Individual Learner Differences: The Relative Contribution of Learning Strategies in Language Learning

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Introduction

It is generally agreed that there is considerable variation among individuals in the ability to acquire/learn second languages. Some individuals seem to acquire their second language (L2) without much difficulty and they manage to master the language in a comparative short period of time. Others, on the contrary, tend to make slow progress over language learning even though a great deal of conscious effort has been spent on it. This has interested many researchers and consequently triggered a number of studies looking into how learners differ in language learning and what contributes to the differences. The results of these studies show that there are a number of dimensions of learner differences generally acknowledged, namely, age, affective states, beliefs, culture, language aptitude, learner attitudes, learning style, learning

strategies, motivation, and personality. Although knowledge of individual learner differences (IDs) has been advancing, a comprehensive theory of IDs in second language acquisition is still lacking (Skehan 1991). There is a need to identify those IDs that are important for successful learning, to indicate the relative contribution of particular IDs to learning, to account for their influence on the learner's choice of specific strategies, and to account for the effect (if any) IDs have on the process of L2 acquisition (Ellis 1994:523). This paper aims to look into the relative contribution of one particular ID variable – learning strategies towards language learning. The investigation to be reported looked into the ways second language learners differed in tackling their learning problems, from the perspective of language learning strategies. A few cases will be used to illustrate this and some attention will be directed towards how the learners' strategy use had affected their learning process and language outcomes.

Background

It would be useful, in the first place, to clarify the meaning of language learning strategies and how they are commonly classified, as well as to understand their significance towards language learning. Language learning strategies are the measures, either observable or unobservable, employed by learners in an attempt to increase their knowledge of the target language and to achieve communicative competence in the language. They can be used to obtain information, to work out rules, to enhance memory or construct the language. They are specific, possibly problem-oriented actions, and often used consciously. In addition, they involve metacognitive abilities, such as the ability to assess the learning situation, plan and select appropriate measures to deal with problems, monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the measures employed. There are a number of ways of classifying language learning strategies. Usually, strategies are grouped into several main categories, for example, according to their purposes or different impact on language learning. Under the main categories, there are sub-categories of strategies. The study to be reported will follow the six main categories, defined as follows.

- *Cognitive strategies* are the mental processes which directly contribute to language learning, for example, comparing the spoken form to the written form of the language, guessing the meaning of new language items using available information, etc. These involve mental processes.

- *Memory strategies* are the measures that learners use to help store incoming information and retrieve it from memory Memory strategies are in fact cognitive in nature because they involve mental processes. However, they are more specifically related to storage and retrieval of information.

- *Metacognitive strategies* involve planning, monitoring and evaluation in the language learning processes. In other words, they are the measures that learners use to organise and manage their language learning. Metacognitive strategies also include an awareness of what one is doing and the strategies one is employing, as well as a knowledge about the actual process of learning, for example, setting oneself a language goal.

- *Social strategies* involve the interaction between two or more people to achieve the purpose of language learning. By using social strategies, learners allow themselves greater opportunities for exposure to the language and enable them to interact and cooperate with others to learn the language. For example, learners may ask a peer or a native speaker to explain a term which they do not know. Learners may also work with others to complete a language task.

- *Affective strategies* are the measures which learners use to reduce the adverse effect of the negative aspects caused by anxiety, stress, etc. and gain control over their language learning. Examples include listening to music or talking to a friend about one's feelings.

- *Communication strategies* and social strategies are related because both involve human interaction. In this study, communication strategies refer to the techniques which learners use to communicate with people when faced with difficulty in getting their meaning across. When compared with social strategies, communication strategies have a less direct, albeit not less important, role in language learning. For example, using gestures to show meaning can help maintain conversations, thus allowing continued language input for the learners.

One of the most significant aspects about learning is learning how to learn (Nisbet & Shucksmith 1986). The secret algorithms of learning, Duffy (1982) believes, lie within strategies. Oxford (1990:1) states that 'strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for

active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.' Consequently, how learners use learning strategies is crucial to their success as language learners. An important feature of learning strategies is that they are teachable; they permit new strategies to be learnt or old strategies to be adjusted or changed to meet different learning situations. Theoretically, strategies can be made accessible to learners by strategy training such as explaining why and when specific strategies are important, teaching learners how to use these strategies, and demonstrating to them how to transfer strategies to new situations. In summary, learning strategies are important because they enable learners to be aware of the processes they use in learning; they help them to control these processes and give them the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning. Gradually, learners will gain control of their language learning and become more self-directed, resulting in improved language proficiency and greater self-confidence. They are useful for all learners, including the successful and less successful ones, to enhance their language performance (Berry 1997).

The Study

The participants in the investigation were twenty Hong Kong Chinese over-seas students aged 12 to 18 studying at an independent school in the United Kingdom. For convenience of reporting, these students were given a code number ranging from S01 to S20. The students shared similar family and educational backgrounds and their level of English ranged from elementary to intermediate. These students all started to learn English as a second language at about five or six years of age. Although Hong Kong is a leading international trade and financial centre, English is not used as a mainstream language of communication there. Generally speaking, when the Hong Kong students first arrived at the school, they all had difficulty in communicating with people in English, though in different degrees.

An interpretative approach was adopted for the study, using in-depth interviewing or retrospective accounts as the main method of enquiry. Complementary methods, including verbal reports and written documents, were employed to enhance the data collected by the main method.

Results & Discussion

The twenty informants reported a number of difficulties they encountered when studying at the school in the UK. Since the focus of this paper is not on discussing their difficulties, more attention will be paid to the ways the learners differed in tackling their learning problems, from the perspective of learning strategies. Two examples are used to illustrate the different ways individual students used to deal with their listening problems; they are as follows:

Table 1 S03 & S10's Listening difficulties and the strategies used to deal with them

Listening difficulties	The strategies used to deal with his difficulties
1 Listening problems (general)	S03 said, 'I remembered the word and I tried to remember to ask my cousin later *[memory strategy - memorising for verification]*. I sometimes wrote the word on my palm to remind myself *[memory strategy - reminder]*. For example, "together" I wrote the word on my palm. When I saw my cousin, I asked *[social strategy - question for clarification]*, "What's the meaning of this word in Chinese? How do you pronounce it? *[cognitive strategy - translation]*" .... After he'd explained to me, I would try to remember the word *[memory strategy - rote-memorising]* '

S10 said, 'Grammar is important to my English development. After doing grammar exercises for some time, I could finish new ones more quickly. I could read much faster, too. My listening ability grew as well. I did not need to ask the girls to repeat several times before I could understand.'
Memory strategy - practising (formal)
+ Metacognitive strategy - self-evaluation (whole paragraph) |

To further demonstrate the individuality of this group of students in using strategies, the strategy use of six students will be employed, including three effective (S01 S02, S18) and three less effective language learners (S07, S09, S19). The classification is based on their language results from internal and external exams in addition to the researcher's observation of their English ability.

Table 2. A comparison of the number of incidences of strategies reported in 6 main categories between effective & less effective language learners

Main strategy categories	Effective language learners			Average	Less effective language learner			Average
	S01	S02	S18		S07	S09	S19	
Metacognitive	42	40	37	**39.7**	14	33	21	**22.7**
Cognitive	7	8	8	**7.7**	1	7	4	**4.0**
Memory	25	10	19	**18.0**	8	13	12	**11.0**
Social	13	19	8	**13.3**	2	16	10	**9.3**
Affective	2	2	1	**1.7**	2	3	3	**2.7**
Communication	2	1	0	**1.0**	1	5	4	**3.3**
Total no. of strategy incidences	91	80	73	**81**	28	77	54	**53**

This reveals that the 3 effective language learners used a greater variety of strategies and used them more frequently than the 3 less effective ones. This is made evident by the respective average use of 28 (81 incidences) and 20 (53 incidences) strategies between the effective and less effective groups. The 3 effective learners reported using a wider range of metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and social strategies than the 3 less effective learners. They also reported that they had used such strategies more often. On average, the effective group used 11.3 metacognitive strategies (39 7 incidences) in comparison to 8.0 (22.7 incidences) of the less effective group, 4.0 cognitive strategies (7 7 incidences) to 2.3 (4.0 incidences), 6.0 memory strategies (18.0 incidences) to 3.0 (11.0 incidences), 4.3 (13.3 incidences) to 2.7 (9.3 incidences). This basically supports the findings of the research carried out by O'Malley & Chamot (1990:143), that effective language learners use a greater variety of strategies and use them more frequently than the less effective language learners.

However, the less effective group reported using more affective and communication strategies than the effective one, contrary to the findings of O'Malley & Chamot (1990) mentioned above. The less effective group in this research reported using 2.0 affective strategies (2.7 incidences), whereas the effective one reported using 1.3 (1.7 incidences). It was also found that the less effective group used more types of affective strategies than the effective ones. One possible explanation for their greater use of affective strategies is that because of their inadequacy in the language, these students were more prone to anxiety and had to use affective strategies to gain control over their learning. Furthermore, the less effective group reported using 2.0 communication strategies (3.3 incidences), whilst the effective one reported using 1.0 (1 incidence). Their relatively higher use of communication strategies could be explained with reference to their language limitations; the less effective language learners had to use communication strategies more frequently in order to get their meaning across. It was found that all three less effective language used '*circumlocution*' to help them convey their meaning.

Also contrary to O'Malley & Chamot's work was the finding in this study that one less effective learner reported using a wide range of strategies and using them as frequently as the effective ones did (See Table 3). Classified as an ineffective language learner in the research, S09 reported a wider variety of strategy use than S02, an effective language learner (24 and 22 strategies, respectively). Also, S09 reported more strategy incidences than S18, also considered an effective language learner (77 and 73 incidences, respectively), though both interviews lasted for one hour.

Table 3. A comparison of the number of strategies reported in 6 main categories between effective & less effective language learners

Main strategy categories	Effective language learners			Average	Less effective language learners			Average
	S01	S02	S18		S07	S09	S19	
Metacognitive	14	9	11	**11.3**	5	10	9	**8.0**
Cognitive	4	3	5	**4.0**	1	4	3	**2.3**
Memory	10	4	4	**6.0**	4	2	3	**3.0**
Social	6	4	3	**4.3**	2	3	3	**2.7**
Affective	2	1	1	**1.3**	2	2	2	**2.0**
Communication	2	1	0	**1.0**	1	5	4	**2.0**
Total no. of strategy incidences	38	22	24	**28**	15	24	22	**20**

The total number of strategies used for effective language learners S02 & S18 were 22 & 24 respectively. It seems that the effective and the less effective language learners could have very little difference in the number of strategies they use for learning the language (See S09 & S19 in comparison). This raises the question of 'What makes effective language learners different from the less effective ones in terms of strategy use?'

To differentiate the effective from the less effective language learners, we should perhaps take quality in use of strategies into consideration, in addition to the number and frequency of strategies learners use. Both S01 and S09 reported using *'questions for clarification'*, but they demonstrated a different quality in their use of the strategy When failing to comprehend people's English, S01 adopted a 3-step approach. She said:

> When I first arrived, I had serious listening problems. When I did not understand people's English, I asked them. When I asked, I usually followed a 3-step procedure. First, I asked them to repeat what they said. If I still did not understand, I would ask them to explain it to me. Sometimes, I still did not understand, I would then pretend to understand and asked again indirectly.

When S01 encountered comprehension problems, she first asked people to repeat what they had said, a common practice in everyday conversation which

most people would act upon without much hesitation. In comparison, asking people to explain things is a more demanding request. During such explanations, conversations would be temporarily interrupted, which some people might find irritating. S01 seemed to understand this reasonably well and had established her own principles concerning the way questions should be asked, thus possibly enhancing the chance of getting help from others.

In addition, S01 seemed willing to take responsibility for her own learning, as shown by her use of another strategy, '*analysing*', before asking people for help. She explained, 'For example, she said, 'In English, similar sounds may be spelled differently, for example, '*sion*' and '*tion*'. I remember once I heard the word '*civilisation*', I was not sure of the spelling of it, so I asked my classmates for the spelling, then confirmed it in the book.' In the same example, she also demonstrated her flexibility of strategy use by incorporating '*questions for clarification*' with other strategies.

Being the most frequent user (12 incidences versus 5.8 incidences in average) of the '*questions for clarification*' strategy in the group, S09 appeared rather dependent on getting help from people, showing a lower level of responsibility for her own language learning. This can be demonstrated by the following extract from her interview. She said:

> '*When I did not know how to express myself in writing, I asked people for help. Sometimes the English girls, sometimes the Hong Kong Chinese students. For example, I asked about what the title was about and what I should write in the essay   .. After asking .... I would write it down.*'

The results of this research generally support O'Malley & Chamot's (1990:118) findings as mentioned previously Moreover, this research suggests that effective language learners may use more metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and social strategies and use them more frequently than the less effective ones. The less effective language learners, on the other hand, tend to use more affective and communication strategies than the effective ones. Furthermore, it can be the quality in use of the metacognitive, cognitive, memory, social strategies which differentiates the effective language learners from their less effective counterparts.

Conclusion

The investigation looked into the ways second language learners differed in tackling their learning problems, from the perspective of language learning strategies. To illustrate their individual differences, the strategy use of three effective and three less effective language learners was presented. This resulted in the proposal that what differentiates the effective from the less effective language learners is the way they use the strategies. The number of strategies employed and the frequency of the strategies used may not necessarily be the dominant explanation of successful or less successful language learning.

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