

ANOTHER LEARNING STRATEGY?

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ABSTRACT

Second language learners create their own glosses while working with written texts. The paper provides some arguments for recognizing this particular learner activity as a vocabulary learning strategy. The strategy, labelled here *learner glossing*, is not distinguished in the strategy literature. Some results of initial research are also presented and discussed.

1. Introduction

Interest in foreign language learning issues has resulted in various accounts of the learning process. This is due to the current interest in the learner's active involvement in the very process. With the dawn of the communicative approach to language teaching two important facts were recognized, namely: (i) the learner himself establishes his learning goals (so his needs should be analysed) and (ii) the learner himself decides about his preferred procedures for accomplishing the learning tasks (so his learning autonomy should be respected and supported). Consequently, this has led to the acknowledgement of the assumption that it is the learner that is ultimately responsible for his/her learning success or failure. Thus the relevant research oriented itself towards finding out why some learners are actually better than others. Among the various issues studied in connection with the language learning process is the question of strategies that learners employ to facilitate the learning burden. Today learner strategies are viewed as the major determinants of the process.

The literature on strategies has now grown to an impressive bulk. Research has produced evidence that second language (L2) learners employ certain learning strategies naturally and intuitively. Consequently, their potential for strategy use should be exploited to maximize teaching and enhance learning. This leads

to the obvious conclusion that learners should be trained and encouraged to use those strategies that they have not discovered for themselves.

Actually, it is not easy to define language learning strategies. A considerable number of their definitions and classifications can be found in related literature; the most representative of them are such as, for example, “[attempts] to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language – to incorporate these into one’s interlanguage competence” (Tarone 1983: 67), “[they] contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly” (Rubin 1987: 22), “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990: 1), “specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills” (Oxford 1993: 18), and “the behaviours or actions that learners engage in, in order to learn or use the L2” (Ellis 1994: 712). According to Oxford (1990), strategies are indispensable in learning as they help learners internalize, store, retrieve, or use the new language. Moreover, she maintains that strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability.

What is noticeable about these definitions is their emphasis on the learning processes and their characteristics. Disregarding certain differences between definitions, it appears, nevertheless, that they share a number of views on what is characteristic of learner strategies. Thus, the definitions point out that strategies:

- are actually used (usually consciously) by learners themselves (i.e. are learner generated),
- make language learning lighter and promote the development of language competence,
- can be both observable (learners’ actions) and hidden (mental processes or thoughts),
- involve learners’ memory and the information they receive.

Apart from these characteristics some other aspects of learner strategies are also considered important. However, they are not accepted commonly and researchers differ in assigning their opinions; e.g., Wenden and Rubin (1987) believe that the strategies which particular learners use are manifestations of their desire to control the learning process and of their autonomy in it. The most comprehensive list of these characteristics to date has been provided by Oxford (1990) in whose view language learning strategies:

- refer to approaches and actions used by the learner to learn L2,
- are problem-oriented (a given strategy is used to solve a particular learning difficulty),

- are, in general, used consciously and identified by learners,
- involve both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour,
- can be used in L1 and L2,
- are either behavioural or mental,
- contribute to learning (directly or indirectly),
- vary in use depending on the task being performed and on individual learner preferences.

Research on language learning strategies provides substantial evidence to show that the use of appropriate strategies secures success even in spite of unfavourable learning conditions or situations, such as poor input and little opportunity for language use or bad materials and teachers (cf. Ellis 1994). Achievement is possible thanks to the use of appropriate learning strategies chosen by the smart learner to challenge the learning adversities. Therefore it seems appropriate to emphasize that strategy use also involves the learner in critical thinking about his own learning problems. Critical thinking implies a mental activity that includes such processes as predicting, concluding, discovering, understanding, and evaluating. It follows that learners make plans, create opinions, find solutions. All in all, they achieve more autonomy in the process of learning a foreign language.

2. Learner glossing

As regards the divisions of strategies they are often presented in groups with relation to learning particular language skills or levels. Among them strategies associated with vocabulary learning are probably the most frequently used by L2 learners. Although lists of vocabulary learning strategies seem to be comprehensive, it seems, nevertheless, that one more should be included in them. The strategy referred to is called here *learner glossing*. This strategy is so very commonly used, especially by beginners, that its missing in the lists is puzzling indeed. The following part of this article provides arguments for including it into the group of vocabulary learning strategies.

The term *glossing* has traditionally been used to refer to providing written explanations of difficult words, phrases or expressions that appear in a text. This is done with the purpose of making the text comprehensible for the reader and/or easier to read. Glossing is frequently practised in designing texts for foreign language learners but can also be found in texts addressed to native language users if difficult or foreign terms appear in them. The idea to provide glosses in educational materials is based on the conviction that they can both encourage learners to read difficult texts and, simultaneously, to make their language learning burden lighter.

Glosses are most commonly placed in the margin (along the same line as the glossed word) or, less frequently, next to the glossed word or expression within the text. They can also appear in a footnote or, in the form of a glossary, at the end of the text. Irrespective of the position of the gloss, the glossed item may itself be additionally highlighted (bolded, italicised, underlined, etc.). A gloss is usually a synonym (or near-synonym) or a short definition. With regard to foreign language teaching, glossing is a pedagogical procedure that is often practised by authors or editors of teaching materials, particularly those designed or selected for learners on lower levels of proficiency, with the explicit purpose of helping learners to comprehend the text and to learn foreign vocabulary.¹

The major pedagogical value of glossing is seen in the fact that it draws learners' attention to new or difficult words/items and facilitates comprehension of authentic texts used in the classroom. Glossing also saves learners time: they do not need to look up the words in dictionaries. Moreover, it helps them to develop self-confidence and reading fluency.

However, in spite of some advantages and without denying that it can be a somewhat helpful and useful aid in language learning, glossing also has certain disadvantages. My scepticism about its learning value derives exactly from the conviction that it does not involve learners directly in a search for lexical information; in mere encountering glosses they actually obtain information mechanically without any cognitive or affective involvement on their part. Little learning can take place therefore as it does not comply with the basic psychological principle of effective learning – it is commonly accepted that learning is more effective when effort is invested in processing new information. Encountering glosses is, therefore, similar to making use of a dictionary, except that the latter requires, at least, the act of looking up an entry. Such effort is neither executed nor necessary in the case of traditional glossing where needed/required information is presented to the learner in a ready-made fashion. It follows from this that retention of new information encountered in the gloss is poor, in accordance with the adage “easy come, easy go”.

Notwithstanding, glossing can be of much greater learning value, provided it is a cognitive act performed by learners themselves; this condition is fulfilled when learners are actively involved in creating their own glosses to satisfy their individual learning needs. Teaching practice provides substantial evidence that learners will often write down any information that they may currently possess or gain about the new words immediately after they come across them in the text being studied. This activity is, actually, glossing and the information written down is, apparently, a gloss. As they themselves admit, learners create glosses to

¹ Some decades ago foreign language learners in Poland were aided in self-instruction with *The Mozaika* and *The Mala Mozaika*, specially edited periodicals that used glossing commonly as a rule.

improve their reading skills. They do it also to protect themselves against reading comprehension problems on subsequent returns to the text. Incidentally, they do it in order to learn new vocabulary as well. Whatever its purpose may be, it can reasonably be assumed that this kind of glossing, i.e. creating glosses by language learners themselves for themselves, can be regarded as one of a number of vocabulary learning strategies. I chose to call this strategy *learner glossing*.

My assumption that learner glossing *per se* is beneficial to vocabulary learning is attributed to several reasons. First of all, the self-initiated task of creating a gloss is a cognitive act that involves the learner emotionally – active participation in the learning process contributes to processing lexical information about the glossed item; hence better retention. Secondly, since glosses facilitate comprehension of the text being studied and increase reading comprehension fluency it follows that the perceived success in reading gives learners a sense of achievement and psychological comfort. This, in turn, develops their confidence in their cognitive potential and generates self-esteem. In consequence, all this strengthens their motivation for perseverance in efforts, promotes further reading, and positively affects language learning in general.

Research into the influence of glossing on learning foreign vocabulary has demonstrated that, on the whole, it has positive effects (Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus 1996; Watanabe 1997). However, it needs to be emphasized that research on glossing has so far been mainly concerned with traditional glossing, i.e. the conventional teaching device discussed above. On the other hand, learner glossing has not been investigated, neither has it been considered a separate vocabulary learning strategy. As such, it is not singled out in the various taxonomies found in the strategies literature. As a matter of fact, to take just one example, the classification proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 119-20) includes a cognitive strategy that they call *note taking* but their definition of it, namely: “[w]riting down key words or concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic, or numerical form while listening or reading” can hardly be regarded as relating to what I call learner glossing.²

Actually, other researchers also consider *note-taking* as a vocabulary learning strategy; e.g., McCarthy (1990: 127) contends that keeping some kind of written record of new words is both an important and efficient part of language learning for many students: writing a word down often helps students to memorize it, even if only with regard to its spelling:

² Admittedly, it is mentioned on one occasion: Schmitt (1997: 201) notes that “Ahmed (1989) described different types of learners and found that most took notes on vocabulary, or wrote notes in the margins of their books”. Schmitt does not explain, however, whether the notes were glosses.

Student notebooks offer a fascinating insight into the individual learning styles that may be present in groups and can alert the teacher to learning problems which might not otherwise be so clearly revealed.

Note that McCarthy refers to *some* students, not all, to *notebooks*, not texts, and to *note taking*, which is not learner glossing. The contention, assumed here, that learner glossing is, *de facto*, a vocabulary learning strategy is based on and follows from the current understanding of the concept of learning strategy as is reflected in its various definitions advanced by researchers. Elements of description of strategy emphasize, on the one hand, that a learning strategy is the learner's deliberate active involvement in the learning process and that it is an observable form of behaviour on the other. These claims correspond with the eight characteristics of the concept enumerated by Ellis (1994: 532-33). Therefore, if learners themselves create glosses for themselves in order to learn, then learner glossing has to be considered a learning strategy.

Since the use of learning strategies is certainly beneficial to language learning, it follows that learner glossing, as such, deserves closer attention in order to find what it is that learners do exactly while glossing so as to benefit from it and enhance vocabulary learning.

3. The study

3.1. The purpose of the study

The major purpose of this paper is an attempt to find:

- how common the practice of learner glossing is,
- whether the level of language proficiency determines the practice,
- which language, L1 or L2, learners choose for glossing,
- whether the choice is determined by proficiency level,
- what and which words learners gloss, and, finally
- where they place their glosses;

Additionally, an open question was included in the questionnaire to find

- why learners create glosses.

3.2. The design and procedure

The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire (see Appendix). It was administered to the subjects in Polish. They were explicitly instructed how to deal with it.

3.3. The subjects

263 Polish learners of English participated in the research. They represented three levels of proficiency (beginners, pre-intermediate, and advanced) and formed four age groups:

Group	Level	Age	F	M	
A primary school	beginners	12	28	22	50
B secondary school	beginners	16	30	18	48
C secondary school	pre-interm.	16	38	22	60
D university	advanced	21	82	23	105
Total			178	85	263

3.4. Findings (figures are in %)

a) Practice of learner glossing

A	96
B	92
C	93
D	66

b) Words glossed

	Only new	New & difficult	Only important
A	58	34	8
B	23	68	9
C	9	64	7
D	26	44	30

c) Language used for glossing

Group	L1	L2	L1 + L2
A	100	0	0
B	100	0	0
C	100	0	0
D	43	37	20

d) Frequency of glossing

	Always	Often	Rarely
A	46	46	8
B	23	59	18
C	71	22	7
D	10	54	36

e) Place

	Over	Margin	Elsewhere
A	52	42	6
B	86	9	5
C	82	14	4
D	58	42	0

4. Discussion and comments

Ad a) An overwhelming majority of learners (the mean calculated is 87%) practice making their own glosses. The figure is impressive, especially when lower level learners are considered (well over 90%). The significant difference between advanced and lower level students can be attributed to the fact that the advanced ones feel more secure about learning vocabulary (are more experienced in using other strategies). It needs to be emphasised that it is mostly males that declare they do not practice making glosses. Nevertheless, since the figures show that learner glossing is commonly practised, it follows that learner glossing deserves closer attention than it has so far received. Another reason for further research is the obvious fact that learners make glosses with the apparent aim of learning new and difficult L2 vocabulary. This is clearly evident in their comments provided in the questionnaire. [All answers contain remarks that can be summarised as: "it helps me to learn words".]

Ad b) The low numbers of glossing only important words suggest that lower-level learners have problems in deciding which words may be important and opt to gloss new and difficult words (what is difficult?). On the other hand, the data for group D seem to demonstrate that advanced learners are not only more flexible in their choices but also that they have developed a better grasp of the problem of vocabulary learning.

Ad c) The figures obtained in the survey speak for themselves and seem not to need any special comment. Lower level learners rely on L1 for the lack of experience in the use of L2. Advanced learners probably have discovered the more beneficial value of glossing in L2. The use of either language in learner glossing needs further investigation.

Ad d) Again, advanced learners create glosses less frequently than less advanced or beginners. This, actually, corresponds to the finding in point (1) that 34% of all learners do not practice making glosses at all while most of the others do. The "always" and "often" answers indicate that these learners' need to rely on ready-made information or to be "assisted" on successive readings of the text.

Ad e) Here, the survey confirmed the expectation (based on pedagogical experience) that learner glosses are usually placed either in the margin or directly above the glossed word. For the time being it seems difficult to offer an explanation for the preference. It can only be speculated that the decision on where to put the gloss may depend on the individual's sense of organization of material or data (as in mind-mapping) or his/her aesthetic needs. The prevalence of placing a gloss directly above the glossed word may be due to the wish of keeping new and given information close together in order not to lose track in comprehending the text. It may also depend on the learner's reading skill: some individuals perceive longer chunks (these put glosses in the margin) while others do not (these put glosses over the glossed word).

Learners' answers to the open question ("Why do you put glosses in a text?") clearly indicate that glossing is practiced for immediate, strictly utilitarian purposes on the one hand and to achieve better effects in language learning on the other. Here are some typical and representative answers: "It is easier to understand the text and remember meanings of new words"; "When I return to the text I needn't look up new words in a dictionary"; "It helps remember meaning and spelling"; "It is easier to learn new words when I see them in the context". Thus, the principal purpose of glossing turns out to be easier comprehension of a text when returning to it for whatever reason.

Adults probably remember their own school experience in learning a foreign language, particularly one like Latin: students would often make glosses in their L1. This experience shows that the practice is not only very common among L2 learners but also applied intuitively.

Another finding worth mentioning was that definitely more females than males create glosses. This is by no means revealing but worth mentioning as it agrees with the results obtained by other researchers. In particular, Graham

(1997) found in her research that females highly surpass males in the number of learning strategies they use.

5. Conclusions

It is hoped that this and further research on learner glossing can be supportive in learning and teaching vocabulary. The teacher can encourage or discourage particular groups/types of learner in the practice of learner glossing. However, a number of questions remain to be investigated, e.g.:

- does placing the gloss affect learning effects?
- which language used by the learner for glossing, L1 or L2, is more effective for vocabulary learning?

These questions and probably many others need further attention. Answers to them may have some pedagogical value – teachers could then train learners in creating glosses and give their best advice that will be relevant to vocabulary learning.

6. Postscript

A few words of caution about the learning value of learner glossing seem necessary, however. Creating glosses in L1 does not involve much mental effort – this is due, most unfortunately, to human nature: in attempts to be economical we take short cuts and act mechanically. On subsequent reading the text that is glossed in L1 the reader's (i.e. learner's) attention focuses on the native gloss and the mind is thus deprived of the opportunity to work on the foreign equivalent. The learner, in consequence, makes little, if any, cognitive (mental) investment to retain new L2 words and store them in his memory.

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