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VERBAL REPORT IN RESEARCH ON LEARNER STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT: Este artigo chama a atenção para a pesquisa sobre estratégias utilizadas pelos aprendizes e para o papel significativo que os dados relatados verbalmente desempenham em tal pesquisa. Observa-se uma variedade de métodos de pesquisa para descrever tais estratégias e um aumento no emprego do relato verbal como um desses métodos na descrição de processos cognitivos em áreas como comunicação, tradução, avaliação e aprendizagem de línguas.

O presente estudo enfoca o uso do relato verbal na descrição das estratégias empregadas pelo aluno na aprendizagem de uma língua. A informação sobre essas estratégias desenvolveu-se a partir de listas em grande parte intuitivas até chegar a taxonomias derivadas empiricamente--que têm como objetivo o treinamento dos alunos na obtenção de maior sucesso na aprendizagem de uma língua. São definidas três técnicas: auto-relato, auto-observação e auto-revelação.

O artigo termina com uma discussão das críticas incidentes sobre as medidas extraídas dos relatos verbais.

1. Learner Strategy Research and the Role of Verbal Report Data

Over the last decade, the role of learner strategies has gained increasing

prominence in language research. Essentially, such strategies refer to mental operations that learners use in accomplishing language tasks. But there is controversy over the use of the term. As Oxford points out (1990:7-8), the term **strategy** has its origin from the Greek term **strategia** which referred primarily to military planning. The field of education has taken over the concept of strategy and has popularized the distinction between **metacognitive** and **cognitive** strategies, with the former encompassing more the notion of conscious planning, monitoring, and evaluation of strategy use, and the latter referring more to the carrying out of the specific learning activities themselves (O'Malley & Chamot 1990:99).

There is still confusion over where to draw the line between metacognitive and cognitive strategies. The latter--more direct--operations have sometimes also been referred to as **techniques** (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern & Todesco 1978) or **tactics** (Seliger 1983). There is also controversy as to the degree of conscious choice that needs to be involved in order for the operation to be referred to as a "strategy" at all, rather than simply as a "process". Although efforts have been undertaken to develop inclusive yet parsimonious classification schemes for the nunerous strategies that have been identified in the field of language learning (see O'Malley & Chamot 1990:99-104), more work still needs to be done in this area (Oxford & Cohen, forthcoming).

Leaving aside unresolved matters of definition, let us now consider the research methods that have been used to access and

describe language learner strategies. The methods have included questionnaires and interviews (e.g., Cohen & Robbins 1976, Oxford, Nyikos, & Crookall 1987), observation schedules (e.g., FOCUS, Fanselow 1977), performance analysis (e.g., identification of communication strategies from speech protocols, Faerch & Kasper 1983; identification of reading strategies from miscue analysis, Goodman 1988), and language tests (e.g., rational-deletion cloze for which completion of each blank presumes the use of a given strategy, Homburg & Spaan 1981, Bachman 1985). Often these methods have produced indications or clues as to the strategies that learners use, rather than instances of actual strategy use, since what is usually obtained is some language product rather than information regarding the processes used to arrive at that product. Hence, researchers have relied to a certain degree on their own intuitions in order to derive strategy descriptions -- e.g., the strategies used by a learner in the classroom to produce an utterance or to write an answer to a test item.

Verbal report measures have recently risen to a level of popularity as an alternative --and perhaps more effective -- means of obtaining empirical evidence as to leraner strategies than the other means have provided. Verbal report methods are being used as a means of obtaining information as to strategies in the areas of communication (e.g., Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman 1986, Poulisse 1989), translation (Faerch & Kasper 1986, Borsch 1986, Gerloff 1987, Krings 1987), test taking (Cohen 1980, Cohen 1984,

Feldman & Stemmer 1987, Gordon 1987, Anderson 1989, Nevo 1989, Cohen, in press). and language learning (Cohen 1990). What may be said to charcterize many of the verbal report studies across the different activity areas is their dependency on rigorous theory (see Ericsson & Simon 1984). These verbal report studies reflect a theoretical framework whereby for the most part only information which is processed in a serrial, controlled fashion is reported--a notable departure from verbal report data collected in the past (see, for example, Titchener 1912).

This article will focus exclusively on the last of the four areas mentioned above, namely, on the role of verbal report in research on learner strategies in language learning. The term **learner strategies** is used rather than **learning strategies** since, as Selinger (1983) points out, learners may employ strategies either for the purpose of internalizing some material during a particular learning event or for the purpose of using material that they have already learned.

With respect to strategies in language learning, what started as lists of strategies used by good learners--partly derived from empirical study and partly from intuition (e.g., Rubin 1975, Stern 1975) has developed into more rigorous taxonomies (e.g., Oxford 1985, 1990) and frameworks for learner training curriculum (Wenden 1987). What began with case-study profiles, classroom observation, and learners' verbal reports (Cohen & Aphek 1979,1981, Hosenfeld 1979, Naiman et al. 1978, Rubin 1981, Wenden 1986b) has grown into studies of as many as

1,200 language learners (Oxford et al. 1987). The work has involved both the identification of learner strategies and the training of learners in the use of these strategies. A major objective of learner training studies has been to determine the benefits of heightening learners' consciousness about their use of strategies in learning a second or foreign language (O'Malley & Chamot 1990, Wenden 1986a, Tyacke & Mendelsohn 1986, Oxford 1990, Willing 1989, Cohen 1990). O'Malley and Chamot note that only a limited number of such studies have been conducted and that there has been little confirmation of the effectiveness of strategy training with second language tasks. But they add:

> The application of learning strategies to second language acquisition would rest on uncertain ground if there were not so many extant training studies in educational psychology verifying strategy effectiveness with a variety of first language tasks. (O'Malley & Chamot 1990:224)

Throughout this period in which our understanding of learner strategies has grown, verbal report measures have played a role in a significant number of the research studies contributing to this growth. Numerous insights about the strategies used in language learning have been obtained from learners as they provide verbal report data, before, during, or after performing language learning or language using tasks. By now it has been clearly demonstrated that verbal report is not one measure, but rather

encompasses a variety of measures intended to provide mentalistic data regarding cognitive processing. Such verbal reports include data that reflect **self-report** (learners's descriptions of what they do, characterized by generalized statements about learning behaviour), **self-observation** (the inspection of specific, not generalized language behavior introspectively or retrospectively), **self-revelation** ("think-aloud", stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes while the information is being attended to), or some combination of these (Radford 1974, Cohen & Hosenfeld 1981, Cohen 1987).

Some examples of studies using self report interviews and questionnaires include Naiman et al. (1978), O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo (1985), Wenden (1985), Ramírez (1986), Oxford et al. (1987). In such studies, the respondents answer interview questions or complete written questionnaires about their language strategies. To mention just a few examples of studies with second or foreign language learners involving self-revelation and/or self-observation, there have been studies like those of Hosenfeld (1984), Cavalcanti (1987), and Block (1986) employing verbal report measures with respect to reading, Cohen and Aphek (1979, 1981) with respect to speaking and vocabulary learning, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1987, 1990) concerning writing, and Neubach and Cohen (1988) regarding the use of dictionaries.

Perhaps a key reason for moving beyond self-report to self-observation and self-revelation is the interest in obtaining data that describe the learning event at or

near the moment it occurs. Such data might be expected to more accurately reflect what learners actually do than might the response to a questionnaire item calling for a description of generalized behavior. Questionnaire items are more likely to elicit learners' beliefs about what they do, rather than what they actually do. In effect, self-revelation and sel-observation are intended to complement self-report--to produce convergent assessment of learner strategies.

Let us now take a look at issues of controversy regarding this method of data collection.

2. The Controversy Regarding Verbal Report Data

Critics of verbal report methods note that much of cognitive processing is inaccessible because it is unconscious (see, for example, Selinger 1983). Critics among second-language researchers have contended that whereas verbal report methods may help to describe language use strategies, it remains to be demonstrated whether they can inform about language knowledge or skill learning, as this information is more likely to be unconscious (Selinger 1983). Even if the processing is not unconcious, it has been considered either as too complex to capture in protocols (Dobrin 1986), or as putting too great a burden on the learner's memory for them to report mental processing with any accuracy. Thus, researchers who use such measures either have to somehow raise the level of concious awareness of processing or make do with insights regarding those

processes to which respondents have concious access. The use of such measures may also require of respondents that they unravel some of the complexity inherent in a given set of cognitive processes and/or improve their recall skills.

In addition, there exists the possibility that if the information is not directly accessible (i.e., the tasks involved are largely automatic), probes may force the subject to produce a verbal response that is not closely related to the actual thought processes (Ericsson & Simon 1980). It has also been pointed out that verbal reports may be too dependent on retrospection--in that it can take 20 minutes to report on 1 1/2 seconds of mental processing (Boring 1953). Hence, what may have begun as an introspective account quickly turns into a retrospective one.

Critics likewise refer to the tendency to repress data--to supply socially acceptable data (Bakan 1954). Thus, protocols may be systematically contaminated by an indulgence in shared assumptions (Dobrin 1986). In fact, protocols have been depicted as an edited replay of the respondents' perception, an invention of the respondents' folk psychology--i.e., a folk psychological account agains the vackdrop of the given culture (Lyons 1986). Not only might the cultural background or the respondent play a role, but also the background knowledge or schemata that the respondent has about the performance of such verbal report tasks (Cavalcanti 1984).

Furthermore, verbal report methods have been criticized for their potential

intrusive effect. For example, in reading research, attention is drawn to the possibility that immediate retrospection may distort the process of reading if the readers read more closely than normal, read sentence by sentence, or concentrate on the additional cognitive and metacognitive task (Mann 1982). Not only is there the possibility that the verbal report task may cause reactive effects, and thus produce data no longer reflecting the processes intended to be investigated; there is also the possibility that the results will vary according to the type of instructions given, the characteristics of the participating subjects (some more informative than others), the types of material used in collecting protocols, and the nature of the data analysis (Olso, Duffy & Mack 1984).

For example, the respondents may differ with respect to their verbal skills. Some may be more adept than others at providing the appropriate amount of verbal report data, at the appropriate level of specificity. Also, respondents may use different terms to describe similar processes or the same terms for different processes. A way of getting around this problem would be to train the respondents in the terms to use in their responses. However, such a form of intervention may distort the data in cases where respondents are meant to supply their own labels for their cognitive processes. In addition, differences may exist between spoken and written verbal report so that studies which combine both sources of data may ultimately find the two types of data to be incompatible (Afflerbach & Johnston 1984).

Finally, there is the potential problem that coud arise when respondents do a task in a target language and report on it in their first or another language. The problem is that the respondents are likely to be recoding the information, which may in itself cause information to get lost due to limits of memory capacity or may lead to inaccuracy at translation of thoughts. The reporting (especially in on-line, self-revelation) may alter the original thought processes more than when no recoding takes place (Faerch & Kasper 1987:19).

The critics would suggest that these numerous problems with verbal report measures seriously limit the generalization of the findings and might even preclude their use. However, proponents of verbal report would argue that cognizance of these problems in planning the research design may help to avoid some of them and that others will simply prevail, just as problems are inherent in the use of other research measures as well.

Perhaps the major purpose for using verbal report protocols is to reveal in detail what information is attended to while performing tasks--information that is otherwise lost to the investigator (Ericsson & Simon 1984; Ericsson 1988). Whereas the neurological origin of cognitive processes may not be available for inspection, the cognitive events themselves are available through verbal report (Steinberg 1986:699). It is suggested that language learners underestimate the extent of conscious (or potentially conscious) processing because they are not attending to it. Futhermore, the

directness of introspection gives it a character not found in any other investigation of psychological phenomena (Bakan 1954).

Whereas the reliability of mentalistic measures has been questioned in comparison with behavioristic measures, research has demonstrated that verbal reports, elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they were obtained, are, in fact, a valuable and a thoroughly reliable source of information about cognitive processes (Ericsson & Simon 1980). In a number of settings, for example, subjects' reports of their hypotheses and strategies have proved to be highly correlated with their subsequent behavior--and are often the most accurate predictors available (Lieberman 1979).

As noted at the outset of the paper, verbal reports have been used as a source of data for understanding the learning and using of language in numerous ways. With respect to second-language learning, the uses of verbal report have been admittedly limited. Immediate retrospective verbal report has, for example, helped to describe strategies in learning vocabulary by association (Cohen & Aphek 1981, Cohen 1990:134-140). Such strategy data provide at least partial information regarding vocabulary learning processes, regardless of whether the learner subsequently produces a correct retrieval of the vocabulary item. With respect to language using, the research literature is more extensive. For example, the thik-aloud method has broadened the scope of what is described in text processing by

providing insights as to the use of prior knowledge in text comprehension and as to the monitoring of this and ogher comprehension processes (Waern 1988). Furthermore, helpful information about the writing process has been derived from protocol analysis without having to account for every mental process (Smagorinsky 1989).

Finally, it needs to be pointeds out that verbal report is not seen as a replacement for other means of research but rather as a complement to them, as all research measures have their potential strengths and weaknesses.

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