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Nexus between Learning Styles and Language Learning Strategies – A Literature Review

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to fix the nexus between the learning styles and language learning strategies. The study highlights various research activities undertaken by the experts in this field in order to overcome the difficulties of the less proficient learners and shows how language learning is promoted in general. An attempt is made to find out the commonly preferred types of learning styles and strategies and to identify the extent to which the knowledge of these two factors can enrich language learning and teaching. In the process, it documents various categories of styles and strategies. This study is taken up with a view to invent answers to questions like: Can the knowledge of personal learning styles help a learner learn a language
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more effectively? or What keeps the learner motivated or sustains the motivation to learn? or How does he or she gain proficiency and such similar questions.

Introduction

The impact of learning styles and strategies in (English) language learning and teaching is tremendous. There have been good many records of achievement in almost all parts of the world due to the successful implementation of the findings of researches in this field. The present study of the nexus between the learning styles and learning strategies may hold answers to various questions like: Can the knowledge, of (personal) learning styles of the SELF, help a learner learn a language more effectively? What keeps the learner motivated or sustains the motivation to learn? How does he or she gain proficiency? and similar questions. To this effect, an attempt is made to find out the commonly preferred types of learning styles and strategies and to identify the extent to which the knowledge of these two factors can enrich language learning and teaching. In the process, the paper documents various categories of styles and strategies used by language learners as guided by the researchers and experts in language teaching.

Learning Styles and Language Learning Strategies

To date, no single definition of the term learning style has been identified. Honey and Mumford (1992, p. 1), for example, defined learning styles as “a description of the attitudes and behaviours which determine an individual’s preferred way of learning.” James and Gardner (1995, p. 20) defined learning styles more precisely by saying that learning style is the “complex manner in which, and conditions under which, learners most efficiently and most effectively perceive, process, store, and recall what they are attempting to learn”. Felder (1996, p. 18) defined learning styles as “characteristic strengths and preferences in the ways they (learners) take in and process information”.

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Definition and Scope of Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 63). When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning.

Depending on the ideas and aspects of the meaning of learning styles, other terms such as learning strategy and cognitive style are often used in a similar context or even interchangeable to the term learning style.

Learning strategies can be seen as short term methods that students apply in a particular situation. These strategies can change with the time, teacher, subject, and situation. When learning strategies are frequently used by students, learning styles can be derived from these strategies (Pask, 1976b). Based on Pask’s work, Entwistle, Hanley, and Hounsell (1979, p. 368) define a learning strategy as “the way a student chooses to tackle a specific learning task in the light of its perceived demands” and learning style “as a broader characterisation of a student’s preferred way of tackling learning tasks generally”. Furthermore, they argued that distinct learning styles underlie learning strategies.

According to Jonassen and Grabowski (1993), learning styles can be seen as applied cognitive styles in the domain of learning. Learning styles are usually based on self-reported learning preferences. For measuring them, instruments are used to ask learners about their preferences. But cognitive styles are ahead of learning styles by just one level. Cognitive styles are identified by task-relevant measures, which test the actual ability or skill.

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Commonly Used Learning Style Models

The selection of the following 10 commonly used learning style models is based on Coffield's review (Coffield et al., 2004a), including the theoretical importance in the field, and their widespread use.

1. Personality Types as defined by Myers-Briggs

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a personality test and is not focused specifically on learning. Nevertheless, the personality of a learner influences his / her way of learning and therefore, MBTI includes important aspects of learning. Basically all the other learning style models are based on considerations of MBTI. Based on Jung's theory of psychological types, the MBTI distinguishes a person's type according to four dichotomies: extroversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving. All possible combinations can occur, which result in a total number of 16 types.

2. Pask's Serialist/Holist/Versatilist Model

During the development of the conversation theory, Pask studied patterns of conversations between individuals to identify various styles of learning and thinking. Different patterns for designing, planning, and organising of thought as well as for selecting and representing information were investigated, resulting in the identification of three types of learners: serialist, holist, and versatile.

3. Entwistle's Deep, Surface and Strategic Learning Approach

The research conducted by Entwistle et.al. deals with the involvement of students' intentions, goals and motivation in their learning approach. Entwistle argued that the students' orientations to, and conceptions of, learning and the nature of knowledge both lead to and are affected by the students' typical approaches to learning. The model, is based on the research by Pask, Marton, and Biggs, distinguishes between three approaches for learning and studying: deep, surface and strategic.

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4. Grasha-Riechmann Learning Style Model

The Grasha-Riechmann learning style model focuses on the students' social interaction with their teachers and fellow students in the classroom environment. Grasha and Riechmann identified three bipolar dimensions in order to understand the students' behaviour with respect to their social interaction: the participant/avoidant, collaborative/competitive, and dependent/independent dimension.

5. Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Model

The Dunn and Dunn learning style model was originally proposed in 1974 and then refined and extended over the years. The efforts in this area led to the development of the Learning Styles Inventory that is used to identify individual learning styles. The Learning Styles Inventory identifies five major categories of stimuli sources and twenty-one learning style elements. It is built on the theory that each individual has a unique set of biological and developmental characteristics. These unique characteristics impact substantially on how a person learns new information and skills. It draws upon two basic theories - cognitive style and brain lateralization.

6. Gregorc's Mind Styles Model

Gregorc's mind style model is based on two dimensions dealing with the preferences for perception and ordering. Regarding perception, people can prefer an abstract or concrete way of perception, or some combination of both. Abstract perception refers to the ability to process information through reason and intuition, often invisible to our physical senses. In contrast, concrete perception emphasises the physical senses and refers to the ability to process information through these senses. The ordering dimension deals with the way a learner is arranging, prioritising, and using information in either a sequential or random order, or in a combination of both. The perceptual and ordering preferences can be combined into four basic mediation channels which lead to four types of learners.

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7. Kolb's Learning Style Model

The learning style theory by Kolb is based on the Experiential Learning Theory, which models the learning process and incorporates the important role of experience in this process. Following this theory, learning is conceived as a four-stage cycle. Concrete experience is the basis for observations and reflections. These observations are used to form abstract concepts and generalisations, which again act as basis for testing implementations of concepts in new situations. Testing implementations results in concrete experience, which closes the learning cycle. According to this theory, learners need four abilities for effective learning:

- a) Concrete Experience abilities,
- b) Reflective Observation abilities,
- c) Abstract Conceptualization abilities, and
- d) Active Experimentation abilities.

On closer examination, there are bipolar opposite dimensions: concrete/abstract and active/reflective. Kolb described that “as a result of our hereditary equipment, our particular past life experience, and the demands of our present environment, most of us develop learning styles that emphasize some learning abilities over others”. Based on this assumption, Kolb identified four statistically prevalent types of learning styles.

8. Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Model

The learning style model by Honey and Mumford is based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and is developed further on the four types of Kolb's learning style model. The active/reflective and concrete/abstract dimensions are strongly involved in the defined types as well. Furthermore, Honey and Mumford stated that “the similarities between Kolb's model and ours are greater than the differences” (Honey and Mumford, 1992).

9. Herrmann “Whole Brain” Model

The Herrmann “Whole Brain” model is based on the split-brain research carried out by Roger Sperry, separating the brain in the left and right cerebral hemispheres. In addition, the Herrmann Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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“Whole Brain” model considers, following MacLean, the hypothesised functions of the brain’s limbic system. Accordingly, individuals are modelled with respect to how they process information using either a cerebral mode, by thinking about the problem, or a limbic mode, which is a more active approach based on experimentation.

10. Felder-Silverman Learning Style Model

In Felder-Silverman learning style model (FSLSM), learners are characterised by values on four dimensions. These dimensions are based on major dimensions in the field of learning styles and can be viewed independently from each other. They show how learners prefer to process (active/reflective), perceive (sensing/intuitive), receive (verbal/visual), and understand (sequential/global) information. While these dimensions are not new in the field of learning styles, the way in which they describe a learning style of a student can be seen as new. Furthermore, Felder and Silverman consider the resulting preferences as tendencies, meaning that even a learner with a strong preference for a particular learning style can act sometimes differently.

Five Families of Learning Style Models

From the above summary it is clear that a high number of learning style models exists in literature. But according to Coffield, et al. (2004b) they can be classified into 5 families based on some principal ideas behind the models, attempting to reflect the views of the main theorists of learning styles.

The first family is built on the idea that learning styles and preferences are largely based on the four modalities: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and tactile.

The second family deals with the idea that learning styles reflect deep-seated features of the cognitive structure, including patterns of abilities.

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A third category refers to learning styles as one component of a relatively stable personality type.

In the fourth family, learning styles are seen as flexibly stable learning preferences.

The last category moves on from learning styles to learning approaches, strategies, orientations and conceptions of learning.

Choice of Language Learning Strategies

Moreover, learning styles of language learners play a crucial role in the choice of language learning strategies. If a harmony exists between the learning styles and learning strategies of an individual learner, the learner will perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety (Oxford, 2003). Studies in the area have shown that an individual's learning style preferences influence the type of learning strategies that they use. For instance, extroverts have demonstrated strong preference for social strategies, while introverts use metacognitive strategies more frequently. Learners who favour group study are shown to use social and interactive strategies, such as working with peers or requesting clarification.

Differences between Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and Learning Styles (LS)

In order to solve the problem of understanding what Language Learning Strategies are and how they are different from Learning Styles, Reid (1998) draws a distinction between these two by focusing on the way they are distinct from each other. She refers to learning styles as “internally based characteristics, often not perceived or consciously used by learners, for the intake and comprehension of new information” (p. ix), whereas learning strategies are defined as “external skills often used consciously by students to improve their learning” (p. ix).

The inference from the above two definitions is that since learning styles are ‘internally based characteristics,’ they explain a learner's preference to a learning situation. In addition, it can be said that they are relatively stable and not likely to change over time. This view is also supported Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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by Oxford (1990) who states that some learner characteristics such as “learning styles and personality traits are difficult to change” (p. 12). Yet, some studies such as Ellis’ revealed that learners abandoned their own learning styles and they adjusted themselves according to the teaching style they were exposed to.

The learning strategies, on the other hand, are said to be ‘external skills’, which indicate they are more problem oriented and consciously used by the learners. And so they are more liable to change over time and depending on the task and materials used in the learning environment. Oxford (1990) claims that “learning strategies are easier to teach and modify” (p. 12) through strategy training.

Research on Language Learning Strategies

Research on language learning strategies got started in 1970s. For the most part, the progress in cognitive psychology had a great effect on the research studies on language learning strategies. In most of the research studies done on language learning strategies, identifying what good learners do to learn a second or foreign language has been the main issue. Rubin classifies learning strategies according to processes which contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning. It is believed by Wenden that reading and discussing the strategies of good language learners is a constructive preliminary activity which can help students to get aware of the concept of learner’s strategies. Learning strategies that language learners employ in the process of learning a new language have been identified and described by the researchers.

Many of the initial studies on language learning strategies were aimed at defining the “Good” language learner. It was realized that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or teaching techniques. Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed; others lacked those abilities. Observations and research studies led researchers to describe “good” language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies.

They believe that good language learners have characteristics of their own as detailed below.

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Good Language Learners

1. Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning,
2. Organize information about language,
3. Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words,
4. Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom,
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word,
6. Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned,
7. Make errors work for them and not against them,
8. Use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language,
9. Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension,
10. Learn to make intelligent guesses,
11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform “beyond their competence”,
12. Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going,
13. Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence,
14. Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation.

Relevance and Usefulness of the Concept of Good Language Learners

While the results of the studies on defining the good language learner are not based on empirical findings, they create characteristics of good language learners as students who are actively involved in language learning and are able to solve problems regarding their own learning. These studies provide a basis for our understanding of what good language learners do to acquire the target language. Once the strategies of successful language learners are identified, these strategies can be taught to less successful learners. It has been consistently reported that all

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language learners report or have been observed using some type of strategies in learning a foreign or second language. However, they insist that successful language learners have reported to use wider range of learning strategies.

In studies of good language learners, researchers mentioned lots of various behaviours that they referred to globally as strategies; some managed to describe strategies more specifically. Learning strategies have been described (Wenden and Rubin, 1987) as “any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (p.19). It was argued (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992) that “learning strategies are intentional behaviour and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information” (p.209). Learning strategies were also illustrated (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990) as “special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p. 1).

Hence, learning strategies were seen as special ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning, or retention of the information. Furthermore, it was stated (Cohen, 1990) that “learning strategies are processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language” (p. 4).

A Summary of the Classifications of Various Language Learning Strategies

O’Malley (1985)

O’Malley *et al.* (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories:

- A. Metacognitive Strategies,
- B. Cognitive Strategies, and
- C. Socio affective Strategies.

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A. Metacognitive Strategies

O'Malley *et al.* (1985) state that metacognitive is an expression to indicate an executive function, strategies which involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, observing of one's production or comprehension, correcting your own mistakes, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed. Based on O'Malley's classification, advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production, and self-evaluation are included among the major metacognitive strategies.

B. Cognitive Strategies

It has been stated (Brown, 2007) that "Cognitive strategies are more limited to specific learning tasks and they involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself" (p.134). Repetition, resourcing, translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, and inference are among the most important cognitive strategies.

C. Socio-affective Strategies

Socio affective strategies have close relationship with social-mediating activity and interacting with others. The main socio affective strategies include cooperation and question for clarification (Brown, 2007).

Rubin (1987)

Rubin, who allocated a great deal of effort in the field of language learning strategies, made a distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those contributing indirectly to learning. Direct strategies include metacognitive and cognitive strategies and indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin, there are three types of strategies used by learners that contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning.

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They are: A. Learning Strategies, B. Communication Strategies, and C. Social Strategies.

A. Learning Strategies

Learning strategies which are divided into two main types (Cognitive Learning Strategies and Metacognitive Learning Strategies) contribute directly to the development of the language system created by the language learner. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures which are taken in learning or problem-solving that involves direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Six major cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning are identified as: Clarification/Verification, Guessing/Inductive Inferencing, Deductive Reasoning, Practice, Memorization, and Monitoring. Metacognitive strategies are used to supervise, control or self-direct language learning. They involve different procedures as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

B. Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are not directly related to language learning since their emphasis is on the process of communication through conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are exploited by speakers when they are faced with some troubles regarding their communication and conversation or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. A usual communication strategy is to make use of one's linguistic or communicative knowledge to remain in the conversation.

C. Social Strategies

Social strategies are activities in which learners are exposed to the opportunities that can be a great help to practice their knowledge. Even though these strategies offer exposure to the target language, they contribute to learning indirectly since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language.

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Oxford (1990)

By referring to the literature, it can be stated that the most inclusive taxonomy of language learning strategies is provided by Oxford's (1990). Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, **direct** and **indirect** strategies which are also subdivided into six classes.

Direct strategies, which involve the new language directly, are divided into Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. As Oxford's (1990) says, “all direct strategies require mental processing of the language” (p.37).

Memory strategies entail the mental processes for storing new information in the memory and for retrieving them when needed. These strategies consist of four sets that include:

- A. Creating mental linkages,
- B. Applying images and sounds,
- C. Reviewing well, and
- D. Employing action.

Cognitive strategies entail conscious ways of handling the target language and fall into four sets which include:

- A. Practicing,
- B. Receiving and sending messages,
- C. Analyzing and reasoning, and
- D. Creating structure for input and output.

Compensation strategies enable learners to use the language either in speaking or writing despite knowledge gaps. According to Oxford's (1990), compensation strategies are employed by learners when facing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing. These strategies are divided into two sets:

- A. Guessing intelligently and
- B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

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Indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Indirect strategies provide indirect support for language learning by employing different strategies such as focusing, arranging, evaluating, seeking opportunities, and lowering anxiety.

Metacognitive strategies enable learners to control their own cognition. They are strategies which entail overviewing and linking with material already known, paying attention, delaying speech production, organizing, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self-evaluating.

Affective strategies assist students to manage their emotions, motivation, and attitudes associated with learning. They can be achieved through lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature.

Social strategies facilitate language learning through interactions with others. Language is a form of social behavior and learning it involves other people, and it is extremely important that learners employ appropriate social strategies in this process. These strategies are divided into three sets, namely asking questions, cooperating, and empathizing with others.

Sixty two strategies in all have been illustrated which include every strategy that is referred to in previous studies conducted in language learning strategies. In fact, this effort has provided a basis for an instrument, The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), designed to obtain information concerning strategy use of language learners in learning a second language. Oxford's classification system is preferred by the majority of the researchers as it proved to be more successful and reliable.

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Stern (1992)

Language learning strategies have been classified into five groups by Stern's (1992). They are as follows:

1. Management and Planning Strategies
2. Cognitive Strategies
3. Communicative - Experiential Strategies
4. Interpersonal Strategies
5. Affective Strategies

1. Management and Planning Strategies

These strategies are actually connected with the learner's purpose to control his own learning. A learner has the capability to take responsibility for the improvement of his own planning when the language instructor supports him only as an adviser or a resource person.

2. Cognitive Strategies

These strategies refer to procedures and activities which learners apply to improve their ability to learn or remember the materials, and solve the problems, especially those actions which learners use with specific classroom tasks. According to Stern (1992) the cognitive strategies include, Clarification / Verification, Guessing / Inductive Inferencing, Deductive Reasoning, Practice, Memorization, Monitoring.

3. Communicative - Experiential Strategies

Communication strategies, such as gesturing, paraphrasing, or asking for repetition and explanation are methods employed by learners to keep the conversation going. In other words, communication strategies involve the use of verbal or nonverbal instruments for the useful transfer of knowledge. The purpose is to avoid interrupting the course of communication.

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4. Interpersonal Strategies

According to Stern (1992), interpersonal strategies monitor the learners' development and evaluate their performance. Learners need to have communication with native speakers and cooperate with them. Learners need to get familiar with the culture of the target language.

5. Affective Strategies

Evidently, in the process of language learning, good language learners use various kinds of affective strategies. Sometimes, it can be frustrating to learn another language. It can arouse feeling of unfamiliarity and confusion. In some other cases, learners might not have a positive perspective towards native speakers. On the other hand, good language learners are relatively aware of these emotions, and they try to build positive feelings towards the foreign language and its speakers as well as the learning activities. To a great deal, training can be of assistance to the students to face these controversial feelings and to overcome them by drawing attention to the possible frustrations or mentioning them as they come up (Stern, 1992).

Practise the Following

From the above discussion on the learning styles and language learning strategies the following points are noteworthy and it is also clear that the desirable result can be achieved if they are practiced regularly in English language teaching or learning.

It can be argued from Felder's theoretical point of view that incorporating the learning styles of students makes learning easier for them and increases their learning efficiency. On the other hand, learners who are not supported by the learning environment may experience problems in the learning process. Felder advises against the unintentional, permanent mismatch of teaching styles and learning styles, where teachers are unaware of their own learning styles and may, as a result, teach only according to this style, thus favouring certain students and disadvantages others (Felder, 1993). Here, it should be noted that through the years the learning styles approach to

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instruction has gained in popularity and is being used widely in schools abroad especially in the US.

The use of language learning strategies leads to better proficiency or achievement in mastering the target language. In a study (O'Malley et al., 1985), it has been found that successful language learners have reported to use more and wider range of learning strategies more frequently than less-successful students. So it can be stated that there is a strong positive correlation between learning strategy use and language proficiency.

In this regard, language instructors should take their students learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students' learning strategies in order to support less successful student to achieve success and master the target language. Teachers can identify these strategies through observations, language diaries, questionnaires, interviews and so on. By doing so, teachers will be able to assist language learners to recognize and appreciate the power of language learning strategies in the process of second or foreign language learning.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, it is not reasonable to expect all learners to use the same good language learning strategies because the factors like age, gender, personality, motivation, self-concept, life-experience, learning style, excitement, anxiety, etc. affect the way in which language learners learn the target language. So, only through the suitable teaching styles that match the learners' learning styles and through a thorough learning strategy instruction teachers can help the students achieve language proficiency. The students or learners should remember that these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning and so they should learn to use more frequently a wide range of learning strategies that suit their learning styles to improve their language skills.

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