
The Investigation of Oral Proficiency and Language Learning Strategies in a Migrant ESL Context

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on the early stages of a larger research project which seeks to investigate the relationship between language proficiency, language aptitude and language learner strategies. Specifically, this project examined the relationship between oral proficiency and reported learner strategy use.

It addressed the question:

“What evidence is there for systematicity in the strategy use of language learners when examined in relation with their proficiency, age, first language background and gender?”

In particular it attempted to find whether the strategy use of high proficiency subjects, assuming them to be ‘Good Language Learners’, displays systematicity. From the evidence provided in the literature, it was expected that evidence of systematicity, in the form of positive correlation, would be found.

Much of the research into learner strategies has concentrated on describing strategies used by good language learners. Wong Fillmore (1976) suggested that, for young learners, social strategies, necessary to immediate context-dependent language use were important. The ‘Good Language Learner’ research (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978) identified five major strategies: active task approach, realisation of language as a system, realisation of language as a means of communication, management of affective demands and monitoring of L2 performance. Rubin (1981), following research with young adult learners, proposed six areas of cognitive strategies: clarification/verification, monitoring, memorisation, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning and practice. Both Naiman and Rubin seem to concur that reflective abilities are important to older learners.

From research with secondary school children O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) identified and classified strategies into three broad categories: metacognitive, cognitive and social mediating strategies. In contrast with the earlier work of Wong-Fillmore and Naiman et al. which placed emphasis on the social aspects of strategies, O'Malley, Chamot et al. emphasised the importance of metacognitive strategies to the language learner. They found that there were differences between beginning and intermediate ESL students in the kinds of specific strategies used, and expressed the view that good learners have developed more effective strategies, or use a wider range of strategies than poor learners.

Oxford (1989) synthesised earlier work on good language learner strategies and suggested that good language learners use strategies in six broad groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social (Appendix I).

Good language learners

... use memory strategies, such as grouping, imagery and structured review, to get information into memory and to recall it when needed. They employ the new language directly with cognitive strategies, such as practising naturalistically, analysing contrastively and summarising. ... They overcome knowledge limitations through compensatory strategies, like guessing meanings intelligently and using synonyms... They manage their own learning process through metacognitive strategies, such as paying attention, self-evaluating, and self-monitoring. They control their emotions and attitudes through affective strategies, such as anxiety reduction and self-encouragement. (Finally,) they work with others to learn the language, using social strategies like asking questions and becoming culturally aware.

(Oxford 1989:236)

Moreover, Oxford (1990) raised the possibility that learner strategies are potential correlates of language learning aptitude and thus are predictors of language proficiency and called for an

investigation of aptitude in its many facets: as a predictor of proficiency, and as a subsumer or correlate of strategies and

styles. The whole concept of aptitude needs to be re-examined and broadened, possibly to include styles and strategies.

(1990:114)

2. Method

The study examined data on oral proficiency and reported language learner strategy use from candidates participating in trials in Australia, in March and June 1994, of an English language proficiency test which is administered overseas to prospective immigrants to Australia. Participants in the trials undertook tests in four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing but, for the purposes of this research project, only the oral proficiency of the subjects has been considered and related to the reported use of language learner strategies.

Subjects

Of the 202 volunteer subjects in this study, ninety-seven were male and 105 female. They ranged in age from 16 to 56, with a mean age of 28 (Figure 1).

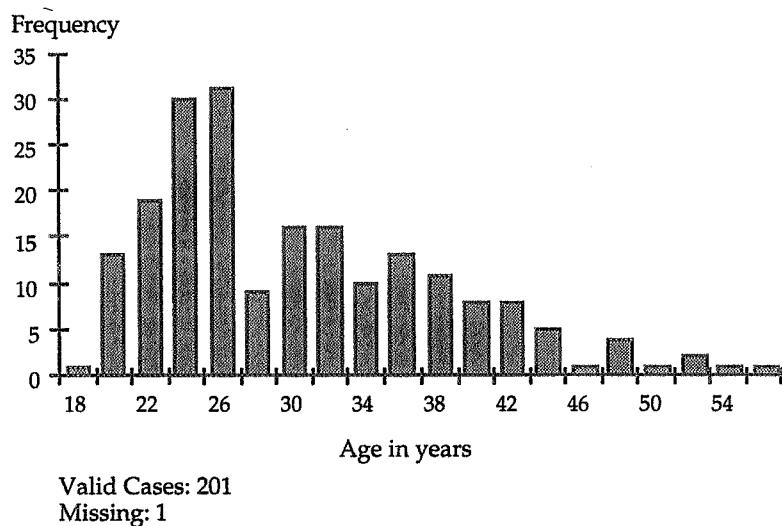


Figure 1: Age of Subjects

All, except one, claimed to be speakers of English as a second language and most, at the time of the data collection were attending English language classes in Melbourne. The subjects were immigrants, overseas tertiary students or students of English. The time they had been in Australia ranged from one month to eight years, with a mean of 15 months; half the candidates had been in Australia for less than eight months. While most had been learning English for more than five years, one subject had been learning for only two months and another for forty years.

Language	No. Subjects
Chinese (incl 15 Cantonese & 30 Mandarin)	45
Russian	24
Indonesian	19
Thai	19
Vietnamese	17
Japanese	13
Polish	8
Korean	7
Singhalese	5
Spanish	5
Arabic	4
Turkish	4
Farsi	3
Afghani	2
Croatian	2
Hindi	2
Macedonian	2
Rumanian	2
Bulgarian	1
Czech	1
English	1
French	1
Italian	1
Malay	1
Serbian	1
Tagalog	1
Tamil	1
Tetum	1
Other African language	1
Other European language	1
Other Indian language	5
Missing	1
TOTAL	202

Table 1: Language Background of Subjects

Subjects were from more than 33 different language backgrounds (L1), the largest of which were: 45 Chinese (30 Mandarin and 15 Cantonese which for the purposes of this report are considered as one group), Russian (24), Indonesian (19), Thai (19), Vietnamese (17) and Japanese (13) (Table 1).

Materials

Data on the subjects' proficiency were obtained from their scores on the two formats of the Oral Interaction Test: firstly, from a live scripted interview between a trained native-speaker interviewer and the subject; secondly, from a language laboratory format of the test administered to groups of subjects in a language laboratory. The two formats of the test consisted of matched items and were designed to test similar language skills of candidates. Corresponding items on the two formats were rated on the same criteria. Audio-tape recordings were made of all subjects' performances which lasted for about thirty minutes each. After the trials all tapes, live and laboratory formats, were rated twice by trained raters. The test forms of the live and the language laboratory test are considered roughly equivalent. Test items between the first trial and the second trial were different, but a number were anchored on each test. Furthermore, the scores from each administration were adjusted using the FACETS (Linacre 1992) anchoring procedure.

To collect data on the subjects' language learning strategies a questionnaire (Appendix II) was administered to subjects at both March and June trials. As well as eliciting biographical data, the questionnaire required subjects to respond to thirty statements pertaining to their language learner strategy behaviour on a five point strongly continuous scale which was later used as data for correlation and t-test.

Subjects responded to statements such as:

I plan how I am going to learn English (a statement related to their use of a Metacognitive strategy), or

I talk about learning English with other learners (a Social strategy statement) by choosing a response of 1 to 5 e.g.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Sometimes true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

The thirty questionnaire statements were grouped in six strategy groups, after Oxford (1989): Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social strategies. For the first four of these groups (Memory, Cognitive, Compensation and Metacognitive) there were five questions on the questionnaire to which subjects could give a response on the scale of 1 to 5. Thus on their responses to each of those four strategies subjects could obtain a maximum of 25. For Affective, with four statements, and Social strategies, with six statements, subjects could obtain a maximum of 20 or 30 respectively.

3. Analyses

The analysis of performance on the two formats of the oral proficiency test was carried out by the FACETS statistical program (Linacre 1992). Analysis of questionnaire data was carried out using SPSS (SPSS Inc.,1990). The principal procedures which were used were correlation and t-test.

4. Results

After the trials of the oral interaction test, candidates were classified in one of three levels according to their level of proficiency in relation to specific cutoff points on the different formats of the test. Those categories have been labelled: High, Mid and Low. Particular attention was paid to results of the High subjects, assumed by virtue of their proficiency scores to be Good Language Learners.

Strategy use

Correlations were performed between individual subjects' overall proficiency score on the test (TOTSCORE) and their reported use of language learning strategies (Table 2). No positive correlations of significance were found. In fact, the only significant correlation between TOTSCORE and strategy groups was negative, with Affective strategies.

Correlations were then carried out between individual's proficiency score on the live interview format (LIVESCORE) and questionnaire responses and also between the proficiency score on the language laboratory format (LABSCORE) and questionnaire responses (Table 2). Similar results were found: no positive correlations of significance and again, only negative correlations of significance between LIVESCORE and LABSCORE and responses to Affective strategy questionnaire statements.

	MEM	COG	META	COMP	AFF	SOC
TOTSCORE	-.0515	-.0148	-.0621	-.0275	-.3719**	-.0261
LIVESCORE	-.0503	-.0022	-.0314	-.0046	-.3494**	-.0032
LABSCORE	-.0193	.0038	-.0742	-.0441	-.3791**	-.0588

* - $p < .05$
 ** - $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Table 2: All subjects: Correlation of scores on test formats with strategy type use

Each proficiency group High, Mid and Low was then examined more closely in an attempt to find some patterns of strategy use. Separate correlations were performed for individual subjects in each proficiency group, that is, for those categorised as High, those categorised as Mid and those categorised as Low between TOTSCORE and responses to the strategy questionnaire (Table 3). No positive correlations of significance were found for any of the High, Mid or Low subjects. In fact, the only significant correlations, negative, were for Mid subjects between the use of Memory strategies

and TOTSCORE, and for High subjects, the assumed Good Language Learners, between TOTSCORE and Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social strategies.

TOTSCORE	MEM	COG	COMP	META	AFF	SOC
High	.1355*	-.0634	-.3977**	-.3051*	-.2978*	-.3195*
Mid	-.2503*	-.0635	-.0656**	-.1771*	-.1465*	.0832*
Low	-.2269*	.0475	.1860**	.1266*	-.0692*	.1206*

* - p < .05
 ** - p < .01 (2-tailed)

Table 3: Correlation of TOTSCORE of High, Mid and Low proficiency subjects with strategy type use

LABSCORE	MEM	COG	COMP	META	AFF	SOC
High	.0244	-.1564	-.2744*	-.3899**	-.3605**	-.3932**
Mid	-.0318	-.0248	-.0795	-.0116	-.3798**	-.0282
Low	-.0130	.1763	.1249	.1218	-.0810	.1074

* - p < .05 **
 - p < .01 (2-tailed)

Table 4: Correlation of language laboratory score with strategy type use

When LIVESCORE, the proficiency score on the live interview test, was correlated with questionnaire responses for individual subjects in each of the High, Mid and Low proficiency groups, no significant, positive correlations could be found (Table 5).

LIVESCORE	MEM	COG	COMP	META	AFF	SOC
High	-.0708	-.0551	-.2570	-.1066	-.2579	.0123
Mid	-.2533*	-.2208	.0997	.0058	-.1891	.0664
Low	-.0883	.0956	.1447	.2276	-.1066	.2074
* - $p < .05$						
** - $p < .01$ (2-tailed)						

Table 5: Correlation of live interview score with strategy type use

Language background

To gain further insight into the reported strategy use of the High subjects, those in the six largest L1 groups, were examined more closely. Interestingly, it was observed (Table 7) that the Russians as a group were the highest achievers on the test; 14 of the 24 Russian subjects (58%) were categorised as High, compared with 63 (31%) of the total subjects categorised as High. No Vietnamese and only one Thai subject was classified as High.

	Number	Percentage
ALL	63	31
Chinese	7	15
Russian	14	58
Indonesian	7	37
Thai	1	5
Vietnamese	-	-
Japanese	4	31

Table 7: Numbers and percentages of High subjects in largest L1 groups

Separate correlations were performed for the individual High Chinese, Russian, Indonesian and Japanese subjects with their reported use of language learner strategies (Table 8). For High Russian, Indonesian and Japanese subjects no positive, significant correlations were found. For High Chinese subjects however, positive correlations were observed between their proficiency scores and their use of Compensation, Metacognitive and Affective strategies. Obviously, with such small numbers in each L1 group, no importance can be attached to these results, but further investigation of the patterns of strategy use and L1 background seems warranted.

Table 8: Correlations: TOTSCORE of 'High' proficiency subjects with strategy type use

	MEM	COG	COMP	META	AFF	SOC
Chinese (n=7)	.1217	-.2630	.5073*	.5847*	.5452*	.4427
Russian (n=14)	.0601	-.0363	.1606	-.0943	-.1054	.2076
Indonesian (n=7)	.2244	-.1690	-.1068	.1912	-.3970	-.4122
Japanese (n=4)	-.9106	-.8597	-.9568*	.0374	-.7409	-.8930
* - p < .05 ** - p < .01 (2-tailed)						

Age

Positive significant correlations were found between age of subjects and proficiency scores (TOTSCORE, LIVESCORE and LABSCORE) on the test (Table 9) and between Age and subjects' use of Memory type strategies (Table 10). However, these correlations were of relatively weak magnitude.

Weak, significant, but negative correlations were found between Age and Affective and Social strategy use (Table 10).

	TOTSCORE	LABSCORE	LIVESCORE
AGE	.2565**	.1662*	.2730**
* - $p < .05$ ** - $p < .01$ (2-tailed)			

Table 10: All subjects: Correlations – Age with strategy type use

	MEM	COG	COMP	META	AFF	SOC
AGE	.1439*	-.0222	-.0348	-.0206	-.1453*	-.0088*
* - $p < .05$ ** - $p < .01$ (2-tailed)						

Table 9: All subjects: Correlations – Age with proficiency scores on test formats

Gender

T-tests were performed to examine the differences between the reported strategy use of the 97 males and the 105 females in the study. It was found that, using the continuous scale of 1 to 5 for responses, females as a group reported making greater use of Social strategies than males (Table 11). The maximum possible score that subjects could have selected on the six statements for Social strategy type use was 30. With a mean of 22.9 for females and 21.75 for males a difference, significant at the .039 level, was observed between the responses to Social strategy use.

Social Strategies	No. of Cases	Mean	t value	P value
Male	97	21.7526		
Female	105	22.9333	-2.08	.039

Table 11: All subjects: t-test on the difference between Social strategy use of males and females

It is recognised that there is a risk of obtaining spuriously significant differences when repeated t-tests are used within the same experiment (Brown 1990) and that a strict interpretation cannot be made of the results obtained. However, as particular attention was paid throughout this study to the High subjects, the assumed Good Language Learners, further t-tests were carried out on 'High' proficiency subjects alone (Table 12). After correcting for error, some doubt was thrown on the result obtained for their use of Social strategies but it was found that females in the High category were making greater use than males of Compensation and Affective strategies, the possible means for which were 25 and 20 respectively.

Compensation Strategies	No. of Cases	Mean	t value	P value
Male	28	17.9643		
Female	35	19.9714	-2.66	.011
Affective Strategies				
Male	28	10.4286		
Female	35	12.2286	-2.49	.016
Social Strategies				
Male	28	21.1071		
Female	35	23.6000	-2.40	.020

Table 12: 'High' proficiency subjects: reported use of strategy type of males/females

5. Discussion

Overall, no evidence of systematicity could be identified in the language learner strategy use of subjects when considered with scores of proficiency. The only clear indication of strategy use was that subjects as a whole were not making use of Affective strategies. No significant, positive patterns of strategy use for All subjects were obvious. Despite expectations, even for High subjects assumed to be the Good Language Learners (GLL), no significant patterns of strategy use were evident.

However, this attempt to find some systematicity in the strategy use of subjects, and particularly the strategy use of the GLL, could have been confounded by the way in which those GLL were identified. In this study, the identity of the GLL could be assumed only by their high proficiency scores on the test. It is possible though that potential GLL, not yet so proficient, remained unidentified as GLL because of their low proficiency scores. Such subjects remained categorised together with low proficiency 'poor' learners. Had they been identified in some way and included in the analyses of GLL strategy use, clearer results might have been obtained.

There is a case then for further research which includes an effective measure of the language learning aptitude of all candidates. Potential GLL, still not proficient, might then be identified and examined together with High proficiency subjects. In a study such as this though, with subjects from more than 33 different language backgrounds, finding a measure of language aptitude, suitable for all, could be problematic.

Language Background

Several studies have shown that ethnicity has a strong influence on the kinds of strategy used by language learners. This study seems to confirm the view of Politzer and McGroarty (1985) that assumed good language learning strategies may be ethnocentrically biased. In this study Russians performed more highly than any other large language group, so no doubt were using strategies which were 'good' for them, yet no strong correlations between their proficiency scores and strategy use could be observed. Perhaps the Russians were behaving more individualistically than other language groups, or

perhaps were using a broader range of strategies. Perhaps their strategy use was more closely related to greater age. The proficiency scores of High Chinese subjects, on the other hand, correlated positively with their Compensation, Metacognitive and Affective strategy use.

It seems then that a more detailed analysis of learner strategy use, language background and age, could provide interesting findings.

Gender

The claims of earlier research (Politzer 1983) that females make greater use of Social strategies seem to have been confirmed by this study. However, the additional finding here that High proficiency females made greater use also of Compensation and Affective strategies warrants further investigation. Again, a study which included low proficiency candidates and an effective measure of aptitude would enable potentially High proficiency subjects to be identified and the relationship between their gender and strategy use to be more closely examined.

Age

The finding of this study of a weak, but significant correlation between Age and Memory strategies could be worth attention. It may be that, because of greater life experience older subjects draw on the resources of memory to a greater extent than younger subjects. As well, the negative relationship between Age and Affective and Social strategies, may indicate that while older subjects are not using them to any great extent, younger subjects are making greater use of these strategies. Thus, a hierarchy of strategy use by second language learners might be implied. More research into the language learner strategies of subjects of different ages could serve to inform on such a possibility.

As well, the investigation of other variables, such as educational background and occupation which were not considered in this study, might also produce interesting results on the use of strategies by language learners.

6. Conclusion

The relationship between strategy use and proficiency is a complex and difficult one. On the one hand, the inconclusive results of this study may be no more than a reflection of the strong individuality of language learners, an indication of the futility of attempts which assign language learners to inflexible classifications. On the other hand however, the inclusion of an effective measure of aptitude may help to clarify further research into the relationship of the variables of strategy use and proficiency. Such inclusion would enable a more precise identification of GLL, and thus stronger indications of any systematicity of their strategy use. Furthermore, it is indeed possible that particular strategies might be identified as correlates of aptitude itself.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix I: Language Learner Strategies

Memory	for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when needed
Cognitive	for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it
Compensation	(such as guessing or using gestures) to overcome deficiencies and gaps in one's current language knowledge
Metacognitive	for organizing, focusing, and evaluating one's own learning

Affective for handling emotions or attitudes
Social for co-operation with others in the learning process.
Oxford, R. (1989)

Appendix II: How Do You Learn English?

Here are some statements about learning English. Read each statement and decide if it is:

- 1. Never or almost never true of me
- 2. Usually not true of me
- 3. Sometimes true of me
- 4. Usually true of me
- 5. Always or almost always true of me

THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS. Just give your own opinion. CIRCLE your answer beside each statement.

- 1. I think about what I already know to help me learn something new in English. 1 2 3 4 5
- 2. When I learn a new word, I use it in a sentence so I can learn it better. 1 2 3 4 5
- 3. I remember a new English word by making a picture of it in my mind. 1 2 3 4 5
- 4. When I am not in class, I read over what I have been learning. 1 2 3 4 5
- 5. I say or write new words several times to help me remember them. 1 2 3 4 5
- 6. I practise English by talking to myself 1 2 3 4 5
- 7. I use the English words I know in different ways. 1 2 3 4 5
- 8. I watch TV shows in English or go to movies in English. 1 2 3 4 5
- 9. I first read something in English very quickly, then go back and read it carefully. 1 2 3 4 5
- 10. I try to find patterns in English. 1 2 3 4 5
- 11. When I am not in class, I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English. 1 2 3 4 5
- 12. I try to correct my own mistakes. 1 2 3 4 5

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13. I plan how I am going to learn English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I check my own progress in English and think of better ways to learn. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Before I speak, I practise what I want to say. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. When I am listening, I try to guess what the topic is about. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I use my hands to help explain something when I can't think of a word. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. If I don't understand a word when I am reading, I try to understand the meaning by looking at other words. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. It does not matter if I make mistakes when I am using English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 23. When I have learnt something well, I give myself a reward. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 25. I talk about learning English with other learners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 26. When I have a problem understanding something in English, I ask someone to explain it to me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 27. I ask other people to correct me when I talk. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 28. I practise English with other students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 29. I ask for help from English speakers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 30. I try to learn about the Australian way of life. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Thank You For Your Help!