

## Are Learning Strategies Used by EFL Learners in Mexico Different? <sup>1</sup>

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The vast majority of language learning /acquisition studies which have been published reflect research done in English as a Second Language (ESL) situations in English speaking countries. The absence of information concerning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is strikingly evident especially in the research concerning learning strategies. This was brought to my attention by a group of Applied Linguistics graduate students at the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla (UDLAP).

The students involved were enrolled in a curriculum development course that I was teaching at the time. As a part of the course they had been reading extensively in the area of learning strategies and discussing different ways in which strategy training could be used with the EFL students at the University. Learning strategies are normally defined as the conscious and unconscious steps used by second language learners to help in the acquisition. The graduate students had read about a variety of factors such as language level, sex, age, nationality/culture, field of study, personality types, learning styles and motivational level that were identified by researchers (Reid 1987; Ehrman & Oxford 1988; Oxford 1988; Oxford & Nyikos 1989; Ehrman & Oxford 1995; Oxford & Shearin 1995) as affecting the choice of learning strategies and were interested in exploring if these factors would be the same for Mexican students studying in their home country.

As a project for the course, they suggested that the group research the types, range and frequency of language learning strategies being employed by the EFL learners at the University and parallel them with those of published ESL studies. Their basic hypothesis was that their results would differ because the subjects they would use were in a foreign language learning environment where there was little chance to use the L2 outside the classroom, thus the opportunity to develop the strategies would be lessened.

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The principle purpose of this article is to report on the findings of the study by this group of graduate students. In order to do so, the article will discuss the following:

- Participants
- Variables Studied
- Instruments
- Hypotheses
- Results

### **Contributions of the Study**

#### *The participants and the variables analyzed*

The EFL subjects in the study were at the time of the study attending English classes in the UDLAP. The school is a small (approximately 6,000 students), private university which was originally established in 1945 as a college for North American residents; however, the school now has approximately a 94% Mexican population studying various academic degrees and can be considered representative of any private university in Mexico.

English courses are obligatory for all native Spanish-speaking students unless they can prove that they have obtained the proficiency level required by the University. The majority of the students take between 3-5 EFL courses during their time in the University. The learners in the study ranged in age from 17-24 and come from a variety of different states in Mexico. The majority are from the middle and upper-middle class and have approximately the same socio-economic profile as the ESL university students which have been used in most published strategy studies with the exception that they are all Mexicans studying in Mexico.

The strategy instrument was applied to 380 EFL students at a variety of English levels (beginner through advanced) of classes which were randomly chosen by the researchers. The sample showed a close balance of males and females studying a variety of undergraduate majors. Two intermediate Spanish as a Second Language classes (38 students) were included into the sample to evaluate the differences that national origin could have on learning strategies. These learners were all North Americans on a one-semester exchange program from different universities in Canada and the

United States to learn Spanish in Mexico. Also, fifty-five students from a nearby bilingual (Spanish/English) high school were used in order to analyze if students who had studied K-12 in a bilingual track situation where approximately 50% of the content courses had been taught in English would exhibit differences in their range and frequency of learning strategies from non-bilingual track high school students. The variables which were statistically analyzed were those which had been established in previous studies as being factors which influenced learning strategy choice and frequency. These variables were: Sex, type of previous EFL experiences, language levels, ethnic origin, major fields of study and motivational levels. The results were analyzed by means of t-tests and were determined to be significantly different if the probability level was equal to or less than five percent ( $P \leq .05$ ).

### *Instruments*

For validity the students chose to translate the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) instrument developed by Rebecca Oxford (Oxford, 1990) into Spanish. They had found this instrument frequently cited and used in published studies and wished to contrast the results found in ESL environments using the SILL with their results in the EFL situation.

The non-English speaker version of the SILL is a 50 item Likert-scaled, self-report instrument which assesses the frequency with which the respondent uses a variety of strategies for language learning.

It differentiates between two basic strategy types: direct strategies which Oxford (1990) identifies as those strategies which directly involve the acquisition of the target language and indirect strategies which are those that do not directly involve the L2 but which are indispensable for the learning process. Each of these two strategy types is composed of three categories that are identified on separate sections of the SILL. Classified under direct strategies are (1) memory strategies (recall of language items by various methods such as reviewing, using images and creating mental associations), (2) cognitive strategies (processing of the language input and preparation for output for example scanning, using deductive reasoning, summarizing and note-taking) and (3) compensation strategies (techniques used when the learner does not understand like coining words, asking for help and using linguistic cues).

The indirect are subdivided into (1) metacognitive strategies (learners control of the language learning process such as centering their attention, setting goals and self-evaluating their progress), (2) affective strategies (regulation of emotions, motivations and attitudes by lowering the learning anxiety, wise risk taking and discussing feelings with other students), and (3) social strategies (learning through interaction with other students through studying with peers, and asking for clarification or correction).

The second instrument used was a background questionnaire created by the students to obtain general information about the participants in the study such as age, sex, major field of study, number of years studying English and any other information pertinent to the individual variables in their studies.

### *Hypotheses and results*

The basic hypothesis of the Master's students in the Curriculum Development class was that their results would find differences between the previously published studies and those done with Mexican EFL learners. In stating their hypotheses, the Master's students decided to formulate them according to the findings in literature and then establish if they were disproved in the EFL situation. A secondary purpose for the study was to identify the strategies which the Mexican population was or was not utilizing in order to design a strategy awareness program for the Mexican students.

Previous studies (Powell & Littlewood 1982; Cross 1983; Oxford et al. 1988) proved there were differences which were weighted towards the ability of female language learners in their frequencies of strategy use. The first hypothesis that there would be a difference between male and female employment of strategies could not be proved. The statistical analysis showed that gender played no significant role in the Mexican EFL strategy use. Females were indistinguishable from the males and used approximately the same strategies and with the same frequency.

Because this result was the opposite of those found in published studies, they decided to look at the results in the articles more carefully. What was found was that females had surpassed the males principally in socially oriented strategies. When the findings were re-analyzed, the students noted that all the Mexican EFL participants had rated social strategies and skills very highly reflecting what had been previously noted for Hispanic stu-

dents in published studies. Latin American learners come from backgrounds where social skills are a core value of the culture and used much more frequently than in North American situations where individual learning is more prevalent. To the graduate students this indicated that the strategy awareness program the social strategies would need less emphasis.

According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989:295), years of language learning and positive self-perception by the learners of their proficiency have been found to effect strategy use. Thus, the second hypothesis that the students decided to analyze was the relationship between the amount of time the second language had been studied and the range and frequency of strategies. They chose to apply the SILL to fifty EFL senior high students who had studied K-12 at a well known bilingual (Spanish/English) school with an equal number of students who had transferred into the same school two and a half years previously. The latter group of students was taking EFL classes and was not in the bilingual track program. Again, no significant differences were found between the two groups. This result surprised the graduate students because strategy training had been an important part of the bilingual track learners' program for several years. In a follow-up visit to the school, the non-bilingual track teachers were interviewed. It was found that the non-bilingual group was regarded as being generally more highly motivated than the bilingual group. The teachers felt this was due to the fact that they had to put forth a greater effort to compete with their bilingual peers. Motivation was then interpreted as the determining factor in the results since it had been noted in previous studies that the motivation to learn and a positive attitude toward the language and its culture has "a pervasive influence on the reported use of specific kinds of strategies, as well as...the overall frequency of strategy use in general" (Oxford & Nyikos 1989: 295).

Another analysis was also conducted with the University students to check the second hypothesis that length of time in learning the foreign language would effect the strategy results. Classes of beginning through advanced level students were analyzed to see if there would be a difference in the types of strategies being employed. This hypothesis was also disproved. The beginning students were found to use the same range of strategies as the more advanced; however, the frequency of the use of the strategies changed significantly. The cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies increased proportionately in frequency from the high beginners through the advanced EFL levels. No change in frequency was found in the memory

and affective strategies. These results indicated to the graduate students that over a four-semester period of time the EFL students were learning how to use the strategies more efficiently and, thus, increased in frequency.

Reid (1987) and Oxford (1989) found in their studies that ethnicity and national origin were also determinants of strategy use. This controversial viewpoint of national origin as a strategy determinant caused the graduate students to use this as their third hypothesis. To compare the published findings to those of their study, North Americans in intermediate Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) classes were compared with intermediate-level Mexican EFL students. The results of the strategy inventory for the two groups were homogeneous except for two strategy types. The North American SSL learners used significantly more compensation strategies (gestures, synonyms coining words, etc.) than did the Mexicans and the EFL students made much more use of metacognitive strategies (arranging and planning their learning, paying attention, etc.) than did their counterparts.

These results indicate that differences in strategy use could be due not to ethnic origin, but to the nature of the language learning situation. The North Americans studying second language courses in the target culture were obliged to use compensation strategies when encountering a language problem in order to communicate their needs to non-English speakers whereas the Mexicans who were taking not only EFL classes but also courses in their majors, found it more necessary to plan and organize their learning wisely than did the students who were only studying Spanish.

Another much cited variable effecting strategy choice has been academic specialization. Reid (1987), Ehrman & Oxford (1988) and Oxford & Nyikos (1989) found that major fields of academic study was a significant factor in the choice of language learning strategies. The fourth hypothesis became that students of similar fields of study would exhibit preferences for certain language learning strategies more than would students studying in a different major. This hypothesis was proved.

The academic major was shown in the study to have a statistically significant influence on the choice of language learning strategies, for example civil engineering students showed a partiality for memory strategies and biology majors were more inclined to cognitive strategies. Physics and industrial engineering students preferred compensation strategies while food, mechanical, electronics and computer systems majors used more metacogni-

tive strategies. Also, a preference for social strategies was found for law, architecture, and accounting students. These results also correspond with other studies that found majors in areas of social science and business can be grouped into the same strategy categories. No significant differences were observed for the affective strategies.

Motivation has repeatedly emerged as the most important variable in learning. The motivated language learner has a greater range of strategies to choose from and employs them more appropriately than does the less motivated learner (Dornyei 1990; Bacon & Finnemann 1990; Nyikos & Oxford 1993). The fifth and final hypothesis that motivation is a factor in the range and frequency of strategy use was also statistically proved. In order to analyze this, first an instrument based on the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) by Gardner & Lambert (1972) was created to ascertain the types as well as level of motivation of a group of 102 intermediate EFL students. The results showed that requirement motivation (language class is taken only because it is obligatory) had the weakest measure with 23% of the students rating it as their personal motivator. Instrumental motivation (a desire to learn the language for external reasons, i.e., job, promotion) was indicated in 32% of the subjects and integrative motivation (an internal desire to learn the language) was chosen by 45% of the students sampled.

The statistical results of the SILL showed significant differences in the choice and frequency of use of strategies between the group which had rated requirement as their principle reason for taking English and the other two groups. The instrumentally and integratively motivated students employed cognitive, compensation and metacognitive strategies much more often than did the requirement motivated students. The three groups showed no significant differences ( $P > .05$ ) in their use of memory, affective nor social strategies. When a t-test was done to analyze if there were any significant differences between the instrumental and integrative groups, no differences could be detected in range or frequency.

#### **Contribution of the results to the University Strategy Awareness Program**

The intention of this article was not to discuss the Strategy Awareness Program (SAP) which was started after the strategy study presently being discussed, however, the results which were obtained provided valuable information to establish the Program for EFL academic-at-risk learners. The

findings that influenced decisions concerning strategies to emphasize or de-emphasize were the following:

### *Memory Strategies*

No significant differences were found in any of the studies that the use of Memory Strategies in the EFL student was especially important, in fact, these were not rated highly by any of the Mexican groups. When the results of the Memory Strategies were compared with those of the North American exchange students, it was clear that the SSL learners had a tendency to use more (but not significantly) and with a slightly greater frequency. If a larger sample of SSL learners had been used, perhaps a significant difference could have been detected. The results that there were no large differences between the two groups came as a surprise since it is a favorite study skill for the EFL students.

The Mexican educational system emphasizes memorization from primary through high school; however, only rote memory is stressed (Johnson, 1993), not the positive memory strategies (grouping, keywords, semantic mapping, etc.) which the SILL evaluates. This indicated that the strategy awareness sessions should help the at-risk students expand their application of other types of memory skills.

### *Cognitive, Compensation and Metacognitive Strategies*

In the study, the use of Cognitive, Compensation and Metacognitive Strategies had significantly increased over four semesters with only one-hour contact time four days a week in the English classroom. This result with non-at-risk groups indicated that the strategy awareness sessions could by explicitly teaching strategies to enable the student with dysfunctional patterns of learning to progress more rapidly in the EFL class.

### *Social Strategies*

The Mexican learner comes into the EFL class with strong social skills which in the strategy awareness sessions need only to be reinforced.

### *Affective Strategies*

As the Memory Strategies these were not chosen often by the Mexican student, neither were the Affective Strategies (self-encouragement, discussing feelings with peers about the language learning process, or lowering



anxiety through music and meditation). This outcome is not surprising either because the EFL learners in Mexico live within their own culture and language and, thus, do not have the alienated feelings that occur in an ESL situation. For this reason, the strategy awareness sessions will not stress these strategies although they will be provided to specific learners with high levels of learning anxiety.

### **Final comment**

Through this activity that began as a group project, the graduate students and their teacher were able to learn first hand about the types of strategies Mexican EFL learners were employing in their University English classes. From the results, it can be noted that the students' original hypothesis that the EFL students' strategies would not be the same as those learners in the ESL environment was sometimes proved and at other times disproved.

The results of this study should not be interpreted as definitive findings. The research reported upon had various constraints such as the participation of a reduced number of subjects all of which attended the same university. If this type of study is to be repeated, it should be with more EFL learners from a wider range of socio-economic levels and educational situations. Nor, should the results from our study in any way negate the valuable work done in English speaking countries; it simply adds another dimension that should be considered. English teachers in foreign countries often have realities other than those projected in ESL literature, but we are the ones who must conduct the research and make the necessary adaptations for our situation and for our EFL learners.

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