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PREFACE

WHY IS CULTURE IMPORTANT FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES?

Culture is the social cement of all human relationships.
—Tom Scovel, 1991

This book, which focuses on cross-cultural use of language learning strategies, is useful to foreign language teachers around the world who have students from just one culture. It is also helpful for second language teachers who have more than one culture represented in their classes. Language researchers and language program administrators would also benefit from a greater and more practical understanding of cross-cultural similarities and differences in learning strategy assessment and instruction. Finally, advanced language learners are likely to gain from a greater comprehension of the cultural dynamics of strategy use.

Culture and its influence on language learning strategies are the keystones of this preface and indeed of this whole book. This preface defines culture and cross-culturalism, defines learning strategies and explains cultural influences on those strategies, and displays the organization and special features of this book.

CULTURE AND CROSS-CULTURALISM

Culture (relating to patterns of living) refers to the individual's role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules or models for attitudes and conduct in them. By reference to these models, all human beings, from infancy onward, justify the world to themselves as best they can, associate with those around them, and relate to the social order to which they are attached... What is important in culture... is what one is expected to think, believe, say, do, eat, wear, pay, ensure, resent, honor, laugh at, fight for, and worship, in typical life situations... (Brooks, 1968, pp. 218–221)

The famous metaphor of the “cultural iceberg” (Hall & Hall, 1990; Oxford, 1995) indicates that many aspects of culture, such as certain beliefs, perceptions, and values, are below the surface of consciousness (in the submerged part of the iceberg). Other aspects of culture, like clothing and TV-watching habits, are in the conscious

area (above the waterline). The less conscious cultural aspects often influence how people learn languages. Research by Yang (1992b) suggests that culture clearly includes beliefs, perceptions, and values which affect language learning, including *general learning styles* (visual, auditory, hands-on; intuitive, sensing; global, analytic; see Reid, 1995) and *specific learning strategies* (the particular behaviors and steps learners use to improve their learning such as note-taking, finding conversation partners, and analyzing words). Oxford, Hollaway, and Horton-Murillo (1992, p. 441) emphasize, "Although culture is not the single determinant, and although many other influences intervene, culture often does play a significant role in the learning styles [and strategies]... adopted by many participants in the culture."

The importance of culture is reflected in the concept of "situated cognition," which holds that the setting and the activity in which knowledge is developed are not separable from learning, nor are they neutral; they are an integral part of the learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Geertz, 1983; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Suchman, 1987). Thus, in the foreign or second language classroom, the activities and cultural influences cannot be separated from what is learned. Language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context. The student becomes enculturated (apprenticed into a particular learning culture that in many ways reflects the general culture) through classroom activities and through the modeling and coaching of the teacher and many others (Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Rather than just the teacher/learner dyad, there exists "a richly diverse field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56). In this view, learning is never a mere process of transmission or transfer but is instead nothing less than a process of transformation.

Cross-Culturalism (Banks & Banks, 1993; Batchelder & Warner, 1977; Gaston, 1984; Luce & Smith, 1987; Oxford, 1995; Putsch, 1986; Seelye, 1987; Weeks, Pedersen, & Brislin, 1977) deals with a dynamic system of understandings across cultures or subcultures. Comprehending cross-cultural similarities and differences involves carefully considering crucial aspects of culture, such as concepts of time, personal space, body language, worship, relationships, hatred, prejudice, love, and respect — and, as shown in this book, language learning strategies within a particular culture and across cultures.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement that is necessary for developing communicative ability (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Strategies are not a single event, but rather a creative sequence of events that learners actively use. Hundreds of foreign and second learning strategies exist. For example, Bob seeks out conversation partners. Zoltan groups words to be learned and then labels each group. Marlen gives herself encouragement through positive

self-talk before getting up to give a speech in the target language. Louelle uses gestures to communicate in the classroom when the words do not come to mind. Mariam learns words by breaking them down into their components. Sayed draws “semantic maps” with lines and arrows pictorially showing the linkages between new words according to their meaning. Deena finds an American pen pal. Darlene consciously uses guessing while reading as many books as she can in the second language. L2 learning strategies like these are very important, because research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, “tailored” use of these strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency.

Learning strategy investigations within and outside the language field have shown that effective learners actively associate new information with existing information in long-term memory, building increasingly intricate and differentiated mental structures, or *schemata*. The use of well-chosen strategies distinguishes experts from novices in many learning areas. Successful learners often use *metacognitive* (i.e., “beyond the cognitive”) strategies such as organizing, evaluating, and planning their learning. These are sometimes viewed as the learner’s own personal “executive control” over his or her own learning. Use of these behaviors — along with *cognitive* strategies like analyzing, reasoning, transferring information, taking notes, and summarizing — might be considered part of any definition of truly effective learning (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983). Additionally, competent learners often use *compensation* strategies such as guessing or inferring and *memory* strategies such as grouping and structured reviewing — all of which have been included as cognitive strategies by most researchers. Research results have shown that some of the best learners use *affective* and *social* strategies to control their emotional state, to keep themselves motivated and on-task, and to get help when they need it (McCombs, 1982, 1988; Dansereau, 1985). Yet many students (and their teachers) are largely unaware of the potential of affective and social strategies.

Cultural background affects *strategy choice*. Because of Hispanics’ global and field dependent style preference (Reid, 1995), many Hispanic ESL/EFL students choose particular learning strategies, such as predicting, inferring (guessing from context), avoiding details, working with others rather than alone, and basing judgments on personal relationships rather than logic. In contrast, many Japanese ESL/EFL students reflectively use analytic strategies aimed at precision and accuracy, search for small details, work alone, and base judgments more on logic than on personal interactions. Cultures that encourage concrete-sequential learning styles (such as those of Korea or some Arabic-speaking countries) often produce widespread use of rote memorization strategies, while more flexible strategies (though not always higher order thinking strategies) and a more facilitative view of teachers are often found among North Americans. Extroverted learning styles, such as those of many Hispanics and Arabic speakers, are related to the use of social strategies for learning (Harshbarger et al., 1986; Willing, 1988). In contrast, according to Harshbarger et al. (1986), many introverted Asian students display strategies for working alone. These are just a few examples of cultural influences on learning strategy selection and use. In addition, gender differences in language learning strategy use have been

rampant in the research (Oxford, 1993a, 1993b), and surely culture is at least one feasible, if partial, explanation. Attitudes toward authority, beliefs about how difficult (or easy) it is to learn a language, ideas about the importance of “the text” and about memorizing it, and concepts about whether personal expression and creativity are allowed — all these are cultural issues that affect the use of language learning strategies.

Culture also influences *strategy assessment*, the measurement of strategy use. Techniques often used for assessing students’ language learning strategies include informal observation, formal observational rating scales, informal or formal interviews, group discussions, think-aloud procedures, language learning diaries, dialogue journals between student and teacher, open-ended narrative-type surveys, and structured questionnaires of strategy frequency (see, e.g., Cohen, 1987a). Learners in some cultures might feel too vulnerable in a think-aloud strategy assessment situation and might prefer a strategy assessment questionnaire. Likewise, culture influences *strategy instruction*. Students in certain cultures might like large and small group discussions with teacher input, while students elsewhere might prefer to improve their strategies independently through self-directed workbooks.

The following is an authentic example of how culture influences strategy use and attitudes toward learner empowerment. It was written by English teacher Milagros Flores in Venezuela. Notice the great surprise registered by some students and the skepticism of others when faced with the concept that they themselves could *actively* do something to enhance their learning:

Whenever a strategy is used by a student in class, I stop and alert the whole class of that strategy and its effectiveness. I also try to use activities which would encourage students to use strategies, for example information gap activities, problem solving, and guessing the meaning from context. In my case after I arrived from the [strategy course for teachers], my first day of class I told my students about this new finding [learning strategies can help students learn more effectively] and I let them know most of the theory. But I realize it is big change for Latin people, I mean, it is going to involve a lot of time for them to get used to this new finding. My students’ reaction varied from surprised to skeptical or mocking. *Because our students are not used to being an active part of the learning process, we have to be persistent in the discussion of the strategies and make students aware of them every time they obtain good results.*

In this culture, passivity was the norm in the learning process. In other cultures the sense of passivity in learning might not be so pronounced, and personal action and power might be felt more strongly. Each culture has its approach to learning and thus to learning strategies, and therefore no single formula for assessing and instructing learning strategies exists.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Part I concerns strategy assessment in various cultures and with different languages, and Part II delves deeply into strategy instruction as it takes place with students of contrasting cultures and languages. Chapter 1, by Anderson and Vandergrift, focuses on verbal reports, especially the well-known think-aloud procedure, and presents a major Canadian illustration highlighting learners of French as a second language. Oxford, Lavine, Felkins, Hollaway, and Saleh in chapter 2 discuss the use of diary studies and recollective studies and give examples with a variety of languages and countries. Using a variety of assessment techniques Levine, Reves, and Leaver demonstrate in chapter 3 how ex-Soviets who have been in Israel for a short time and those who have lived in Israel for decades differ in their cultural-educational learning views and their learning strategy use. Bedell and Oxford in chapter 4 review 36 studies of language learning strategy use in many different cultures, and then they center on an intensive strategy study in the People's Republic of China. Chapter 5 by Dreyer and Oxford is a view of South Africa, focusing on personality factors and learning strategies among Afrikaans-speaking learners of ESL. Kaylani, author of chapter 6, studies motivation and gender as related to learning strategy use in Jordan. In chapter 7, Cohen and Scott give a synthesis of internationally used strategy assessment options, giving advantages and disadvantages of each, as a fitting close to Part I.

Part II, with its focus on strategy instruction, starts with chapter 8 by Nyikos, who explains the conceptual shift that is essential when the teacher wants to create a learner-centered classroom (a necessity for improving students' learning strategies). Hajer, Meestringa, Park, and Oxford show in chapter 9 the power of print materials in strategy instruction, using illustrations from the UK, the US, and the Netherlands. Baily's chapter 10 proves that the computer can be a vehicle for assessing/tracking language learning strategies and for providing certain forms of strategy instruction. In chapter 11, Rubin continues the topic of media by introducing her Language Learning Strategy Program, which provides multimedia strategy instruction regarding multiple target languages, such as Russian, Korean, Spanish, and 17 others. Chapter 12 by Dadour and Robbins is a demonstration of the effectiveness of detailed, systematic strategy instruction for EFL oral communication skills in Egypt and in Japan. Chapter 13 details the CALLA model in a discussion by Chamot and O'Malley. Many of the principles of that model are applied to Japanese, Spanish, and Russian learning in chapter 14, written by Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, and Robbins. Kidd and Marquardson propose a well-articulated ESL strategy instruction model from Canada, a model known as Foresee and based somewhat on CALLA but with very specific revisions (chapter 15). In chapter 16, Yang shows how a strategy instruction program designed with group strategy interviews and discussions can affect the frequency and variety of strategy use among Taiwanese university students. Flaitz and Feyten describe a vibrant but short strategy instruction intervention and show that it can, in optimal circumstances, raise both strategic awareness and language performance. Chapter 18 by Oxford and Leaver synthesizes what we know at this time about strategy

instruction around the world and refers to several key factors, such as consciousness, resource use, and degree of integration into regular classwork. The afterword brings together the key points of Parts I and II.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

This volume has a number of special characteristics not found in many other books on language learning strategies.

- This is the first book that looks closely at the nature of cultural effects on language learning strategy use, assessment, and instruction. Areas cited in this book for their language learning strategy involvement (and often for cultural influences) are Belarus, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Israel, Japan, Jordan, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Russia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, the Ukraine, the US, the UK, and many more.
- Unlike many other strategy books, this book discusses a wide range of *culturally appropriate* and *practical* ways to conduct strategy assessment and instruction.
- This is the first volume that shows how language learning strategies are employed, assessed, and taught with a large variety of native and second/foreign languages. In this book, a sampling of the languages specifically affected by language learning strategies includes, among others: Danish, Dutch, English (as a second language and as a foreign language), French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.
- This book contains chapters by most of the well-known researchers in the field of language learning strategies and also introduces some young, highly promising strategy researchers.
- This book contains new, unpublished information about language learning strategies; for instance, the volume describes recent strategy assessment and instructional projects, explores new links between strategy use and language performance, discusses computerized strategy assessment, highlights the value of print media for self-directed strategy instruction, and shows that a small amount of strategy instruction can sometimes have a surprisingly significant effect on language achievement.
- The volume is easier to read than most edited books in the language learning/teaching field. It has been carefully edited by a single individual, who aimed at eliminating major redundancies, creating smoothness and uniform quality across chapters, avoiding jargon, providing the clearest and most powerful presentation possible, offering syntheses at the end of each part of the book, and gathering references at the end of the volume.

As you read this book, consider the questions you want to have answered about language learning strategies around the world. Search for what you personally need to know. At the same time, keep an open mind for new questions and ideas you have not even considered. Enjoy this cross-cultural exploration of language learning strategies.