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Can Second-Graders be taught Listening Strategies?

Piri Leeck
Reasercher & TEFL Instructor
University of Siegen
Germany

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Piri Leeck
Reasercher & TEFL Instructor
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Abstract

Strategies are said to be one of the identifying marks of successful language learners, the more successful ones using a wider variety and applying them with greater consistency. On the other hand, age has been made out as one determining factor of how well certain strategies can be used. In my research on how portfolio work influences listening comprehension of very young learners I also paid attention to strategies. I wanted to know which strategies students in grade 2 and 3 are aware of, and which ones they use. Even more important to me was the question whether this use could be trained through reflection phases as part of portfolio work. This question arose because English has become a mandatory subject at elementary level, in some states even from grade 1 onward. Moving the start of teaching a foreign language forward does not mean that teaching styles of former days can be implemented with the same ease in earlier grades. Rather, some child-adequate methods have to be found. In this regard, teaching in Germany has gone to some extremes just to avoid teaching elementary students like secondary beginners. This has led some to highlight the playful character, while condemning any vestige of what could be named 'academic learning'. It is only of late that some more demanding methods and aspects have slowly found their way back into beginners' lessons. In this regard young learners also have often been underestimated at what they are able to do, which is why first writing was left out (almost) entirely, grammar was un-thought of, and reflection was unthinkable. Some even avoided grades and tests. While tests, grades and writing now have their 'curriculum-sanctioned' place in English, grammar and strategy-training do not share that same acceptance-level - yet. In my study report I would like to highlight some promising results from the reflection phases and class-observations in connection with the questions raised above.

Keywords:

Introduction

Using strategies is said to be one of the identifying marks of successful language learners, the more successful learners using a wider variety and applying them with greater consistency. On the other hand, age has been made out as one determining factor of how well certain strategies can be used. In my research on how portfolio work influences listening comprehension of very young learners I also paid attention to strategies. I wanted to know which strategies students in grade 2 and 3 are aware of, and which ones they use. Even more important to me was the question whether this use could be trained through reflection phases as part of portfolio work. This question arose because English has become a mandatory subject at elementary level, in some states even from grade 1 onward. Moving the start of teaching a foreign language forward does not mean that teaching styles of former days can be implemented with the same ease in earlier grades. Rather, some child-adequate methods have to be found. In this regard, teaching in Germany has gone to some extremes just to avoid teaching elementary students like secondary beginners. This has led some to highlight the playful character, while condemning any vestige of what could be named 'academic learning'. It is only of late that some more demanding methods and aspects have slowly found their way back into beginners' lessons. In this regard young learners have also often been under-estimated at what they are able to do, which is why first writing was left out (almost) entirely, grammar was un-thought of, and reflection on language was unthinkable. Some teachers even avoided grades and tests. While tests, grades and writing now have their 'curriculum-sanctioned' place in English language teaching, grammar and strategy-training do not share that same acceptance-level - yet. In my study report I would like to highlight some promising results from the class-observations of three elementary schools in North-Rhine Westphalia in connection with the questions raised above.

When researching listening comprehension in a mixed grades class (grades three and four), I found that some students claimed they did not understand English, yet many of those who said so understood quite as much as their fellow students. Obviously they were not aware of their accomplishments or they had set themselves goals too high to reach at that early level. Different researchers mentioned similar observations (see Joiner, 1986; Oxford, 1993, Kolb, 2007), though the opposite has been reported as well. It could be assumed that the underlying reason for this negative view of one's capabilities lies in the nature of listening comprehension itself, its being a receptive skill and therefore invisible (see Rampillon 1985, 69). Learners thus have no product to look at (and be proud of) at a later point in time, or to bring home to show the parents. Often, listening is merely a means to an end, as in understanding a task, but not yet the completion of a task. For example, if the teacher says "Take out your Activity book, open to page 14, and write the jumbled sentences in the correct order" the student might not be able to write these sentences correctly, yet he might have understood the instructions perfectly well. If such a student would not see that he can already understand

many words and sentences in the new language, his motivation might soon wane.

My next research was thus focused on how students could become more aware of their accomplishments in listening comprehension. The idea behind it was to raise the students' motivation, since motivation seems to play one of the most significant roles in learning another language successfully (see Skehan, 1998, 38; Böttger, 2005, 29; Harmer, 2007, 98; Elsner, 2010, 23). In this regard, working with a portfolio, where students focus on accomplishments, i.e. on what they *can do*, and on each skill separately and repeatedly, seemed the best choice. Another positive side-effect would be that one of the portfolio's main function, documentation (see MSW, 2009, 3; see further Winter, 2002, 180) can counteract the *"ephemeral nature"* (Gómez Martínez, 2009, 30) of listening. Additionally, I wanted to see if a focus on listening comprehension would also improve that very skill. Working with a portfolio in a foreign language class includes more than self-evaluation twice a year. Kolb (2007, 21) could show in her study that it was the reflection phases that made the portfolio-work work.

In this study report I would like to focus on that second part, on the reflection phases. These were mainly used to find out how listening comprehension works, how it can be improved, what teacher and students need to do, and what has helped them most. This is of interest, because it leads to topics such as strategies and language learning awareness – topics that are still mostly reserved for older learners. And yet, if asked what makes good language learners succeed at learning a foreign language, many would agree that apart from motivation strategy-use plays a vital role. Some researchers suggest that *"if we can discover what the good language learner does, we can teach those strategies to poorer learner"* (Gass/ Selinker, ²2001, 366). This implies that if a teacher only knows what strategies their good students use they can teach all their students to use them and succeed. Unfortunately, according to a large-scale study conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, shortly after English was introduced as mandatory at elementary school (grades 3 and 4), it was found that strategies are not taught sufficiently and too little time is spent on reflection phases (see Elsner, 2010, 9). The question might come up how strategy-use can be taught at all, especially at such an early age, and when teaching a foreign language should focus on its holistic and playful character.

On the other hand, as Gass and Selinker point out, *"[g]ood learners may do certain things because they have the prerequisite abilities to do so. Even if poor language learners tried to do these things, they may not be able to and might have to improve their second language skills before they could use these strategies"* (Gass/ Selinker, ²2001, 368). This gives rise to another question: Is time spent on teaching strategies really spent that well? Before entering this discussion, it needs to be clear what strategies are and what types of strategies second-graders should (or should not) be taught.

Generally speaking, strategies are *"plan[s] designed for a particular purpose"* (ALD, ²1995, 5ᵗʰ ed. "strategy"). In the context of learning a

language this purpose is broadly defined as *"[d]evelopment of communicative competence"* (Oxford, 1990, 8; see also the curricular goals in MSW, 2008, 5; MSW, 2011, 8). In this context, then, strategies are defined as *"specific actions, steps or techniques [...] used by students to enhance their own learning"* (Oxford/ Ehrmann, 1988, 6f.). As will become clear from the further discussion, though, the focus should not solely rest on what the language learner himself does, especially when talking about younger students. Brown thus defines strategies as the *"moment-by-moment techniques that we employ to solve "problems" posed by second language input and output"* (Brown, 2007, 132). While Brown likely focused on language output by the learner, it is equally logical that a teacher who works with beginners has likewise "problems" in phrasing output that is authentic, yet understandable to his learners. This is why Pinter (2006) focuses on what the teacher should do when talking about strategies. It should also be mentioned that strategies are far more than techniques to solve problems; they *"are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information"* (Brown, 2007, 119). Though focusing on different aspects, all the foregoing definitions have one thing in common: they all seem to point to a conscious use of strategies. This view is supported by some, who define as strategies only *"those processes which are consciously selected by the learner"* (Cohen, 1998, 4). When talking about children as foreign language learners, the aspect of consciousness is called into question, though. Tings (2007, 4) could observe that students at elementary school level did indeed use strategies but, when asked about them, were either only slightly or not aware of them at all. Similarly Kirsch (2009, 172) notes that in literature there is by no means such agreement on the degree of consciousness. Obviously it is this discrepancy between planning something to improve learning, listening, memory, etc. and the younger learners' seeming inability to notice, let alone describe what they are doing that has led to the conclusion that young learners might not learn very strategically.

Another reason might be that some types, like learning strategies (see Vanderplank, 2008, 718f.), especially memory strategies, require the development of other skills, e.g. meta-memory (see Holland Joyner/ Kurtz-Costes, 1997, 275, 282ff.), which takes time to develop (see ibid. 286f.). And while it is true that elementary school students have already learned at least one language (their native tongue) and thus possess *"well-developed strategies"* (Tough, 1991, 222), there is by no means agreement on whether these are available to such young learners when having to learn a new language at school (see ibid. 23 in favor; Wolff, 2003, 15; Hermes, 1998, 221 against). It seems plausible, though, to assume that *"the ability to use language learning strategies **efficiently** do[es] not happen automatically"* (Kirsch, 2009, 171, my highlights). Yet this does not altogether rule out training very young students in strategy-use. As to raising awareness about strategies, Kolb (2007, 309) found children were sorely under-estimated in this regard. She observed that students could differentiate between more and less effective strategies and use more effective ones (see ibid. 64). Goh and Taib (2006, 222; similar Chamot, 2004,

25) found that the weaker students even profited most. Generally it was found that strategy-instruction improves the students' learning (see Oxford, 1990, 22), knowledge and repertoire of strategies (see Chesterfield/ Chesterfield, 1985 in Kirsch, 2009, 178f.), and abstract thinking (see Cameron, 2003, 108) and leads to more learner autonomy (see Flowerdew/ Miller, ²2006, 16). While these are all promising results, it was also observed that young children have more difficulties with certain strategies than older children, and that some strategies are less effective for younger ones, and thus often not used spontaneously by them (see Guttentag, 1997, 262ff.). It is important, then to teach younger students only such strategies as would (likely) be used by them (see Brown, 2007, 131f.; Gass/ Selinker, ²2001, 368). This was all the more important for my research project, as I intended to work with even younger students than many of those of the aforementioned studies.

In my research the focus was solely on listening strategies, mostly taken out of research projects with or models for younger learners. The following table served as research-basis and combines categories for strategies from several models.[1]

Table. Listening Strategies for Elementary School

Listening	Metacognitive	Cognitive	Socioaffective
For students	° Planning (e.g. paying attention to teacher/ text, ignoring distractions) ° Watch/ direct attention (e.g. keep up interest) ° Evaluate (e.g. check whether what was understood is logical; use a portfolio)	° Strategies for deducing meaning (e.g. paying attention to stress/ emotional contour/ gestures/ facial expressions; looking for key words/ words sounding similar to L1; relate to own experiences, to known words/ parts of words; guessing; visualizing) ° memory- and classification strategies (e.g. grouping together; mental images) ° Selective listening (intonation/ phonemes/ morphemes/ word recognition) ° Global comprehension (understanding plot/ topic)	° Encourage oneself ° talk about positive/ negative feelings/ experiences ° ask for clarification
For teachers	° Talking about/ practicing strategies with students ° Introducing/ working with portfolio	° Giving specialized listening tasks ° Using gestures/ mime/ prosody/ visual clues	° Formulating self-evaluation sheets positive ° Lauding students frequently

(see Leeck, 2014, 72)

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[1] For a discussion of these differing models see Leeck (2014, 62ff.).

The table above shows that many strategies that a student can use to support listening comprehension can be boosted by what the teacher does. This gives rise to the question of whether it is enough for the teacher to support strategy-use implicitly by e.g. using gestures, stressing certain words, pointing to objects, commending students for their performance, etc. How strategies should be trained, especially with young learners, *"is quite a contentious area"* (Field, 2008, 304). The views range from disapproving any overt focus (see Holden, 2002, 18; further Bleyhl, 2005, 4; Tough, 1991, 223, 225) to advocating exactly such: *"Strategy training needs to be* direct, overt, *and* explicit. *Teachers must make learners aware of the purpose and potential of learning strategies. Pupils are unlikely to develop strategies, if they do not understand how the teaching activities contribute to their learning"* (Kirsch, 2009, 183). Teubner (2006, 64f.) points out that especially weaker students are disadvantaged when strategies are not talked about. One possibility to talk about strategies is to use refection phases, where weaker students can learn from others (see Rau, 2011, 38) which strategies they have recognized themselves (see Tings, 2007, 4).

In my research there were recurring reflection phases in combination with portfolio-use on how well the students did in listening comprehension, as well as on strategy-use (see Council of Europe, 2007). The study was conducted at three different schools, one serving as pilot study, and one as main contributor, where I accompanied all second grades up to third grade. At every school, all classes were taught by the same teacher, thus ensuring that deviations in results would not be due to different topics, time spent on these topics, and a different teaching style. At each school there was one class where portfolio-work was introduced, while the other(s) served as control-group. The sampling of data consisted of portfolio-pages, observations, listening comprehension tests and interviews over a period of one and a half years.

To begin with, hardly any student in any of the groups could name any listening strategy. While reflection-phases were only planned for the treatment-group, the teacher of one school accidentally initiated one in the control-group some nine months into the study. This classroom-discussion revealed that even at a later point in time students without reflection phases were hard pressed to name any strategy. By contrast, regular portfolio-work resulted in the treatment-groups' rising awareness of listening strategies, even to a point where they could evaluate their usefulness.

The students of the treatment-group became aware of the following strategies:

(It helps to understand…)
- If I hear something several times/ if the teacher repeats it.
- If I know the topic
- If I repeat it
- If it is drawn on the blackboard/ pictures/ flashcards
- If the teacher mimics/ mimes it

- If I already know the word
- If everyone is quiet
- If the students look at the teacher's mouth
- If I make movements
- If I check the dictionary
- If I pay attention
- If I draw it

(see Leeck, 2014, 171)

Of these, the students found the following strategies most useful:

- If the teacher makes signs/ gestures
- If the teacher shows it[1]
- Pictures
- If words are known/ repeated

(see ibid., 172)

It is interesting to note that at the end of the research-period all but three (very weak) students found the reflection-phases to have helped them in their listening comprehension. As shown above, after one and a half years they became aware of many strategies and could choose which ones helped them best. If compared to the box above, it becomes obvious, though, that the majority belong to the cognitive/ student-oriented strategies-category. Very few metacognitive any no socioaffective strategies are mentioned (though observation showed that they were used by some). It can be assumed that the usefulness of what Oxford (1990) terms *indirect strategies* was not obvious to the students due to a lack of immediate impact.

In connection with the actual performance in listening comprehension, it could be observed that the treatment-groups improved, especially the girls and those students who had had to learn German already (among them, no distinction between the sexes could be made out). These were also mainly the students that showed awareness of strategies in classroom discussions. It could be concluded, then, that very young learners, when guided by portfolio-work including reflection phases, cannot only be trained to notice and evaluate listening strategies, but that they actually benefit from using them, improving their listening comprehension. It is hoped, therefore, that despite the additional time and work that a teacher unquestionably has to invest, portfolio-work will find a wider acceptance in elementary English lessons.

The following is supplementary material taken from the classroom observations of the study. Space will not permit to show the students'

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[1] This category is not clearly pertaining to either the foregoing or the following; some students might mean one, while others might mean the other; thus I kept it as a separate category.

performance in all their depth. The three examples should merely highlight some of the points mentioned above.[1]

The first example is taken from the main-study, albeit not the main contributing school, and shows how students reflect on their actual strategy-use:

> Teacher: "You can listen to music." Was könnte mir helfen? (What could be of help?)
> Tar.: Music? Weil sich das so ähnlich wie im deutschen Musik anhört. (Because it sounds similar to German ‚Musik').
> Sel.: Weil, „listen to music" kann „listen" ja „hören" heißen. (Because, 'listen to music', 'listen' could mean 'hear/ listen'.)
> Teacher: Yes. Aber woher könntet ihr das wissen? (But how would you know?)
> Sa.: Weil, bei PLAYWAY [name of course-book], da haben Sie so 'ne CD, und da sagen die immer "listen". (Because in PLAYWAY, there you've got a CD, and there they always say 'listen'.)
> (see Leeck, 2014, 211)

When asked about listening strategies, the students of one of the treatment-groups, which had by this time worked with a portfolio and done several reflection phases, could not only solve the listening task (the sentence as well as the words 'music' and 'listen' had not been introduced in any unit yet), but could name several useful strategies that had helped them to come to the correct understanding. Tar. refers to a similar word in German (not his L1), Sel. uses intelligent guessing (what to do with music), and Sa. uses former experiences (in their course-book the students often have to solve listen-and-tick, listen-and-point, listen-and-circle, and similar tasks).

The second example was taken from the main contributing school a few months into the study. It likewise shows how students use certain strategies, though the reflection on it is rather impromptu:

> Teacher: you've got ten minutes. You've got ten minutes (shows her ten fingers). And in these ten minutes you can start to color these pictures (shows worksheet). But please, have a look to the right colors (points to the picture on the blackboard)… Habt ihr das verstanden? (Did you understand that?)
> No.: Ich hab das doch gar nicht verstanden. (But I didn't get it.)
> Ta.: Also, du hast gesagt, dass wir das in der richtigen Farbe ausmalen sollen. (Well, you said that we should color that with the right colors.)

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[1] The conversations were noted down as they took place, though no attention was given to the actual pronunciation (as the focus was on listening comprehension, not on the students' ability to speak). Since they are partly English, partly German, the German parts have been translated. For reasons of anonymity the names of the students have been abbreviated.

Teacher: Warum hast du das den verstanden? (So why did you understand that?)
Ta.: Weil, du hast das ja auch gezeigt. (Because, you also showed it.)
(see ibid. 208)

The teacher in this class relied much on repetition, gestures and pointing to things, which, as hinted at above, supports the use of strategies for deducing meaning implicitly. At this point in time reflections had only been sporadic, so very few students seemed to know how to use listening strategies, like intelligent guessing, deducing meaning from gestures or focusing on specific words/ global understanding. Thus even very good students, like No., feel they do not understand what the teacher requires of her students. Ta., on the other hand, already knows how to employ certain strategies. Unlike some of the children observed by Tings (2007, 4), Ta. is aware of the strategy that has helped her to come to the right conclusion. It is in reflections phases that students like her can help other children who are less aware of how to improve listening comprehension. Without talking about such strategy-use, many students would likely try to understand everything word by word, or give up trying. Either way would not help them in listening, nor would it contribute to their motivation to learn another language.

The final example is taken from the control group of the main contributing school, which, as mentioned above, was by mistake, yet insightful:

Teacher: Was meint ihr denn, wie das noch besser funktionieren könnte? (What do you think, how could this [listening comprehension] function even better?)
Students look at her and each other questioningly, without any idea.
Teacher: In der [3a] hab ich gesagt "Schaut mich an!" Warum wohl? (In the other class I said "Look at me." Why?)
Hi.: Weil, du machst das ja vor… oder? (Because, well, you show it… right?)
Ni.: Und weil, dann weißt du ja, dass wir dir zuhören. (And because, then you know that we're listening.)
(see Leeck, 2014, 212f.)

After more than nine month with a heightened focus on listening (there were some listening tests implemented as well), but without any reflection phases so far, the students of one of the control-groups were more than hard pressed to think of any strategies. After the teacher gave a hint, initially only one student could name a plausible strategy, but it has to be mentioned that Hi. was one of the students whose mother tongue is not German, and who thus had already experience in learning another language. Secondly, even he is not sure that what he said really helps, as can be seen by his rather doubtful question at the end. The all-over unsure tone could not be transcribed, but it contributed to the estimation that the student was not completely sure of the usefulness of what he had just proposed. Ni. mentions a metacognitive strategy, which is

certainly helpful as well, though again, this might not be a sign that the student is aware of how paying attention can support listening comprehension, since the focus is more on the teacher and desired behavior in class. This example shows how students in general need guidance to become aware of and use listening strategies. The other examples show how even very young learners can already benefit from such reflection phases, and is an invitation to all elementary school teachers to challenge their students to reflect and to use listening strategies.

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