided by Richards and Platt which state that learning strategies are "intentional behaviour and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information"².

¹ Hismanoglu, Murat, *Language Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the Internet TESL Journal*. Vol. VI, No. 8, August 2000. Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Hismanoglu-Strategies.html>

² Hismanoglu, Murat, *op. cit.* Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Hismanoglu-Strategies.html>

Other terms used for describing learning strategies refer only to the rational, cognitive aspects of learning, without taking into account the emotional and social factors. They include³:

- tactics;
- techniques;
- potentially conscious plans;
- consciously employed operations;
- learning skills;
- functional skills;
- cognitive abilities;
- processing strategies;
- problem-solving procedures;
- basic skills;
- thinking skills, thinking frames;
- reasoning skills;
- basic reasoning skills;
- learning-to-learn skills;
- moves.

The above definitions refer to the conscious dimension of strategies use; however, all language learners tend to use strategies, be it consciously or unconsciously, in order to process new information and to deal with tasks in the language classroom environment. This functions as a problem-solving context in which it is almost inevitable to use strategies when having to deal with new input and difficult learning tasks proposed by the teacher. Confronted with a lot of new information and having to achieve certain learning goals, learners usually try to find the easiest and the quickest way to perform what they are required to.

Rebecca Oxford provides a more comprehensive definition of learning strategies, saying that they represent “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations”⁴.

³ Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 238

⁴ Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *op. cit.*, p. 8

As far as learning and acquisition are concerned, learning strategies apply to both of them. For example, analytic strategies are related to learning, leading to conscious knowledge of language rules, whereas naturalistic strategies contribute to the acquisition of a foreign language, being focused on conversational fluency and naturalistic language use.

The study of language learning strategies has led to the identification of the following features, mentioned also by Rebecca Oxford⁵:

- contribute to the development of communicative competence;
- are learner-generated, being steps taken by language learners;
- promote self-direction for learners, which is highly important for language use outside the classroom;
- expand the role of teachers to facilitators, helpers, guides, consultants, advisers, or coordinators;
- are problem-oriented and action-based, involving behaviours accomplished by the students to solve a problem, a task or to meet an objective;
- involve more than learners' cognition, such as their metacognitive, emotional and social functions;
- influence learning both directly and indirectly;
- are not always observable, either because they happen in the learners' mind (making mental associations) or because they are used outside the classroom;
- are conscious, even though after a lot of practice, they might become automatic and unconscious, being applied instinctively, unthinkingly and uncritically;
- can be taught, improved and modified through strategy training;
- are flexible, not depending on precise sequences or patterns; it is up to the learner to decide how they are combined and sequenced;
- are influenced by different factors, such as the learners' awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, learning style, nationality, personality features, or motivation, or the purpose for learning the foreign language.

⁵ Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *op. cit.*, p. 9

Different researchers, without too much disagreement between their categorizations, have classified learning strategies. One of these classifications pertains to Rubin, who identifies three classes of strategies⁶ influencing directly or indirectly language learning, namely:

- learning strategies;
- communication strategies;
- social strategies.

Learning strategies refer to two types of strategies contributing directly to learning: cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The former category includes strategies that involve analysis, transformation or synthesis of information, such as:

- clarification/verification;
- guessing/inductive inferencing;
- deductive reasoning;
- practice;
- memorization;
- monitoring.

On the other side, **the metacognitive strategies** help learners regulate, or supervise learning by self-management, planning, setting priorities, or establishing goals.

Communicative strategies seem to indirectly influence language learning since they focus on communication, transmission and clarification of the message. **Social strategies** also contribute indirectly to learning since they only offer exposure to language, without directly leading to the obtaining and storing of it.

Another classification was provided by O'Malley who divided language strategies into three categories:

- **metacognitive strategies** used for planning and organizing the learning process, thinking of it, monitoring language production and comprehension, as well as for evaluating the learning outcomes;
- **cognitive strategies**, such as repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, auditory representation, contextualization, inferencing, are related to particular learning tasks and to the manipulation of the learning material;

⁶ Hismanoglu, Murat, *op. cit.* Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Hismanoglu-Strategies.html>

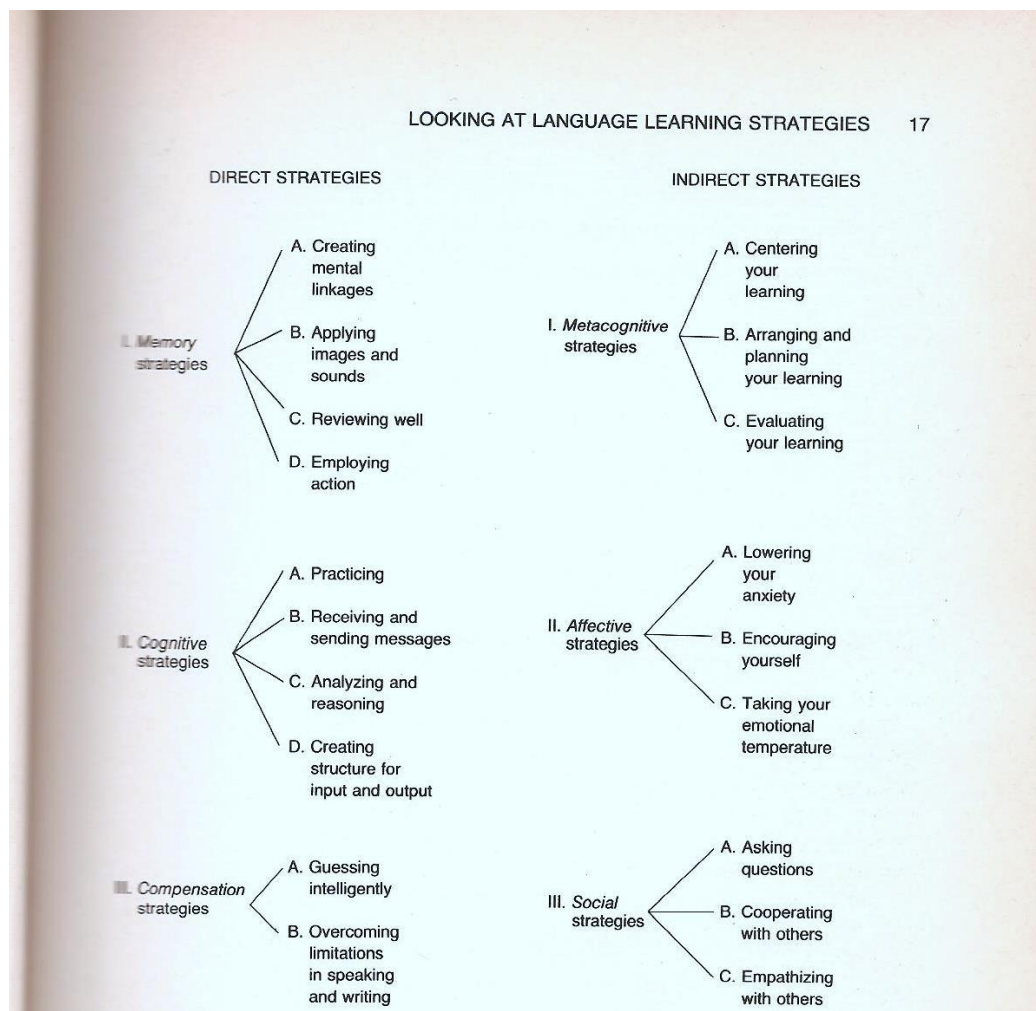
- **socioaffective strategies** are used when interacting with other and they include cooperation and asking questions for clarification.

One of the best-known and comprehensive taxonomy of strategies was devised in 1990 by Rebecca Oxford, the designer of the **Strategy Inventory for Language Learning**⁷ (SILL). According to Oxford, all language strategies are used in order to develop learners' communicative competence. As Rubin, she also supports the existence of direct and indirect strategies, the former involving the use of the target language for remembering more effectively, using cognitive processes and compensating for lack of knowledge, whereas the latter organize, manage and evaluate learning without directly involving the target language.

In Oxford's system, direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. **Memory** strategies are used for storing and retrieving new information, **cognitive** strategies are applied for understanding and producing the language, while **compensation** strategies are designed for dealing with limited proficiency in the target language. The second category, that of indirect strategies, includes **metacognitive** (for coordinating the learning processes), **affective** (for regulating emotions and attitudes), and **social** strategies (for learning and working with others).

⁷ Brown, H. Douglas (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, Longman, London, pp. 203-205

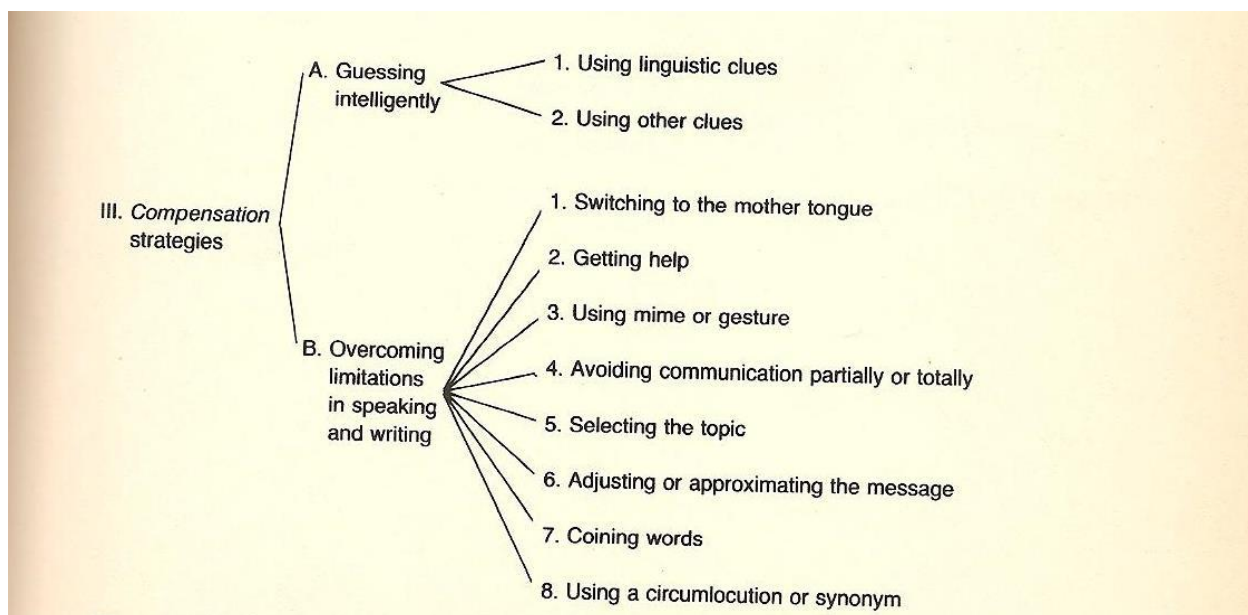
Diagram of the Strategy System



Source: Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 17

Compensation Strategies

Compensation strategies, also called cover or coping strategies⁸, are used by learners to overcome knowledge gaps and continue to communicate in the target language, thus developing their strategic competence. In real-life communication, everybody makes use of this kind of strategies if an expression is not known, or if something is not heard very clearly. Compensation strategies include guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.



⁸ Cohen, Andrew D. (1996). *Second Language Learning and Use Strategies: Clarifying the Issues*, p. 4. Retrieved from <http://www.carla.umn.edu/strategies/resources/SBIclarify.pdf>

Source: Oxford, Rebecca L (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 19

A. Guessing intelligently is highly important for reading and listening since it helps learners understand a lot of language without retaining all the details. Guessing may be applied either by using linguistic clues or using clues of another nature. **Linguistic clues** may be derived from the learner's knowledge of the target language, his mother tongue, or other foreign languages he may be familiar with. An example of guessing based on partial knowledge of the target language would be a learner who understands that a conversation is about going shopping after hearing the words *trolley*, *money*, *market*. In the case of written materials, the same linguistic clues may lead to correct guesses. For instance, a learner knows that *soup*, *salad* and *pie* relate to food; thus, when he encounters *pudding* and *steak* on the same menu, he understands that these are constituents of a meal.

Using other clues besides those of linguistic nature is also very useful when listening and reading in the target language. They may refer to forms of address and social relationships, but also to nonverbal behaviour, including tone of voice, facial expression, emphasis, body language. All these elements help learners understand or guess the meaning of what is being said or heard. In listening, a good source of nonlinguistic clues is represented by what has already been said. Thus, relying on this information, the learner may get the meaning of what is currently being said or he may anticipate what will be said. Also in listening, perceptual clues related to the situation, such as the background noise or the number of characters involved, help the listener better understand the material. In oral or written stories, the descriptions of people, the identification of the situation presented in the passage or the recognition of the manner in which people treat each other can help listeners and readers guess the events and the message of the story. Equally important are the pictures, the graphs, the tables or the text structure, including its title, introduction, transitions, and conclusion.

Another important source of clues to meaning is the learners' general background knowledge, referring to what he knows about the culture, the topic, literature, art, or geography. All these elements help learners make guesses and associations between what they hear/read and their prior knowledge.

B. Being able to **overcome limitations in speaking and writing** is an essential feature of a good language learner, since it allows learners to keep interacting or writing, despite their limited knowledge of language. Overcoming limitations may be reached by applying the following compensation strategies:

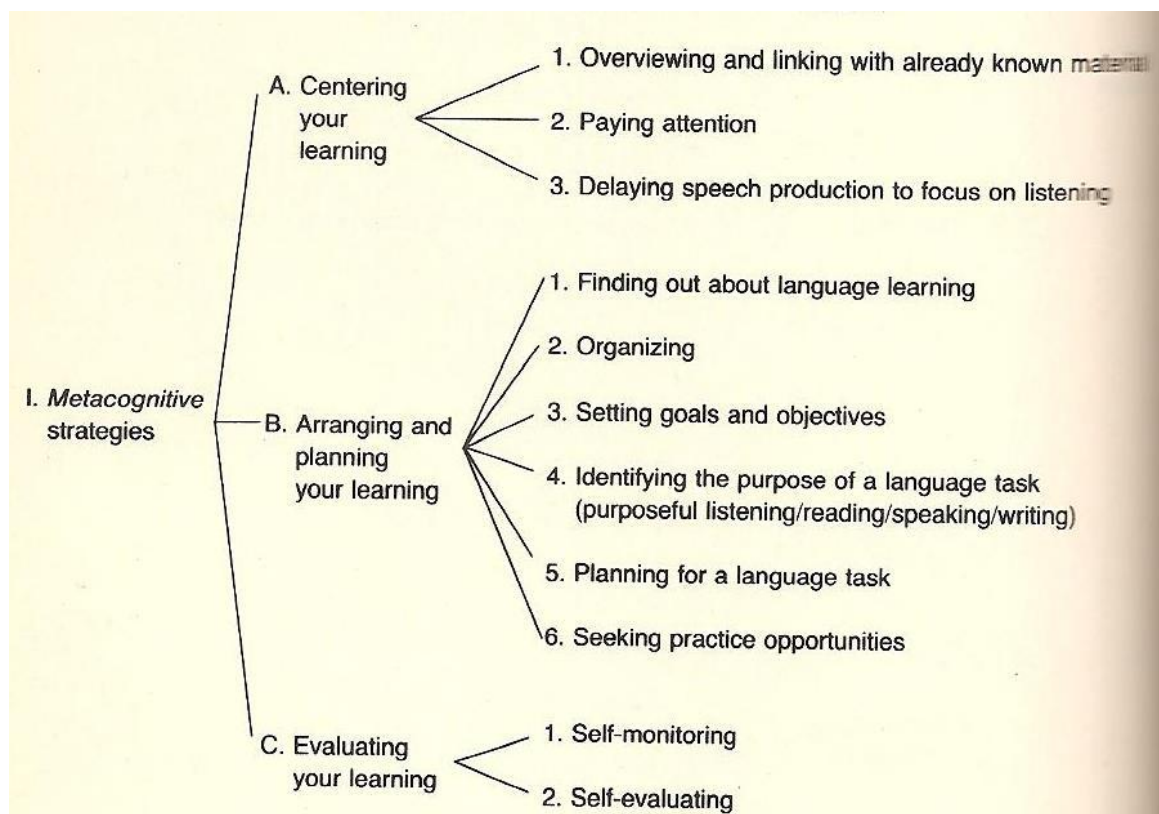
- **Switching to the mother tongue** means that the learner uses a word or an expression without translating it.
- **Getting help**, or asking for help in a conversation by hesitating or directly asking for the right word. In the case of this strategy, the learner wants the other person to come with the word or expression he does not know, without explaining or clarifying it. For example, learners might signal that they need help by saying only the beginning of the sentence, or by asking *how do you say...?*, or *which is the word for...?*.
- **Using mime or gesture** during a conversation in order to illustrate the meaning of an unknown expression. For example, in order to express approval, one may simply nod and say “yes”, while for saying “he is over there” one may point to that place.
- **Avoiding communication partially or totally** if problems are expected or encountered. For example, learners may avoid a certain topic, or even a situation, because they are not certain of or they do not know the words, the constructions, the concepts or the grammatical structures associated with it.
- **Selecting the topic** in speaking and writing when the learners are sure they master the vocabulary and structures that might prove necessary. If they enjoy the topic and are good at it, they will definitely direct the conversation towards it.
- **Adjusting or approximating the written or spoken message** refers to the situation in which the message is altered by omitting some details, making the ideas simpler or less precise, or by saying something different, but with similar meaning. For instance, a learner might use the word *tree* for speaking about an *oak*, or he might say *I did not buy that car because I did not have money*” instead of the more complex sentence “*I would have liked to have bought that car, but I could not do it because I lacked the necessary money*”.
- **Coining words** or creating new words to communicate something for which the learner does not have the right knowledge. For example, a learner might create the word *eye-doctor* if he does not know the word *ophthalmologist*.

- **Using a circumlocution or a synonym** to convey the intended message. An example of circumlocution would be the description of a suitcase when the speaker does not know the right word. In many cases, learners tend to use close synonyms for words they do not know, such as *fruit* for *plum*, *table* for *bedside table*, or *drink* for *juice*.

Metacognitive Strategies

The second category of strategies identified by Rebecca Oxford is that of indirect strategies that support language learning indirectly by focusing, planning, evaluating, creating opportunities, lowering anxiety, or increasing cooperation. This set includes metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

Metacognitive strategies are those used for managing and regulating learning and they include centering learning, arranging and planning, as well evaluating progress in the target language.



Source: Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 20

A. Centering your learning means identifying a focus, and this can be done by:

- **Overviewing and linking with already known material** involves previewing the principles, the new vocabulary or the material for an upcoming language task and linking them to learners' prior knowledge. For example, knowing that his task will be to check off the phrases related to disapproval while listening to a tape, a learner might preview the vocabulary about disapproval, put it in context, add other expressions, and compare the English expressions with those in his mother tongue.
- **Paying attention** is essential for the development of all language skills and it involves either directed or selective attention. Directed attention means being generally or globally attentive to the task and avoiding distractors. On the other hand, selective attention involves noticing particular details or elements, such as pronunciation, register, style, grammar, vocabulary in spoken communication, or to structure, content, punctuation or sentence construction in writing.

- **Delaying speech production to focus on listening** applies to listening and reading and consists of postponing speaking in the target language for hours, days, weeks, or even months. It is seen as a way of concentrating on listening comprehension before feeling comfortable to speak. The delay may be either total or partial, if only some stock phrases are uttered, but not creative sentences.

B. Arranging and planning your learning

The strategies falling into this category aim at organizing learning, setting personal aims and task purposes, planning tasks, as well as creating opportunities for practicing the language. More precisely, they refer to the following steps:

- **Finding out about language learning** or discovering what language learning involves, what problems learners may face and what effective strategies they could use;
- **Organizing** or creating the most appropriate physical environment, as well as scheduling your learning so as to include enough time for outside-the-classroom practice;
- **Setting goals** (long-term aims) and **objectives** (short-term aims) in each of the skill areas, as well as deadlines for accomplishing them;
- **Identifying the purpose of a language task** enables learners to focus their attention on the right aspects;
- **Planning for a language task**, including identifying the nature of the task, its requirements, the learner's available resources and the need for supplementary aids or resources;
- **Seeking practice opportunities** for all the four skills, both inside and outside the classroom. For example, a student may decide to practice his listening comprehension skills by listening to songs in the target language, by watching movies with no subtitles, or by listening to radio programmes.

C. Evaluating your learning

This set includes two strategies that are equally important for all language skills, namely:

- **Self-monitoring**, or noticing and correcting personal errors in any of the language skills. In speaking, this strategy is important but it should be used with care; becoming obsessed with correcting every mistake will destroy communication, which is the major objective

of learning a foreign language. Instead of willing to be perfect speakers, learners should focus on those errors that might offend or cause confusion.

- **Self-evaluating**, or measuring the overall language progress or achievements in one of the four language skills by using checklists, diaries or journals. Here is one example of a progress questionnaire included in the textbook I work on with my sixth graders:

Progress questionnaire

H

**Mark your progress in these areas out of ten.
Be honest!**

speaking		key
grammar		9/10 = brilliant
reading		8 = excellent
writing		7 = very good
pronunciation		6 = good
vocabulary		5 = satisfactory
listening		4 = not satisfactory
		3 = bad
		2 = very bad
		1/0 = terrible

Which area do you want to study more?

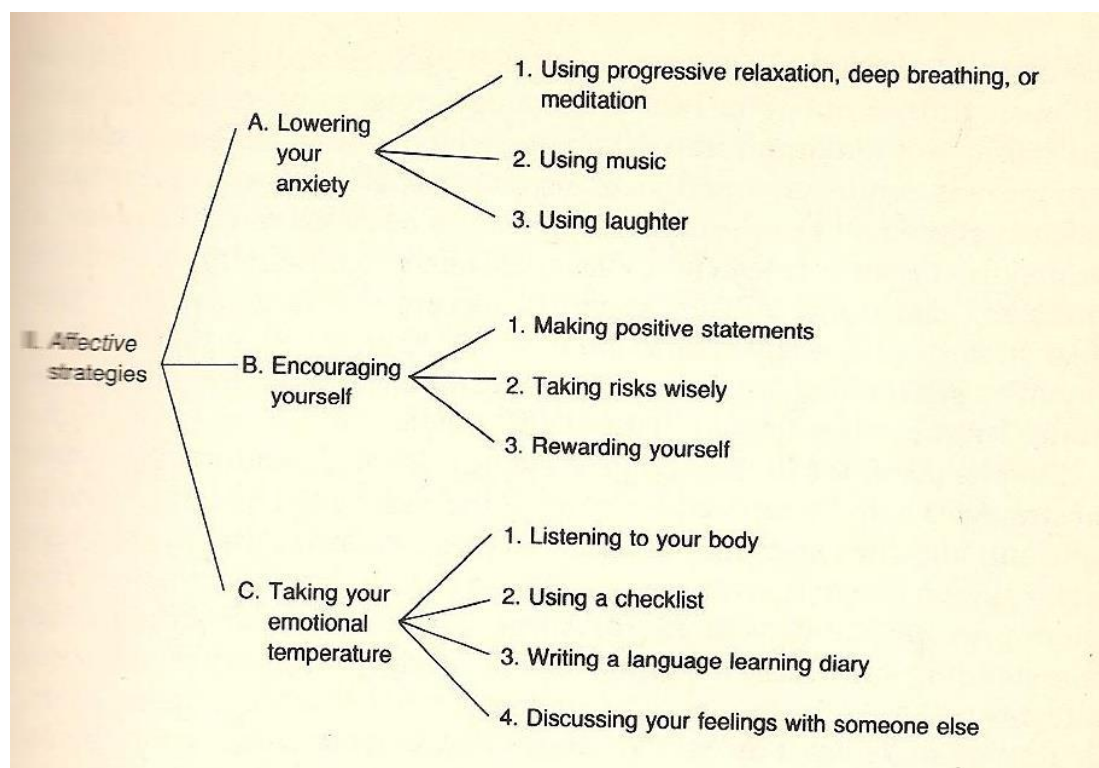
Source: Harris, Michael, Mower, David (1997). *World Class*, Longman, UK, p. 88

Affective Strategies

As the other strategies previously mentioned, affective strategies are equally important for preparing learners both “emotionally and attitudinally for the learning process”⁹ and for attaining communicative competence. Their role is to develop learners’ self-confidence and perseverance

⁹ Pachler, Norbert, and Field, Kit (2001). *Learning to Teach Modern Foreign Languages in the Secondary School – A Companion to School Experience*, Routledge, London, p. 67

and to deal with negative feelings, such as anxiety or fear of speaking, which might impede them to engage actively in language learning.



Source: Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 21

A. Lowering your anxiety involves:

- **Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation** are very effective techniques for reducing anxiety; they can be used both inside and outside the classroom before entering a testing room, or giving a talk in the target language.
- **Using music** before any stressful language task can give learners a more positive attitude towards learning and the task itself. One of the teaching methods promoting the use of baroque music in the language classroom is Suggestopedia.
- **Using laughter** is also an anxiety-reducer for language learners. It may be brought in the classroom through jokes, role-plays, games, and other active exercises.

B. Encouraging yourself

- **Making positive statements**, such as *I did well today*, *I can understand without knowing all the words*, *I am a good listener*, or *I made some progress*.
- **Taking risks wisely** despite the possibility of making mistakes or facing difficulties, or very often regardless of the fear of failure.
- **Rewarding yourself** for doing well in language learning either through visible or intangible rewards, such as listening to your favourite music, eating something sweet, going out shopping, or through positive statements.

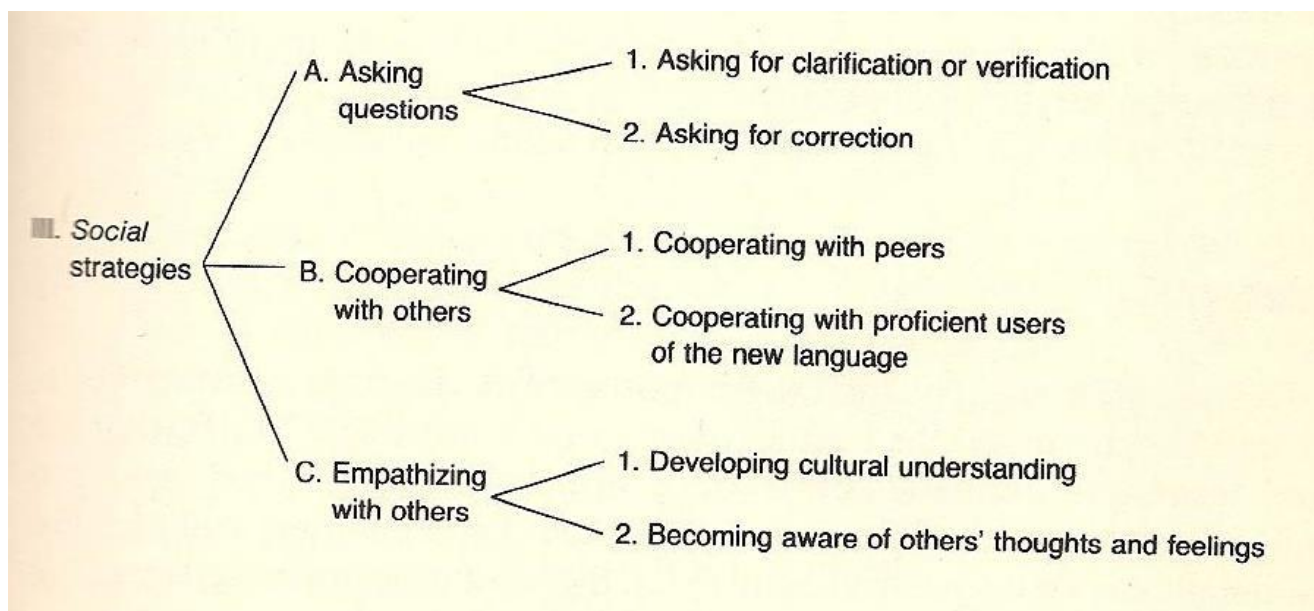
C. Taking emotional temperature is highly important for the affective self-assessment and it enables learners to get in touch with their feelings, attitudes and motivations, give up negative ones and take advantage of the positive ones. This set of strategies includes the following:

- **Listening to your body** or assessing your physical state that might be affected by negative feelings, such as anxiety, tension, or fear. For example, before speaking in a foreign language, one might feel his stomach knotting up or his legs going weak; in such a case, being aware of these symptoms, he will try to do something about it, to control and to relax.
- **Using a checklist** for identifying your emotional state in general or related to particular language tasks and skills.
- **Writing a language learning diary** including learners' emotions, feelings, and attitudes towards language learning.
- **Discussing your feelings with someone else**, such as peers, parents, friends, teachers, or native speakers, both inside and outside the classroom.

Social Strategies

Social strategies aim at developing sociolinguistic competence by increasing the interaction with other learners or language speakers, as well as their empathetic understanding¹⁰. The following strategies are included in this category:

¹⁰ Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *op. cit.*, p. 8



Source: Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA, p. 21

A. Asking questions

This set of strategies includes asking for clarification or verification, especially in listening and reading, and asking for correction in speaking and writing.

- **Asking for clarification or verification.** When learners want to clarify something, they ask more proficient speakers to slow down, to repeat what has been said, to paraphrase, or to explain. The other component of this strategy, asking for verification, means checking to make sure that the message has been understood correctly. Questions like *Would you repeat that, please?, I'm sorry, I haven't understood, What does....mean,* are just a few examples of acceptable ways to ask for clarification or verification in a conversation. In reading, this strategy involves asking someone who is more proficient in the target language.
- **Asking for correction** is used especially in speaking and writing, that is in language production. In spoken interactions, learners might ask the interlocutor to correct the major problems which can offence or create misunderstandings. In writing, asking for correction, especially with advanced students, may take the form of noting the most serious problems, for which they try to find the correct form on their own.

B. Cooperating with others

The strategies that fall into this category are similar to the cognitive strategy of practicing naturalistically, since they involve cooperation with other people, real-life contexts, interaction with peers and other proficient users of the target language.

- **Cooperating with peers** means working together with other learners in order to accomplish a task and reach a common goal. It can be applied through simulations, role-plays, jigsaw listening and reading activities, games, telephone conversations, brainstorming activities, and other active exercises which involve communication, cooperation, negotiation of meaning, and questioning among peers.
- **Cooperating with proficient users of the new language** involves all language skills and it aims at enhancing communication with more proficient users of the new language.

C. Empathizing with others

- **Developing cultural understanding** by providing learners with knowledge of the new culture is highly important for understanding what is being read or heard in the target language, as well as for knowing what is appropriate to say or write from a cultural point of view. In the classroom, cultural awareness may be developed by discussions on various topics, as well as by comparing behaviour in the students' own background with the foreign culture. Outside the institutional context, it may be enhanced through reading, watching movies, listening to radio programmes in the target language, or visiting a particular country.
- **Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings** helps learners come closer to the people they communicate with, understand better what is said, as well as understand what to say and do. Such awareness of the thoughts and feelings of other speakers may be achieved by observing their behaviour in face-to-face communication, analyzing tone, expression and physical signals, listening carefully to what is being transmitted, or trying to depict both literal and implied meanings, especially in writing.

Sources:

- Brown, H. Douglas (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, Longman, London
- Cohen, Andrew D. (1996). *Second Language Learning and Use Strategies: Clarifying the Issues*, p. 4. Retrieved from <http://www.carla.umn.edu/strategies/resources/SBIclarify.pdf>
- Hismanoglu, Murat, *Language Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the Internet TESL Journal*. Vol. VI, No. 8, August 2000. Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Hismanoglu-Strategies.html>
- Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies – What Every Teacher Should Know*, Heinle & Heinle, Boston, USA
- Pachler, Norbert, and Field, Kit (2001). *Learning to Teach Modern Foreign Languages in the Secondary School – A Companion to School Experience*, Routledge, London, p. 67

Biodata: Cătălina Ecaterina Bălățeanu is a graduate of Al. I. Cuza University Iasi (2008, French-English); MA degree in Applied Linguistics -teaching EFL (2010); teacher of English and French at Scoala Gimnaziala Tutora, Iasi, since 2011