A Study on Affective Factors and Strategy Instruction in the Self-access Mode: Focusing on the Treatment[15]

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Background of the project

The idea for this study grew out of the concern of the administrators of the National University of Río Cuarto, (UNRC), Argentina, about the number of teachers and researchers in this institution who do not have an adequate knowledge of English. The UNRC is a small (10,000-student), but progressive university, located in the center of the country, about 600 kms. from Buenos Aires. The UNRC is very active in international collaboration with European and American universities. The fact that there are still a number of teachers and researchers who do not have a reasonably good command of English is, of course, a drawback. Most of these scholars from the School of Humanities, School of Engineering, School of Sciences and School of Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine have already had some experience in learning English, and feel quite frustrated by their current language abilities. In many cases they have attempted to take English courses more than once but have quit their classes before having made any significant improvement. I felt that there had to be affective factors playing an important role in this discouraging situation and that the implementation of a strategic self-access mode for learning could be beneficial. The present study was supported with a grant from the UNRC.

This research builds on earlier research on:

a) learning strategies in both ESL and EFL (See, for example the studies by Bialystock, 1981; Brown y Palincsar, 1982; Cohen, 1987; Dansereau, 1985; Nunan, 1996, O´Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1989; 1993; 1996 and Wenden and Rubin, 1987);

b) affective factors such as self-efficacy and attitude (See, for example, Kahn and Prickel, 1998; Pajares and Johnson, 1996; and Pajares and Kranzler, 1994) and

c) the use of technology in EFL learning. (See, for example, Bush, 1997; Garret, 1991; Joiner, 1997; Kern, 1995; Lafford and Lafford, 1997; Longhini et. al, 1998; Martínez-Lage, 1997; and Stock, 1993)

It was also inspired by Oxford's claims (1997) that consideration of individual differences in attribution and self- efficacy as well as differences in

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[1] This is a refereed article.

learning styles, learning strategies and motivation could give us a clearer insight into how knowledge is constructed.

Goals of the project

I decided to investigate the effect of self-efficacy and attitude on strategies-based EFL learning of sophisticated adults working in an autonomous and interactive multimedia setting. By "sophisticated adults" I mean worldly-wise and experienced learners. My research questions were the following:

- Among sophisticated adult EFL learners who are exposed to a combination of interactive multimedia instruction and strategies training, what is the relation between initial differences in a) self-efficacy expectations, b) attitude about autonomy, c) attitude about computer assisted language learning, d) attitude about learning strategies and language proficiency gains, respectively?
- Among sophisticated adult EFL learners who are exposed to a combination of interactive multimedia instruction and strategies training, how do initial differences in a) self-efficacy expectations, b) attitude about autonomy, c) attitude about computer assisted language learning, d) attitude about learning strategies compare to attitudes after the treatment ended?

Treatment

The treatment consisted of 40 one-hour weekly teacher-guided sessions on learning strategy instruction for autonomous learning in tandem with weekly three-hour self-access sessions of EFL learning (independent work), with emphasis on the development of the listening ability. The self-access sessions permitted the students to work autonomously, on their own multimedia PCs, in their offices or at home, applying the learning strategies that had been presented and practiced during the weekly session with the teacher. Apart from this, students were recommended to take advantage of, at least one monthly teacher-student conference hour. Office-hours served as a tutorial offered to students so that they could use me, the teacher, for intellectual and affective support. I acted as a knowledgeable partner, clarifying language points, guiding students to find solutions to learning problems, and discussing with them the course contents, the approach, the materials and any other topic that interested them. On my part, I made use of these meetings to elicit their opinions and feelings about the treatment in general and their use of strategies in particular, as well as their feelings toward the self-access experience (qualitative data). An ad-hoc questionnaire was used to keep a record of these meetings in order to track students' development.

Before starting

The sample was self-selected and consisted, initially, of 67 subjects (the initial sample diminished significantly and the causes for dropping out are discussed under "Findings"). The average age was 38. These students had already expressed their needs informally when they let the administrators of the UNRC know about their desire to take an EFL course. At the moment of enrolling in the course, students had to answer a bio-data questionnaire which also inquired about their area of specialization and level of knowledge of other foreign languages. At the same time, in order to assess students' self-perception of their language proficiency, they were asked to rate their proficiency in English by answering a scaled-item question (very good / good / fair / poor). (See Appendix 1).

First meetings

During the first meetings the subjects completed three semantic differential scales in Spanish to assess attitudes toward a) technology (see Appendix 2), b) interactive multimedia instruction (see Appendix 3); and c) autonomous learning and self-access (see Appendix 4); and two different Likert-type scales to assess a) expectancy beliefs (see Appendix 5) and b) attitude toward learning strategies (see Appendix 6). All of these scales were repeated during the twelfth month of the treatment. Subjects were also administered the TOEFL prior to the beginning of the treatment, after six months, and at the end of the treatment. Furthermore, they were administered the Style Analysis Survey (SAS), (Oxford, 1990, translated into Argentine Spanish by Longhini, 1997), in order to help students know about their own learning preferences. This was done during the third class, after the teacher had presented the course, discussed its characteristics and familiarized the students with concepts such as "learning styles," "autonomous learning," and "self-access." The results of the SAS were used to further "tailor" the course. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), (Oxford, 1990, translated into Argentine Spanish by Longhini, 1997) was administered during the ninth weekly one-hour session with the teacher. By this time, the students had already received "awareness training" (Oxford, 1990), that is, they had been made aware of the existence of language learning strategies and their potential to help them accomplish various language tasks.

Strategy instruction

Essentially, the course was based on a selection from Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies (1990). The strategies selected were those that lend

themselves better to autonomous learning with multimedia computers in an EFL context (as different from ESL). Some of them had to be slightly adapted to fit our culture, and they were complemented with others that emerged from the students and the situation. The strategies that were emphasized were those for the development of the listening ability; however, many speaking strategies were also discussed and applied to the extent that they helped improve the listening skill. Students received "completely informed training" (Brown et al., 1980) on language learning strategies; that is, there was explicit teaching about the nature of strategies, their significance, how to use them, how to monitor them, how to evaluate them and how to transfer them. As students were supposed to apply the strategies learned in the classroom to the independent learning they did on their own with their computers and other materials at home or in their offices, emphasis was placed on transference. In the weekly one-hour teacher-guided lesson, strategies were integrated into class materials, and students were encouraged to discuss and reflect on their use and applicability for further transfer to the learning of contents when working autonomously in the self-access mode.

I soon realized that getting students initiated into explicit strategic learning training is not a simple task, and it is not something that can be done overnight because it requires dedication, reflection and patience. After making sure that students, in general, had grasped the concept of "learning strategy" and, more specifically "language learning strategy," I shifted the focus to listening strategies. I introduced the topic of "listening" in one's mother tongue: what it implies, how it is done and when it is successfully accomplished. This raising of students' consciousness refers to what they do when they listen in their own native language and was fundamental to start speaking of listening in English and the affective factors related to it. The comparison between the strategies and the processes used for listening in one's native language and those used in listening in the foreign language was a recurrent topic throughout the training period. Time and again, when students "complained" about not being able to understand the speaker on the tape or on the screen, we analyzed the possible reasons that could be preventing them from understanding and then related the situation to a hypothetical or experienced L1 situation. This was done for the students to reflect on what they meant by "I cannot understand" when listening to English, and how different their perception would be, even with the same amount of "understanding" in their native language. Here, notions such as "the informative value of lexical words," "the informative value of grammatical words," "situational context," "grammatical context," and "guessing meaning from context" came up. Speaking about my own language learning history was very useful as a way of illustrating the theoretical concepts, and also for students to know that I shared their feelings. Anecdotes about successful communication in spite of little individual word misunderstandings on my first visits to an English speaking country delighted the students. I found that my students—also being adults—felt better when they realized that I had gone through situations similar to the ones that they were experiencing. Not only strategy use demonstration, but also

strategy assessment demonstration, was integrated into the weekly lesson materials. That is, I tried to give students explicit training on how to evaluate the effectiveness of a strategy and to discard or replace ineffective strategies. I illustrated my point by verbalizing the processes I went through when working on a given task, showing them how after monitoring my comprehension, and finding it unsuccessful, I decided to try something different and, for example, capitalize more on my knowledge of the world and pay closer attention to the context of situation. When giving training in strategy assessment, emphasis was placed on "finding the Spanish equivalent" and then "contextualizing, contextualizing, contextualizing" as an effective strategy to learn how to "think in English," for example. Students were assigned the task of trying out this strategy and comparing the results with other memorization strategies that they had been applying.

Reflecting on learning preferences and strategy use

From the very first meeting, students were introduced to the concept of "strategy" in a broad way. Then we discussed the use of strategies in everyday life, and the usefulness of strategic behavior, always illustrating the discussion with examples. Next I started to get students familiarized with the concept of "language learning strategy" and we commented on the different techniques we all resort to when trying to memorize something, or when trying to understand a complicated paragraph we are reading. The conversation led us to the differences in strategies used by people of different ages, different levels of instruction and different cultures. Only then, after students had been introduced to the concept of "language learning strategies" and had made comments on the use of these strategies, were they administered the Argentine Spanish version of the SILL[2][6]. Another scale the students completed was the Style Analysis Survey (SAS), (Oxford, 1990). Before administering the SAS, I tried to raise students' awareness of the existence of different learning styles and how they can determine learning preferences. We discussed the advantages of certain styles for certain tasks, always making it clear that no one style is necessarily better than the others. Students made interesting contributions to this discussion. Before completing the SAS, students were informed about the existence of other learning style surveys and even of other methods for finding out about learning styles. They were advised to keep in mind that surveys are not absolute, that they just show traits, and that these traits can generally be altered, made more flexible, and even changed for one's own benefit. The relation between learning preferences and the use of learning strategies was quickly established and thoroughly discussed, and always illustrated amply with examples provided by either me or the students. I encouraged discussion about "good strategies" not necessarily being "good" for everybody to get students convinced that each

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[2] In translating the SILL, I had tried to make sure that enough context was given for students to understand the questions, and had taken special care to use equivalents that sounded familiar to our culture, for example, I translated "flash cards" as "tarjetones."

individual has to find the strategies that suit herself/himself best, according to her/his learning traits.

Students were stimulated to reflect on and compare their results on the SAS to the image they had of their own learning styles and to try to find a relation between their preferred way of learning and their favorite strategies, if any. During practically every class I tried to encourage reflection about the extent to which a better knowledge of one's preferences for learning can make learning more enjoyable and can lead to improved results.

The self-access mode and interactive training with the multimedia computer

The most salient characteristics of the self-access mode—the managing of one's own learning, freedom, responsibility and self-assessment—were introduced and discussed in detail during the first meetings.

I presented the interactive multimedia courseware for EFL learning that was going to be used, and explained how to use it. Once the students got to know how to use the software, I started prompting, and eliciting from students themselves, ways to apply the strategies we worked on in class to their independent learning with the computer and more conventional materials such as tapes, dictionaries, grammar books, notes, etc. Throughout the whole treatment we discussed the strategies that they were using when working autonomously, the ones that they found most useful, the ones that they had not even tried, the ones that they preferred, etc. This transference of strategies from "in class" to independent learning took time and effort. Metacognitive strategies (following Oxford's taxonomy (1990): "planning," "monitoring," "directed attention," "selective attention," etc.) were a special concern, for they were indispensable for students to manage their autonomous learning. Great emphasis was also placed on the application of cognitive strategies (following Oxford's taxonomy (1990): "repetition," "grouping," "taking notes," "inference," "activating background knowledge," etc.), to prevent the entertaining and motivating effect of the multimedia computer from misleading the students, who could think they were investing their time in learning, when they were actually just letting screens pass in front of their eyes.

Findings

The correlation of TOEFL scores with attitude scales showed that those subjects with below-the-mean attitudes toward technology, toward self-access and toward expectancy beliefs scored significantly lower (P<.10) on the first TOEFL, those subjects who scored above the mean on the learning strategy

scale obtained a higher TOEFL score than those who scored below the mean on the same scale, the difference; in this case, however, was not significant.

Of the nineteen subjects that had been identified as having a favorable attitude toward the treatment, six dropped out of the course.   The same happened with eleven out of the twenty two subjects that had been identified as having an unfavorable attitude. Twelve months after the start of the course, the average attendance was about twenty students. An ad-hoc survey showed that the causes of attrition did not have to do with the course itself but with reasons related to scheduling conflicts, lack of time, and career plans.   However, I consider that it is quite reasonable to think that the self-access mode of learning does not suit all personalities. This could be the reason why several people quit the course after realizing they would have to take responsibility for their own learning.   In fact, this has become a controversial issue in the field of autonomous learning**3**[7]. The 24 students who remained in the course answered anonymous questionnaires (later coded and analyzed) about their feelings toward the treatment.   All of them emphatically expressed enthusiasm about the approach as well as their desire to continue learning English independently and with the aid of strategy instruction. Some of them stated that they liked "this way of studying" but they were not satisfied with their achievements because they had not "devoted enough time to English."   Some of the unedited reponses to the question "Do you like this way of learning: working autonomously with your computer and attending a weekly strategy instruction lesson with the teacher?" were: "Yes, because I can manage my study time and I enjoy it;" "Yes, I find it interesting, motivating, attractive;" "Yes, because it's a natural way of learning" (emphasis mine); "Yes, because it's an innovating methodology and gives very good results;" "Yes, because it's fun and I learn;" "Yes, I find it entertaining and easy;" " Yes. I find it entertaining, creative, enjoyable;" and "Yes, because I can manage my times." Some of the students stressed the fact that self-access work in tandem with strategy training with a teacher was what they liked the most. They said, for example: "I like self-access because I can go at my own pace, and I like the classes because they're flexible and they respect our needs."   It was also apparent that students valued the opportunity for socialization and collaboration that the strategy instruction lesson gave them: " I like the classes with the teacher because it's important to me to have the chance to interact with people. I'm an introvert and what I need is talking to people."

When the battery of affective scales administered during the 12th month was compared with the initial results, the comparison showed that there was a significant difference (α=.004) between the mean scores on the scale to assess attitude toward autonomous learning and self-access (see Graph 1).

The comparison of the TOEFL total score means at 0 and 12 months of treatment also showed a positive significant difference (P<.10).   However, no

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[3] See, for example, Cotterall, 1995 and Walter, 1997.

significant difference was found between the score means in attitude scales and the TOEFL scores administered during the 12th month (see Graph 2).

Conclusion

This study dealt with an important problem in most Argentine universities – and very likely in most Latin American universities- which is that a significant number of teachers and researchers do not have an adequate knowledge of English, even when the great majority of them have taken English courses more than once in their lives. I developed a hypothesis that affective factors play an important role in situations like these, so I decided to look at the effect of a self-access mode of learning with the complement of strategy instruction. The strategy instruction treatment I used was intended to foster autonomy and facilitate the learning of a foreign language on the part of sophisticated students; likewise, the self-access mode lent itself as the "ideal" setting for this type of student. What the qualitative aspect of this study showed was that students gradually improved their attitude toward the treatment, and progressively accepted my guidance with enthusiasm (they had looked somewhat suspicious and diffident at the beginning), followed my explanations with attention and became actively involved in discussions about learning strategies, learning styles and autonomous learning. At the same time, their TOEFL scores showed gains.

As for the treatment, I was pleasantly surprised to know that students had found that learning strategies were so useful that they began applying the strategies, e.g., social and affective strategies that we had practiced in class, in their daily work in their laboratories. Regarding the data collection instruments, I still wonder what the relation is between what they said that they did when I asked them to verbalize their strategies, and what they were really able to do at the time of processing the learning material on their own. However, at the same time, I know this is a concern I share with most researchers involved in topics related to internal processes.   I also suspect that sometimes students cannot find the way to express what they do when trying to read or listen for full understanding, and that they consider training in speaking about strategies a waste of time. My experience has shown that one has to be very cautious about insisting on the verbalization of internal –and even external—processes, at least when working with sophisticated adults. The good thing is that, in the end, many "reluctant" students are persuaded by the positive and pervasive results of becoming familiarized with language learning strategies.

At the same time, the attrition rate, i.e., the number of participants who dropped out of the course –quite typical of self-selected samples[4]--may have obscured the results of the statistical analysis.

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[4] A group of students involved in a research project is considered self-selected when they volunteer for the research.

I think we should continue examining the ways in which students learn and especially how affective factors influence their learning, trying to improve, in all possible ways, our measuring instruments, so that we get more reliable data. At the moment, in an attempt to go beyond the findings here, I am working on case studies of some of the students who stayed in the course until the end.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1
INFORMACION PERSONAL

1. Fecha _____

2. Nombre _____

3. Facultad _____

4. Especialidad _____

5. Edad _____   6. Sexo: _____

7. Lenguas extranjeras que entiende o habla   a- _____

    b- _____

    c- _____

8. Nivel de competencia en esa o esas lenguas   a- _____

    b- _____

    c- _____

9. ¿Cómo evaluaría su nivel de competencia en inglés comparándolo con el de sus colegas, la gente que trabaja en su Departamento?

    Excelente ☐   Bueno ☐   Regular ☐   Pobre ☐

10. ¿Cuál ha sido su mejor experiencia en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera?

    _____

    _____

Appendix 2

¿Qué opinión tiene usted sobre la **tecnología**?
   Exprese su opinión marcando con una cruz en la escala que aparece más abajo. Por ejemplo:

cara		X				barata

En este caso la cruz indica que, en su opinión, la tecnología es mas bien cara y no barata, pero no es muy cara.

LA TECNOLOGÍA

simple						compleja
desagradable						agradable
incomoda						cómoda
divertida						aburrida
novedosa						rutinaria
innecesaria						necesaria
útil						inútil
valiosa						despreciable
ineficaz						provechosa
beneficiosa						perjudicial
difícil						fácil
confusa						clara
asequible						inasequible
incomprensible						comprensible
complicada						elemental
tediosa						fascinante
excitante						inhibitoria
imprescindible						sustituible
frustrante						gratificante
conocida						desconocida
fría						cálida
insegura						segura
atemorizante						Amistosa

Appendix 3

¿Qué opinión tiene usted sobre la **computadora multimedial**?
   Exprese su opinión marcando con una cruz en la escala que aparece más abajo. Por ejemplo:

cara				X		barata

En este caso la cruz indica que, en su opinión, la computadora multimedial es mas bien barata y no cara, pero no es muy barata.

LA COMPUTADORA MULTIMEDIAL

desagradable						agradable
estresante						cómoda
divertida						aburrida
novedosa						rutinaria
innecesaria						necesaria
útil						inútil
organizada						desorganizada
ineficaz						provechosa
beneficiosa						perjudicial
difícil						fácil
confusa						clara
asequible						inasequible
incomprensible						comprensible
complicada						elemental
tediosa						fascinante
práctica						impráctica
motivadora						desmotivadora
imprecisa						exacta
amistosa						atemorizante
aburrida						interesante
gratificante						frustrante
imprescindible						sustituible
excitante						inhibitoria
fría						cálida
segura						insegura
desconocida						conocida

Appendix 4

¿Qué opinión tiene usted sobre el **aprendizaje autónomo e independiente (auto-acceso)**?
Exprese su opinión marcando con una cruz en la escala que aparece más abajo. Por ejemplo:

fastidioso					X	agradable

En este caso la cruz indica que, en su opinión, el aprendizaje autónomo e independiente es muy agradable.

APRENDIZAJE AUTÓNOMO (AUTO-ACCESO)

simple						complejo
desagradable						agradable
incómodo						cómodo
divertido						aburrido
novedoso						rutinario
innecesario						necesario
útil						inútil
organizado						desorganizado
ineficaz						provechoso
perjudicial						beneficioso
difícil						fácil
confuso						claro
asequible						inasequible
relajado						estresante
complicado						elemental
tedioso						fascinante
práctico						impráctico
motivador						desmotivador
confiable						inseguro
inhibitorio						excitante
sustituible						imprescindible
frustrante						gratificante
amistoso						atemorizante
desalentador						alentador
conocido						desconocido
interesante						monótono
rígido						flexible
tranquilizante						preocupante

Appendix 5

ESCALA DE NIVEL DE AUTO-CONCEPTO Y AUTO-EFICACIA

A continuación Ud. va a encontrar aseveraciones con respecto a **su nivel de expectativas en el aprendizaje del inglés**. Después de leer cada ítem, por favor indique con una cruz la respuesta que se adecue a su situación. Note que puede elegir de entre cinco grados distintos, entre dos extremos. Trabaje rápidamente, es mejor poner lo primero que piense.

	EXC.	M. Bueno	Bueno	Regular	Malo
1- Para las lenguas extranjeras soy					
2- Para la lengua inglesa soy					
3- Para leer en voz alta en inglés soy					

	M. Fácil	Fácil	Normal	Difícil	M. Difícil
4- Aprender inglés anteriormente me ha resultado					
5- Leer comprensivamente en inglés me resulta					
6- Pronunciar palabras en inglés me resulta					
7- Comunicarme oralmente en inglés me resulta					
8- Escribir una nota o una carta sencilla en inglés me resulta					

	Muy Pla-centero	Placentero	Normal	Desagra-dable	M. Desa-gradable
9- Aprender inglés anteriormente me ha resultado					
10- Comunicarme oralmente en inglés me resulta					

	Muy Util	Util	Indife-rente	Relativa-mente útil	Inútil
11- Aprender inglés anteriormente me ha resultado					

	M. Cómodo	Cómodo	Indife-rente	Bastante Estresante	Estre-sante
12- Comunicarme oralmente en inglés me resulta					
13- Escribir una nota o una carta sencilla en inglés me resulta					

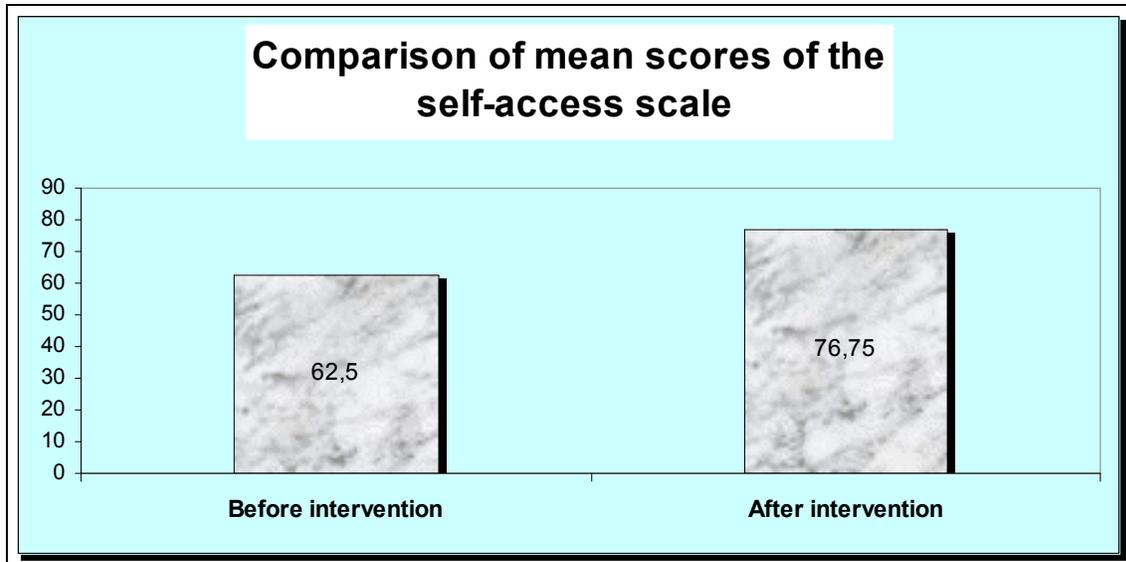|	M. Fácil	Fácil	Difícil	M .Difícil	Imposible
14- Entender conversaciones en inglés me resulta					
15- Entender inglés en la televisión o en el cine me resulta					
16- En actividades de comprensión auditiva, comprender la idea general me resulta					
17- En actividades de comprensión auditiva, aparear la idea de lo que escucho con la respuesta más aproximada me resulta					
18- En actividades de comprensión auditiva, entender conversaciones cortas entre dos personas me resulta					
19- En actividades de comprensión auditiva, responder preguntas sobre lo que escuché me resulta					
20- En actividades de lengua escrita, completar una oración con opción múltiple					
21- En actividades de lengua escrita, encontrar el error en una oración me resulta					
22- En actividades de lectura comprensiva, encontrar la misma idea dicha con otras palabras me resulta					
23- En actividades de lectura comprensiva, responder preguntas de comprensión de opción múltiple me resulta					

Appendix 6

ESCALA DE ACTITUD SOBRE ESTRATEGIAS DE APRENDIZAJE

A continuación Ud. va a encontrar aseveraciones con respecto al uso de **estrategias de aprendizaje**. Después de leer cada ítem, por favor indique con una cruz la respuesta que se adecue a su situación. Note que puede elegir de entre cinco grados distintos, entre dos extremos. Trabaje rápidamente, es mejor poner lo primero que piense.

	Siempre	General-mente	A veces	Rara vez	Nunca
1- Soy optimista en cuanto a descubrir formas de estudiar que me faciliten el aprendizaje					
2- Me gusta decidir qué estudiar y cómo					
3- No recurro a nada en especial para estudiar vocabulario, sólo repaso mis apuntes o leo del libro					
4- Después de cada clase repaso en casa el material visto..					
5- Para estudiar vocabulario nuevo recurro a distintas y variadas técnicas.					
6- Regularmente repaso temas dados hace tiempo.					
7- En la clase de inglés prefiero que la profesora me diga qué hacer y cómo, a tener que decidirlo yo.					
8- Creo que a esta altura de mi vida no hay mucho que pueda hacer para mejorar mi forma de aprender el inglés					
9- Creo que lo que puede ayudarme a aprender inglés es la tecnología, pero no lo que yo ponga de mi parte.					
10- En casa o en mi lugar de trabajo ensayo pronunciación y expresiones en cualquier momento del día.					
11- Creo que hay mucho que yo puedo hacer para aprender inglés con éxito.					
12. Busco oportunidades para hablar inglés con nativos o gente que hable bien en inglés.					
13. Creo que una actitud positiva con respecto a mis condiciones para aprender inglés me puede ayudar.					
14. Cuando miro TV o veo películas en inglés, presto atención a lo que dicen y cómo lo dicen					

Graph 1

Comparison of mean scores of the self-access scale

	Before intervention	After intervention
Value	62,5	76,75

Graph 2

Comparison of Toefl overall average before and after intervention

Average

Before intervention — After intervention

Toefl results