Strategies and the Language Learner
Issues in Language Testing

Claudia D'Este

Abstract   The active role of the learner in the language learning process has been thoroughly acknowledged in the past fifty years. The discussion on the centrality of the learner in the acquisition of a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) is essentially based on the postulate that the characteristics of the learner affect the way in which the second or foreign language is acquired and that successful learners appear to have common personal features. Research on the language learner has demonstrated that every person learning a language has his or her own peculiar features and considerable personal baggage which must be taken into account throughout the learning process (characteristics such as age, gender and aptitude, and factors such as motivation, styles and strategies). This paper will first focus on the development of research on the language learner and on the main issues concerning language learner's aptitude, motivation, and, in particular, on learner strategies. The second part will concentrate on language learner strategies involved in language testing situations and on how the use of these strategies affects the test, its quality and, namely, its validity.

1   Introduction

The active role of the learner in the language learning process has been thoroughly acknowledged in the past fifty years. The discussion on the centrality of the learner in the acquisition of a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) is essentially based on the postulate that the characteristics of the learner affect the way in which the second or foreign language is acquired and that successful learners appear to have common personal features. Research on the language learner has demonstrated that every person learning a language is not «an empty vessel that will need to be filled by the wise words of the teacher» (Cohen, Dörnyei 2002, p. 170). Learners have their own peculiar features and «considerable personal baggage» (p. 170) which must be taken into account throughout the learning process. Individual differences in foreign and second language learning can be identified in characteristics such as age, gender and aptitude, and in factors such as motivation, styles

and strategies. This paper will first focus on the development of research on the language learner and on the main issues concerning language learner's aptitude, motivation, and, in particular, on learner strategies. Age, styles and gender will not be considered as research on these characteristics also involves a deep analysis of sociological and psychological issues which are beyond the aim of this paper. The second part will concentrate on language learner strategies involved in language testing situations and on how the use of these strategies affects the test, its quality and, namely, its validity.

2 The good language learner: aptitude, motivation and strategies

2.1 Language learning aptitude and motivation

The first important research concerning the language learner dates back to the middle of last century and investigates the concept of 'aptitude' in second language acquisition (SLA). In 1959, the American psychologist Carroll developed the first *Modern Language Aptitude Test* (MLAT), where the term 'language learning aptitude' refers to the prediction of how well, relative to other individuals, an individual can learn a foreign language in a given amount of time and under given conditions. The test was designed as part of a five-year research study at Harvard University between 1953 and 1958, but it was initially conceived to help the US Army select people who would easily learn foreign languages. The test is a combination of five tests used to predict foreign language learning success in different contexts. In the article «The prediction of success in intensive foreign language training», Carroll (1962) states that one of the most important conclusion of his research is that 'language learning aptitude' is not an «undivided ability», but rather the composition of at least four relatively independent «specialized» abilities: **phonetic coding ability** (ability to identify, form and retain association between distinct sounds), **grammatical sensitivity** (ability to be aware of the grammatical functions of words), **rote learning ability** (ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings) and **inductive language learning ability** (ability to infer the rules that govern the use of language).

Another interesting contribution on 'language learning aptitude' was given more recently by Skehan (1989), who defines it by means of three components: **auditory ability**, which corresponds to Carroll's **phonetic coding ability**; **linguistic ability**, which draws together Carroll's **grammatical sensitivity** and **inductive language learning ability**; and **memory**, which the author associates not only to acquisition of new information but also with retrieval of «elements stored» (Skehan 1989). In both studies, 'language aptitude' is assumed to be relatively stable during an individual's lifetime, and this brings to light the importance of a variable but crucial factor in language learning: motivation. In fact, Carroll and Skehan's re-
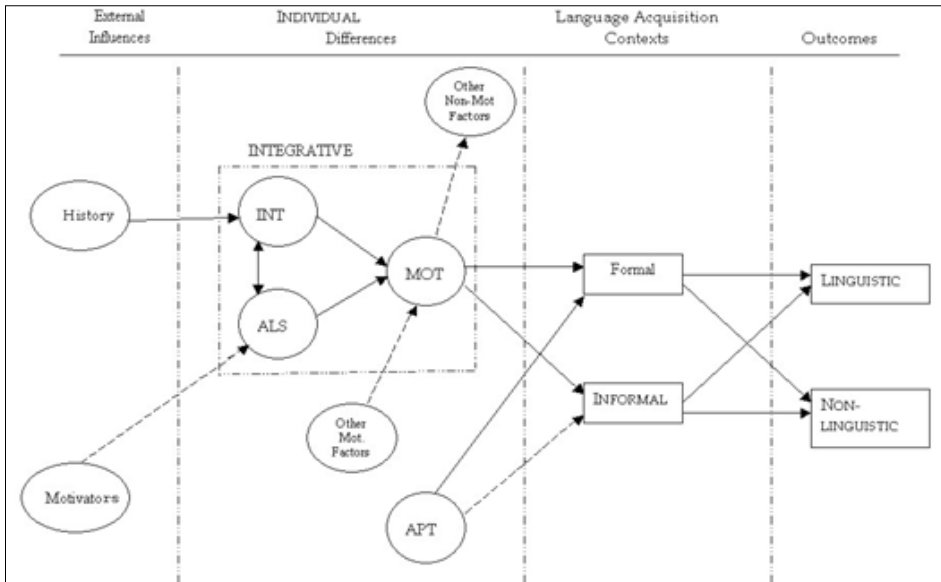
Figure 1. Revised Socio-Educational Model (adapted from Gardner 2001).

search does not include any measure of motivation.

Motivation has been recognized as one of the key learner characteristics and it represents a powerful factor since several studies have proved that the performance of students with low motivation may be poor in a language course test despite a high score on an aptitude test like the MLAT.

The social psychologists Gardner and Lambert were the first to attempt to interrelate language attitude with the learner's disposition towards the L2 speaking community and his or her desire to learn the L2. They claim L2 motivation contains a social dimension as any language is also a mirror representing the culture and society of the people who speak that language. In 1982, Gardner and Lambert developed a comprehensive theory of L2 motivation in which they defined motivation through a general learning model, the so-called 'Socio-educational Model'.

In the 'Socio-educational Model', they tried to connect four features of Second Language Acquisition: the **social and cultural milieu, individual learner differences**, **the setting** or **context**. According to Gardner and Lambert, the most influential factor is represented by the four individual differences: **intelligence**, **language aptitude**, **motivation** and **situational anxiety**.

In 2001, Gardner presented a revised version of this model (exemplified in Figure 1) where the category of **external influences** replaces that of

the *social milieu* by introducing the concept of **motivators** intended as all the elements stimulating motivation. Under the category of **individual differences** he places three variables: **integrativeness** and **attitudes toward the learning situation** and **motivation**. The first two variables have a direct effect on the third. **Integrativeness** reflects a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community while the variable, **attitudes toward the learning situation**, involves attitudes toward any aspect of the situation in which the language is learned. Finally, the variable **motivation** refers to the 'driving force' in any situation and it requires three elements. The motivated individual: expends effort to learn the language, wants to achieve the goal and will enjoy the task of learning the language. According to Gardner «in the socio-educational model, all three elements, effort, desire, and positive affect, are seen as necessary to distinguish between individuals who are more motivated and those who are less motivated» (Gardner 2001, pp. 7-8).

2.2 Learner strategies and the good language learner

The greater emphasis in research on the role of the learner in the learning process led also to the study and analysis of learner strategies. Between 1970 and 1990, the interest in learner strategy research came out of a communicative perspective on language teaching methods which emphasized learner involvement in the learning process. The attempt was to determine – by looking at individuals who had been successful at learning several languages – what characteristics they had and what procedures they followed. The practical goal of the investigation was based on the assumption that the strategies used by 'the good language learner' could be identified and made accessible to poorer language learners as a way to improve their learning.

An important contribution to the definition of the role of the learner is a study conducted by Rubin (1975) in order to provide a definition of 'the good language learner'. In her work, Rubin suggests that, as aptitude is the variable less subject to manipulation, it is important «to isolate what the good learner does», what strategies he uses and «impart his knowledge to less successful learners» (pp. 41-42). In Rubin's opinion, strategies are «the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge» (p. 43). In conclusion, she claims that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning. Rubin, who pioneered the field of strate-

gies, proposes a distinction between strategies contributing directly and indirectly to learning.

In a more recent work, Rubin and Wenden (1987) identifies three types of those strategies: **learning strategies**, **communication strategies** and **social strategies**. As all these strategies are important in the development of the language system constructed by the learner, Rubin subdivides **learning strategies** into two groups: **cognitive strategies** and **metacognitive strategies**. **Cognitive learning strategies** pertain to the different stages in learning which require: direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin identifies six main **cognitive learning strategies** contributing directly to language learning: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization and monitoring. **Metacognitive learning strategies** are strategies used to supervise, control or self-direct language learning. They involve various processes as planning, prioritizing, setting goals and self-management. **Communication strategies** are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. They are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication means do not allow them to keep pace with communication or when they have to cope with misunderstanding created by an interlocutor. **Social strategies** are those activities learners engage and give them opportunities to be exposed to and practice their knowledge. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving and using of language (Rubin, Wenden 1987, pp. 23-27).

Another interesting contribution on the study of language learner strategies was provided by Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco, in the book *The Good Language Learner* (1978). The aim of their study was to interview good and poor language learners in formal and informal L2 learning situations in order to get useful information about successful language learning, and to confirm, change or amend existing theories about language learning. By interviewing thirty-four adult learners and analyzing students from various levels of a program on French L2, they identified five major strategies for language learning. According to Naiman et al. 1978, good language learners share these characteristics: they actively involve themselves in the language learning task and they develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system and as a means of communication and interaction. Furthermore, good language learners realize initially, or with time, that they must cope with the affective demands made upon them by language learning, they succeed in doing so and they monitor their performance in the target language. In order to accomplish their aim, good language learners use several techniques such as having contact with

native speakers, listening to the radio, t.v., records, movies, commercials, or repeating aloud after the teacher or native speaker etc. Another important issue of the above study was the importance given to personality and motivational factors in the learner which are considered as important and relevant to the learning process as strategies and attitude.

In the volume *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) provide a significant contribution to research and reconsider theories, hypotheses and issues on learning strategies in L2 learning by focusing on students learning English as second language and students learning different foreign languages. Their approach is based on cognitive theory according to which learning strategies are defined «special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information» (p. 1). Learning strategies are analyzed and debated with a remarkable emphasis on the storing of language knowledge in memory and on the automatic language comprehension and production resulting from the second language process. The conclusion drawn from O'Malley and Chamot's studies and the relevant theoretical developments is that second language acquisition encompasses both dynamic and active mental operations that authors organize into three categories: **metacognitive strategies**, **cognitive strategies** and **social/affective strategies**. **Metacognitive strategies** are «higher order executive skills» which include planning for, monitoring or evaluating the success of the learning process and are applicable to different learning tasks (p. 44). In **metacognitive strategies**, the processes that would be included are selective attention for special aspects of learning task, planning the organization, monitoring a task, production and comprehension, and checking and evaluating of learning tasks. **Cognitive strategies** are more limited to specific learning tasks as they operate directly on incoming information and on how information is 'handled' to improve the learning process. They may be grouped into three main categories: **rehearsal**, **organization** and **elaboration activities** (including repetition, resourcing translation, grouping, note taking, deduction, recombination, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer and inferencing) (p. 44). As far as **socioaffective strategies** are concerned, they are related to interaction with another person and to a kind of «affective control» to assist a learning task (p. 45). It can be argued that they pertain the social sphere of learning and that they involve every mediating activity and transaction with others. Cooperation, questions for clarification and self talk are the main **socioaffective strategies**.

In her analysis of 'the good language learner', Oxford (1990) puts forward the idea that language learning strategies are instrumental in the improvement of communicative competence: learning strategies are specific, self-directed parts of the learning process through which learners

Table 1. Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies (adapted from Oxford 1990, p. 17).

Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
1. Memory a. Creating mental linkages b. Applying images and sounds c. Reviewing well d. Employing action	1. Metacognitive strategies a. Centering your learning b. Arranging and planning your learning c. Evaluating your learning
2. Cognitive a. Practising b. Receiving and sending messages strategies c. Analysing and reasoning d. Creating structure for input and output	2. Affective strategies a. Lowering your anxiety b. Encouraging yourself c. Taking your emotional temperature
3. Compensation strategies a. Guessing intelligently b. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing	3. Social strategies a. Asking questions b. Cooperating with others c. Empathizing

try to ameliorate it. In her comprehensive language learning strategy scheme, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), she groups language learning strategies into two strategy categories, **direct** and **indirect strategies**, divided into six strategy groups. Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies is shown in Table 1. The **direct learning strategies** consist in the identification, retention, storage or retrieval of words, phrases of the target language. The **indirect strategies** involve the management of the learning and aspects that help the learner in controlling the emotional and motivational sphere such as activities for self-encouragement and the reduction of anxiety, and activities which allow communication with other speakers and address the actions learners take in order to communicate with others, such as asking for clarification and be cooperative in communication. Most of Oxford's work in this area is underpinned by a broad concept of language learning strategies which include social and communicative strategies.

In their contribution to research on the language learner's individual profile, Cohen and Dörnyei (2002), after tackling learner's characteristics outside the teacher's control such as age, gender, language aptitude and language styles, introduce an interesting analysis on motivation and language strategies. The authors' investigations are grounded in Gardner and Lambert's research: the social nature of motivation is stressed as their assumption is that learning a language means learning the culture behind that language. The learner's feelings towards and the desire to interact with the L2 speaking community are of paramount importance. Moreover,

another fundamental feature of L2 motivation is that, according to Dörnyei, it is «in a continuous process of change» (p. 172). The 'dynamic process' of L2 motivation encompasses three main stages: **choice motivation**, **executive motivation** and **motivational retrospection**. **Choice motivation** entails the values and inclinations towards the L2, L2 speakers and the language learning process in general. Starting from Gardner's theories, **choice motivation** is presented as the combination of at least seven components: **integrative orientation** (a favorable attitude toward and the will to interact with the L2 group), **instrumental orientation** (the potential goals or tasks to be pursued through L2 learning), **integrative motive** (a set of integrative orientation, attitudes toward the learning situation and desire and attitudes toward L2 learning), **expectancy of success** and **perceived coping potential** (learners' linguistic self-confidence), **learners' initial beliefs** about L2 learning and **positive or negative messages** they receive from the environment (pp. 173-174). **Executive motivation** pertains to the learner's perception and evaluation of the learning process and allows the generated motivation to be preserved and safeguarded. The perceived quality of the learning experience goes through the appraisal of different elements, such as the contribution provided by teachers and parents. Furthermore, another important constituent of **executive motivation** is autonomy as autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners. Lastly, **motivational retrospection** includes the set of operations (feedback, praise and grades) through which learners review and estimate the outcome of the L2 learning process.

One of the most interesting issues in Cohen and Dörnyei's article is that the emphasis on motivation is supported by the claim that «knowledge of and skills in using various 'learner strategies' also have an impact» in all three phases of the motivational process (Cohen, Dörnyei 2002, p. 175). According to the authors, well-used strategies incentivize successful L2 learning and augment the learner's self-confidence. In addition, during the phase of motivational retrospection, the reinforcement of the enlarged range of the useful strategies will contribute to the consolidation of a positive approach and progress of the learning process.

As far as learning strategies are concerned, Cohen and Dörnyei identify two main types of strategies: **language learning strategies** and **language use strategies**. According to Cohen, «whereas **language learning strategies** have an explicit goal of assisting learners in improving their knowledge in a target language, **language use strategies** focus primarily on employing the language that learners have in their current 'interlanguage'» (Cohen 1998, pp. 2-3). **Language learning strategies** operate at conscious or semi-conscious level as they are ideas, considerations and behaviors through which learners try to improve their L2 acquisition. **Language use strategies** include four sub-strategies making reference to how learners use the language being learnt: strategies to re-

cover what has been learnt (**retrieval strategies**); strategies to practice language in order to become skilled in using L2 (**rehearsal strategies**); strategies to transfer meaning and information (**communication strategies**) and strategies used by learners to simulate a full control of language ability in order not to appear silly or lacking in preparation (**cover strategies**). Other interesting group classifications introduced by Cohen are self-motivation strategies and strategies analyzed according to skill areas. The first group comprises all the strategies that help the learner to increase and protect his or her existing motivation to learn a language such as self-management skills for self-motivation, whilst the second group concerns strategies linked to particular language skills or tasks such as listening or reading strategies. In conclusion, the authors claim that an appropriate use of strategies in language learning and teaching often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall, and that learner should be taught to enhance their strategies use in this perspective.

3 Learner strategies in language testing

The implications in language testing of research on the language learner and strategies are of the utmost importance as understanding L2 learners' cognitive processes may be one of the most essential areas for language testers to work on.

3.1 Taxonomies of test-taking strategies

Cohen (1998) points up to the importance of looking at the test-taking strategies used by L2 learners to improve the assessment instruments and to increase the success learners have in responding to these instruments. Firstly, he notes the limits of quantitative measures of test validity and emphasizes the role of evidence concerning the processes test-takers go through in order to produce responses. Cohen proposes using **verbal report measures** to identify test-taking strategies and in order to assist test developers in improving tests and in interpreting test results once the test has been finalized. Test-taking entails cognitive processes that are not open to objective observation and evaluation. Therefore, in order to get the best evidence of what it is respondents do as they take a test, researchers have tended to use **verbal report protocols**. **Verbal report protocols** are «oral record of thoughts, provided by subjects when thinking aloud during or after completing a task» (Kasper 1998, p. 358). According to Cohen, **verbal protocols** are increasingly playing a vital role in the validation of assessment instruments and methods as they offer a means for more directly gathering evidence that supports

Table 2. Test-taking strategies (adapted from Cohen 1998).

Test-taking strategies	
Language use strategies (steps or actions selected to accomplish language tasks):	Test-wiseness strategies (the respondent's knowledge on how to take the test):
a. retrieve L2 material for use in the test b. rehearse it before use c. cover strategies 'to look good' d. communication strategies if test requires it	a. choosing between language tasks b. using material from a previous item c. finding correspondences between items to provide correct answer d. taking shortcuts to give correct answer

judgments regarding validity than other more quantitative methods as they are frequently used to put «one of the most fundamental questions» about language tests: what is it that a test actually measures. Test-takers are asked to think aloud as they are coping with test items. The resulting protocol is then analyzed to investigate the cognitive processes and relevant strategies involved in carrying out the test task. Cohen suggests that «not only testing researchers» but also SLA researchers should «consider validating testing measures they use through triangulation» or multiple approaches including «the collection of test-taking strategy data on subsamples of respondents» (Cohen 1998, p. 217).

Cohen's definition of test-taking strategies is based on the assumption that language test performance is partly dependent on the learner's L2 knowledge and ability to use L2 but also on what he calls the learner's **test wiseness** which is independent of learner's language knowledge and language skills. In brief, **test-taking strategies** are a mix of **language use strategies** and **test wiseness strategies** as illustrated in Table 2. **Test-wiseness strategies** consist mainly in learners' knowledge on how to take tests, and they are independent of learner's language proficiency.

Allan (1992), in his investigation into ESL strategies for taking reading tests, stated that some students were sometimes choosing the right answer by using test-taking skills which had almost completely no connection to language proficiency: they were using test-wiseness (TW) principles. **Test-wiseness** appears thus to be «the ability to use a set of principles to answer test items regardless of the content of the items or of the skills supposedly elicited by the items» (p. 92). His taxonomy of **test-wiseness strategies** consists of four groups dealing with **time management**, **minor error avoidance techniques**, **guessing strategies** and **deductive reasoning strategies**. We can easily deduce that, according to Allan, **test-wiseness** is an element which may subvert the purpose of a test. For this reason, he designed a test to study **test-wiseness** in EFL/ESL, and to demonstrate that **test-wiseness** is an important source of test content/construct inva-

lidity since it highlights students' ability to answer correctly by exploiting weaknesses in test design. Furthermore, Allan's test was developed to examine inexperienced or underachieving language test-takers, and to confront their weaknesses. Allan's assumption partly coincides with Cohen's, who states that approaching L2 testing from the point of view of the strategies used by respondents during the test should be «acknowledged as a possible source of insights concerning test reliability and validity» (Cohen 1998, p. 218). In fact, test performance is affected not only by the characteristics of test method, but also by test-takers' individual attributes and cognitive approaches to test-taking which can also be referred to as **test-wiseness**.

Cohen is also strongly persuaded that even if the test-taker represents the main problem, test developers and test researchers should aim to analyze items inducing respondents to give wrong or illogical answers. **Test-wiseness strategies**, if misused, may produce a negative effect on students' performance on some or all the items of a test. Rogers and Bateson (1991) state that if a test-taker possesses test-wiseness and if the examination contains susceptible items, then the combination of these two factors can result in an improved score; in contrast, a student low in test-wiseness will tend to be penalized every time he or she takes a test that includes test-wise components.

However, in Cohen's opinion, the frequency of test-taking strategies use is not a guarantee of success or failure (Cohen 1998, p. 220) as the evaluation of any test-taking strategy depends on how individual test-takers employ the strategies at a given moment, on a given task. Cohen's assumption refers to Canale and Swain's definition of **strategic competence** as the ability to use language strategies to enhance communication and deal with breakdowns in it (Canale, Swain 1980). Applying the concept of 'strategic competence' to the practical design and development of language tests, Bachman and Palmer (1996) identify three sets of **metacognitive strategies** involved in **strategic competence** which together comprise «a set of metacognitive processes, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities» (Bachman, Palmer 1996, p. 70). The three sets of **metacognitive strategies** might be applied to test-taking situations as described in Table 3.

Strategic competence together with **language knowledge** constitutes what Bachman defines **language ability** the ability to produce and find meaning in discourse either in responding to language test tasks or in non-test language use (Bachman, Palmer 1996, p. 67).

According to Bachman and Palmer, **strategic competence** is a crucial element since it is one of the test taker's characteristics that affect **interactiveness** in language tests. The authors recognize **interactiveness** as one of the fundamental language test qualities and define it as «the extent

Table 3. Bachman and Palmer's taxonomy of strategic competence (adapted from Bachman, Palmer 1996).

Strategic competence

Assessment Assessing which communicative goals are achievable and what linguistic resources are needed	Goal setting Identifying the specific tasks to be performed	Planning Deciding how to use the language material one has
• Assessing the characteristics of the test task to determine the desirability and feasibility of successfully completing it and what is needed to complete it.	• Identifying the test tasks.	• Selecting elements from the areas of knowledge for successfully completing the test task.
• Assessing our knowledge components to see if relevant areas of knowledge are available for successfully completing the test task.	• Choosing one or more tasks from a set of possible tasks.	• Formulating one or more plans for implementing these elements in a response to the test task.
• Assessing the correctness or appropriateness of the response to the test task	• Deciding whether or not to attempt to complete the task(s) selected.	• Selecting one plan for initial implementation as a response to the test task.

and type of involvement of the test-taker's individual characteristics in accomplishing a test task». **Interactiveness** resides «in the interaction between the test-taker and the task» (Bachman, Palmer 1996, p. 25) and language test tasks become interactive when they engage test taker's language ability. **Strategic competence** is indeed the element conjugating the components involved in language use and in language test performance «within the individual» but also the «cognitive link with the characteristic of language use» and language test task and setting (p. 62). Furthermore, it is an essential component of the construct definition in testing situations where test developers want to make inferences about strategic competence and about the test-taker's ability to adapt language use to different situations (p. 120). Bachman and Palmer's is an interactional model of language test performance in which the conceptualization of **strategic competence** represents the theoretical basis for designing and developing interactive test tasks and for evaluating the interactiveness of the test tasks themselves (p. 70).

3.2   Areas of research in test-taking strategies

The taxonomies listed above have represented the starting point for research in test-taking strategies in recent years. Cohen (2007) identifies three main areas which can be regarded as the most challenging themes of investigation in strategies and language testing: contribution to test validation, the relationship between strategies and test-taker language proficiency, and strategy instructions for performance on high-stakes tests.

The outcomes of this research aim to «determine how comparable the results from different test methods and item types are – with regard to level of difficulty, the strategies elicited, and the abilities actually assessed, depending on the characteristics of the individual respondents or cultural groups» (Cohen 2009, p. 3) and it has already provided insights in:

- low-level vs higher-level processing on a test,
- the impact of using authentic vs inauthentic texts in reading tests,
- whether the strategies employed in L2 test-taking are more typical of rst-language (L1) use, common to L1 and L2 use, or more typical of L2 use,
- the more effective strategies for success on tests as well as the least effective ones,
- test-takers' vs raters' understandings of and responses to integrated language tasks,
- the items on a test that would be susceptible to the use of test-wiseness strategies
- (Cohen 2009, p. 4).

Several studies have introduced a new approach to test validation by analyzing «what it actually entails for test-takers to arrive at answers to various language assessment measures» (Cohen 2012, p. 3) and what respondents need to do in order to improve their performance on tests in relationship to test methods, test format but also item content and item performance.

In their practical application, findings from such research on test-taking strategies play a crucial rule in test construction. According to O'Sullivan and Weir (2011), one of the most important assumptions we make when designing test items and tasks is that responding to them relies on a correct activation of certain cognitive processes. Cognitive validity is, in their validity test model, dependent upon the processes that respondents use in responding to language assessment items and tasks.

With regard to this type of validity, Cohen (2012, p. 1) focuses on the appropriateness of the cognitive processes required to complete a test task and on the differences/similarities of the same task in a 'real world' context. He argues (p. 1) that test-management strategies contribute to construct-

relevant variance and that test-wiseness strategies might assist test-takers in responding to items and tasks without having real competence in the targeted language skill.

In this perspective, studies on test taking strategies helps test designers and developers to identify useful construct-relevant strategies test-takers use to produce their responses and allow them to understand why some tasks and items might be critical. The intent is to ensure that test-takers' language skills are actually being assessed and that respondents that lack them do not use strategies in order to circumvent those skills.

The assumption that a test is valid is thus put under further discussion and learner characteristics, such as strategies, become a new source of elements to prove test and assessment approach validity.

New questions then arise when examining test results and shifting the focus from the analysis of the test itself (methods, format, item, task etc.) to the respondent performances which are always influenced by individual characteristics and approaches to language learning.

3.3 Strategies and alternative assessment

Another interesting issue connected to research on the language learner and strategies is the development of the so-called **alternative assessment**. According to Alderson and Banerjee alternative assessment is usually taken «to mean assessment procedures which are less formal than traditional testing, which are gathered over a period of time rather than being taken at one point in time, which are usually formative rather than summative in function, are often low-stakes in terms of consequences, and are claimed to have beneficial washback effects» (Alderson, Banerjee 2001, p. 228). From this perspective, assessment is no longer perceived as an element isolated from the learning process but as an essential phase of it, as alternative assessment can be considered extremely useful «for collecting information about students' attitudes, motivation, interests, and learning strategies» which cannot be gathered by conventional test methods (Genesee, Hamayan 1994, cited in Tsagari 2004, p. 2).

Tsagari (2004) emphasizes that one of the main aims of alternative assessment is evaluating the process and product of learning as well as other important learning behaviors such as learning strategies, learning styles, affective factors and the learner's personal background. As it is demonstrated that the learner's characteristics and features play a fundamental role in the learning process, alternative assessment might provide a useful contribution to define cognitive processes underpinning test-taking activities and to make language learners aware of them. Other benefits include the possibility to connect assessment with review of learning strategies. Alternative assessment is performance based and implies that students can

evaluate their own learning and learn from the evaluation process. In fact, it should be noticed that most alternative assessment methods give learners opportunities to reflect on both their linguistic development and their learning processes. In this way, the mechanism of **retrospectional motivation** would be operating directing the learner toward a critical review of his or her learning. Moreover, learners made aware of the test-taking strategies they use are given the opportunity to use these strategies «at the right time and in the right way so as to apply them for the realization of particular task» (Dietel 1991, cited in Tsagari 2004, p. 9).

Assessment and strategies thus become an integral part of the language learning process by providing consistent feedback to students to facilitate assessing their own achievement and to modify and adjust their individual learning strategies and goals. Furthermore, in an educational context, they empower both students and teachers by fostering consciousness raising and critical thinking.

4 Conclusion

The analysis of the processes and strategies involved in test-taking can be considered a useful approach for improving research in the field of testing methods as it provides evidence for construct validation by associating a qualitative investigation to the quantitative analysis of test and item scores. The three main approaches described by Cohen (2002) perfectly summarize the three cardinal points toward which test-taking strategy research should head: the observation of what respondents do during tests, the designing of items that are assumed to require the use of certain strategies and the use of verbal reports, while the items are being answered, immediately afterward, or some time later. In the light of these considerations, the findings coming from test-taking strategies research and alternative assessment methods are to be regarded as a huge potential source of new insights which will lead to improvements in language test construct validity, administration and in the interpretation of test results.

References

Alderson, J.C.; Banerjee, J. (2001). «Language Testing and Assessment (Part 1)». *Language Teaching*, 34 (4), pp. 213-236.
Allan, A. (1992). «Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Test-Wiseness in EFL/ESL Reading Test Takers». *Language Testing*, 9 (2), pp. 101-122.
Bachman, L.F.; Palmer, A.S. (1996). *Language Testing in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bateson, D.J.; Rogers, W.T. (1991). «Verification of a Model of Test-Taking Behavior of High School Seniors». *Journal of Experimental Education*, 59, pp. 331-350.

Canale, M.; Swain, M. (1980). «Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing». *Applied Linguistics*, 1 (10), pp. 1-47.

Carroll, J.B. (1962). «The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training». In: Glaser, R. (ed.), *Training Research and Education*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Carroll, J.B.; Sapon, S.M. (1959). *Modern Language Aptitude Test*. San Antonio (TX): The Psychological Corporation.

Chamot, A.U.; O'Malley, J.M. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen A.D. (1996). *Second Language Learning and Use Strategies: Clarifying the Issues*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. `http://www.carla.umn.edu/strategies/resources/sbiclarify.pdf`.

Cohen, A.D. (1998). «Strategies and Processes in Test Taking and SLA». In: Bachman, L.F.; Cohen, A.D. (eds), *Interfaces Between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing Research*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Cohen, A.D. (2007). «The Coming of Age for Research on Test-Taking Strategies». In: Bayliss, D.; Cheng, L.; Doe, C.; Fox, J.; Turner, C.; Weshe, M. (eds), *Language Testing Reconsidered*. Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, pp. 80-111.

Cohen, A.D. (2009). «Test-Taking Strategies». In: Coombe, C.; Davidson, P.; O'Sullivan, B.; Stoynoff, S. (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96-104.

Cohen, A.D. (2012). «Test Taker Strategies and Task Design». In: Davidson, F.; Fulcher, G. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing*. Oxford: Routledge.

Cohen, A.D. (2013). «Using Test-Wiseness Strategy Research in Task Development». In: Kunnan, A.D. (ed.), *The Companion to Language Assessment*. Vol. 2: *Approaches and Developments*. Hoboken (NJ): Wiley; Blackwell.

Cohen, A.D., Dörnyei, Z. (2002). «Focus on the Language Learner». In: Schmitt, N. (ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Arnold Hodder.

Gardner, R.C. (2001). «Language Learning Motivation: The Student, the Teacher, and the Researcher». *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 6, pp. 1-18.

Green, A.J.F. (1998). *Using Verbal Protocols in Language Testing Research: A Handbook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kasper, G. (1998). «Analysing Verbal Protocols». *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (2), pp. 358-362.

Naiman, N.; Fröhlich, M.; Stern, H.; Todesco, A. (1978). *The Good Language Learner*. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Oxford, R.L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. New York: Newbury House.

O'Sullivan, B.; Weir, C.J. (2011). «Language Testing = Validation». In: O'Sullivan, B. (ed.), *Language Testing: Theories and Practices*. Basinstokes (UK): Palgrave Macmillan.

Rubin, J. (1975). «What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us». *TESOL Quarterly*, 9 (1), pp. 41-51.

Rubin, J.; Wenden, A. (1987). *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall International.

Schmitt, N. (ed.) (2002). *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Arnold Hodder.

Skehan, P., 1989, *Individual Differences in Second Language Learning*. London: Arnold Hodder.

Tsagari, D., 2004, «Is There Life Beyond Language Testing? An Introduction to Alternative Language Assessment», in *CRILE Working Papers*, 58, pp. 2-23.