Strategies in years 4-6: Possibilities and Problems

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Abstract

Strategies appear in all the parts of the syllabus for English in the new Swedish national curriculum introduced in 2011. The knowledge requirements for year 6 distinguish between the use of the singular “a strategy” for the lowest grade and the plural “strategies” for the higher grades.

Although there are strong arguments in favour of including strategies in a language syllabus, teachers face several problems when assessing strategies summatively as a basis for grading, particularly listening and reading strategies. First, there is a problem of categorization and definition. Second, if listening and reading strategies are viewed metacognitively, they cannot be assessed when being used. Third, strategies may be used consciously or subconsciously. Fourth, the knowledge requirements indicate that teachers should establish a causal relationship between strategy use and comprehension, but strategies are not necessarily facilitative and learners’ successful comprehension may be due to other factors. While arguing that reception strategies should not have been included in the knowledge requirements, the text includes an example of how a teacher had her learners using listening strategies collaboratively and as a basis for formative assessment.

Key words: English as a foreign language, language teaching, listening strategies, reading strategies, strategies, summative assessment

Introduction

In 2011, a new national curriculum for the compulsory school was introduced in Sweden (Skolverket, 2011a). In the syllabus for English, one of the major changes concerns an increased focus on strategies. With the exception of years 1–3, strategies appear in all the sections of the syllabus: in the introduction, the overall goals, the core content and in the knowledge requirements. The latter are a combination of goals for pupils to achieve and grading criteria for teachers. Additionally, for years 6 and 9, there are descriptors for three levels of proficiency denoting grades E, C and A with A being the highest. The proficiency
levels for these school years correspond to levels A2.1 and B.1 in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).

There are strong reasons for including strategies in a language syllabus. One is that strategy use is part of communication, and strategies appear as a sub-category in most models of communicative competence. The CEFR also views strategies as part of communication: “To carry out communicative tasks, users have to engage in communicative language activities and operate communication strategies” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 57).

Another reason for including strategies is that they can be connected to language learning ideals like consciousness-raising, learner awareness and learner responsibility. Underpinning such ideals is that competent language learners can reflect on their learning and take responsibility for it. Such learners are likely to increase their ability to assess their own learning. In all likelihood, they also increase their motivation. As part of their growing learner awareness, they acquire a repertoire of ways of dealing with problems that may appear along the way. Strategy use can therefore be viewed as problem solving. The comments to the syllabus for English for the compulsory school (Skolverket, 2011b) express this as follows:

> Sometimes situations arise when one attempts to convey a message without quite reaching the person listening. In other situations it may be difficult to make sense of a message. … There is then a need to compensate for this by using e.g. reformulation, synonyms, questions and body language. Therefore, one purpose of the teaching of English is that learners should develop and *be able to use different strategies* … to overcome these obstacles in communication. (p. 9; my translation)

Consequently, strategies should be taught and be made part of on-going discussions between language teachers and learners about language learning and ways in which communication problems may be solved.

However, a closer study of strategies as a research area and an analysis of how they appear in the Swedish syllabus for English will show that they pose several problems for teachers of English. Part of the complexity concerns how the knowledge requirements for the lowest grade E and the higher grades distinguish between the use of ”a strategy” and “strategies”. In order to pinpoint whether learners have used one or more strategies, teachers have to have a clear sense of what is meant by strategies and of what role strategy use may play in
communication. This is because the logic of the system for grading learners demands that all the requirements for a given grade have to be met and that the grading is carried out in the name of equivalence and fairness. Consequently, all students must be assessed according to the same principles and standards. Since it is hard to investigate and assess listening and reading strategies while students are listening or reading – and any attempt to do so will inevitably affect the process – these strategies pose a particular problem.

The following text provides more detailed explanations why it is hard to assess listening and reading strategies summatively as a basis for grading learners (a closer discussion can be found in Lundahl, 2012). But first we will see what strategies are included in the syllabus for English for years 4–6.

**Strategies in years 4–6**

As mentioned previously, strategies appear in all the parts of the syllabus for English. One of the five overall goals states that the teaching of English should “give pupils the opportunities to develop their ability to … use language strategies to understand and make themselves understood” (Skolverket 2011a, p. 32). This shows that the focus is on communication strategies or more specifically reception, production and interaction strategies. The following part of the syllabus, the core content, is divided up into three sub-sections: “Content of communication”, “[l]istening and reading – reception”, and “[s]peaking, writing and discussing – production and interaction”. As suggested by the overall goal mentioned above, strategies only appear in the last two sections. “Listening and reading …” includes “[s]trategies to understand key words and context in spoken language and texts, for example, by adapting listening and reading to the form and content of communications” (p. 33), while “[s]peaking, writing and discussing…” lists “[l]anguage strategies to understand and make oneself understood when language skills are lacking, such as through reformulation” and “[l]anguage strategies to participate in and contribute to discussions, such as questions, and phrases and expressions to confirm understanding” (p. 34). However, another type of strategy is also included under “Listening and reading …”, but when the text talks about “[d]ifferent ways of searching for and choosing texts and spoken English from the Internet and other media”, the word strategy is not used.
Dilemmas connected to assessing strategies

The research into communication and learning strategies has been extensive ever since the 1970s (see Macaro, 2006 and Oxford, 2011 for overviews), but there are still many uncertainties regarding how strategies should be defined and categorised. Rod Ellis (2008) summarises the fields of learning and communication strategies and emphasizes how difficult it is to distinguish between them since “there is no way of telling whether a strategy is motivated by a desire to learn or a desire to communicate” (p. 704). He also comments on the broadening of the field of communication strategies from a psycholinguistic focus to a more social orientation, resulting in a “loss of clarity and definition” (p. 502). In an overview of individual differences in second language learning, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) found no theoretical base for the concept of learner strategies. In another overview, Macaro (2006) expresses his frustration over considerable differences in categorisation and definition. Macaro also remarks on a further lack of consensus regarding whether strategies “are always facilitative and effective” (p. 325). As for the latter point, Macaro has repeatedly emphasized how difficult, if not impossible, it is to establish causality between strategy use and successful performance (e.g. 2007 and Greenfell & Macaro 2007). For the Swedish syllabus for English, this is a crucial point since the knowledge requirements even for the lowest grade for year 6 (E), state that teachers should be able to establish a relationship between comprehension and strategy use: “To facilitate their understanding of the content of the spoken language and texts, pupils can choose and apply a strategy for listening and reading” (p. 35, bold in original). Ascertaining such a relationship is difficult because success may be achieved due to other factors, e.g. language ability or prior knowledge. In addition, the teacher’s task design, including scaffolding, may play an important role. The National Agency of Education has acknowledged that strategies are not necessarily facilitative. Its comments on the syllabus for English (Skolverket 2011b) express that strategies may “be more or less effective” (p. 15, my translation).

These comments indicate another problem connected to strategies. In stating that “[s]trategy is a collective concept referring to various methods used and actions taken in communication and students’ learning” (ibid., p. 15, my translation), the National Agency of Education accepts an extremely broad definition where strategies appear outside of the brain through actions taken by learners. According to such a broad and general view, a reading strategy is used when a boy uses a finger to follow a text he is reading. If the same boy also uses a
dictionary to look up unknown words, he is providing evidence of using reading *strategies*. However, this blurs the distinction between strategies and study skills. The CEFR views reception strategies metacognitively, and most research literature on listening and reading strategies has a psycholinguistic orientation with a focus on cognition and metacognition.

When we place listening and reader strategies inside the brain, we end up with the problem that learners’ strategy use can only be established after their use, and when learners are expected to describe or refer to the strategies they have used, we are asking them to identify strategies that they cannot be certain of having used. We are also asking them to refer to strategies they may have used subconsciously. This difficulty is acknowledged by the comments to the syllabus for English which state that “[s]trategies may be conscious or partly subconscious” (ibid., p. 15, my translation). In summative assessment this problem is exacerbated in a system which is supposed to be based on fairness.

Moreover, a good listener or reader with excellent language ability may need to use fewer strategies than a less able listener/reader. In fact, the comments to the syllabus for English express this as follows:

> All people need and use strategies to understand, make themselves understood, communicate and learn. Beginner learners in particular need to compensate for their lack of language ability over a long period of time. Along with increasing language ability, the need for compensatory strategies decreases, but communication strategies will still be used. (p. 35, my translation)

Adding further to the complexity is the realization that in any language learning situation, the application of strategies will be governed by the interaction between factors such as text (in a broad sense of the word), the purpose for listening and reading, as well as the learners’ linguistic knowledge and prior knowledge. Strategy use is therefore context-specific and dynamic, and effective strategy use can therefore not be generalised in the sense that some strategies are always successful. Simply put: different texts, different purposes for listening to or reading them and students’ language ability, interest in and knowledge of the contents will lead to the use of different strategies.

The account that I have given of strategies explains why teachers of English will face difficulties when assessing strategies in order to grade their learners, with listening and reading strategies posing a particular problem. Production and interaction strategies are a
different matter. When the core content of the syllabus for English describes "[l]anguage strategies to participate in and contribute to discussions, such as questions, and phrases and expressions to confirm understanding" (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 34), the strategy use in question functions as part of turn taking. It is audible and therefore possible to assess.

My critical overview of dilemmas connected to summative assessment of listening and reading strategies shows that I question the inclusion of these strategies in the knowledge requirements. However, as mentioned in the introduction, it is also important to acknowledge the potential for including strategies in teaching and formative assessment. The use of listening strategies in a year 6 class at a primary school in a small municipality in the south of Sweden can be given as an example.

**Listening strategies in practice**

In April 2012, a primary teacher teaching year 6 decided to introduce the theme “Pay it forward” based on the film with the same name. Space does not allow a description of the aims and phases of the topic-based approach adopted by the teacher. The focus is on how the teacher asked her students to work out the basic meaning of a YouTube-clip in which Catherine Ryan Hyde, the writer of the novel that the film was based on, explains what inspired her to write it (Pay it forward – Catherine Ryan Hyde). Late at night she had found herself in a rough area of Los Angeles when her car broke down and smoke started filling up the engine compartment. She jumped out of the car only to find two men running in her direction. She was sure that she was going to be robbed or worse, but one of the men carried a blanket and the men used it to put out the fire. The fire department turned up soon afterwards, and in the ensuing confusion, the men disappeared and Catherine Ryan Hyde realized that she had forgotten to thank them. She used the novel and the idea of creating ripple effects of kindness as a way of doing so.

When using the video clip, the teacher placed the learners in groups of 3-4, where each group had access to a computer. She then asked them to view the video clip several times to try to work out what situation the writer had found herself in and what then happened. These meanings are in line with the knowledge requirements for year 6 which demand that learners “can understand the main content and clear details in simple English, clearly spoken at a relaxed pace …” (grade C; p. 36, bold in original).
The video clip is less than five minutes long and all the groups listened to it several times. One of the groups was side-tracked by the word *blanket* which they confused with the similar Swedish word *blankett* (a form to fill in). In the end, all the groups were able to work out the basic meaning of the video clip. Although it is difficult to establish the precise reasons for their success, it is reasonable to assume that the learners were able to work out the gist of the text because the video clip was embedded in a clearly defined context. They all had prior understanding of the topic. Furthermore, the problem-oriented task provided them with clear scaffolding, and the learners could support one another in their understanding of the text.

As far as listening strategies are concerned, the learners’ use of strategies was made both audible and visible. The following listening strategies (that have been identified as such by Vandergrift et al, 2006) were used by the learners to make sense of the text:

- They used the general idea of the text to help them guess the meaning of words that they did not understand.
- As they listened, they adjusted their interpretation when they realized that it was not correct. (Sw. *blankett* – En. *blanket*)
- They used the words they understood to guess the meaning of the words that they did not understand.
- They used their knowledge of the topic to help them understand.
- When they guessed the meaning of new words, they thought back to everything else that they had heard, to see if their guess made sense.

It must also be stressed that the learners worked out the basic meaning of the video clip collaboratively, and in the ensuing discussion between the teacher and the learners the assessment was formative.

**Conclusion**

Since we use strategies when we communicate, language syllabuses should include communication strategies. When strategies are made part of teaching, they should also function as part of formative assessment. However, I have explained why the new Swedish syllabus for English should not have included listening and reading strategies in its knowledge requirements. The problems that language teachers face as a consequence can be summarised as follows:
• There is uncertainty about how to categorise and define strategies. Should activities and behaviours be included or should strategies be limited to cognition and metacognition? Given that strategies can be categorised and defined differently, is it possible to avoid arbitrariness when teachers assess learners?
• When listening and reading strategies are viewed cognitively and metacognitively, they cannot be assessed when being used. To what extent will then learners’ telling of strategies be a reconstruction after the event?
• Strategies are used either consciously or subconsciously. What do we do when learners are successful in their comprehension but unaware of their use of strategies?
• The knowledge requirements demand that teachers attempt to establish a connection between the process and the product, in the case of listening and reading comprehension between the use of reception strategies and comprehension. If researchers face major difficulties identifying such a causal relationship, how can teachers be expected to do so?

References


*Pay it forward – Catherine Ryan Hyde*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD_eMYDwVGA

Skolverket (2011a). *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011*. The text can be downloaded from www.skolverket.se/publikationer
