

Identifying Language Learning Strategies: An Exploratory Study¹

Jorge E. Pineda^{2*}
Universidad de Antioquia

Abstract

This is a small scale, inductive, ethnographic study whose objective is to explore the language learning strategies used by the students of different languages at a language program at the university level. Students of English, French, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and German participate in the study. Three instruments are used to gather data: an open-ended questionnaire, a series of lesson observations, and a semi-structured interview. The students report the use of several strategies for the learning of grammar, reading, speaking, writing, and listening.

Keywords: communicative competence, ethnography, language learning strategies (LLSs), language teaching and learning

Resumen

Este es un estudio etnográfico de pequeña escala e inductivo cuyo objetivo es explorar las estrategias de aprendizaje usadas por los estudiantes de diferentes lenguas en un programa de idiomas a nivel universitario. Estudiantes de inglés, francés, portugués, chino mandarín, japonés, italiano, y alemán participan en el estudio. Tres instrumentos son usados para recolectar información: una encuesta abierta, una serie de observaciones de clase, y una entrevista semi-estructurada. Los estudiantes reportan el uso de varias estrategias para el aprendizaje de gramática, lectura, habla, y escucha.

Palabras claves: competencia comunicativa, etnografía, estrategias de aprendizaje de un idioma, enseñanza y aprendizaje de las lenguas

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² Este estudio se deriva de una investigación para optar al título de magíster en didáctica del inglés en la Universidad de Caldas y tuvo lugar durante el segundo semestre del año 2007. [This study is part of research carried out to obtain the degree of Master in the Teaching of English from the *Universidad de Caldas* and it took place during the second semester of the 2007 school year.] Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jorge E. Pineda, Universidad de Antioquia, Escuela de Idiomas, Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia. E-mail: jorgeeduardopineda@gmail.com

The purpose of this study is to explore the language learning strategies (LLSs) which university students of different languages use to develop their communicative competence. The situation of this particular program, called *Multilingua*, can be described from an institutional point of view since the university invests around \$900 million pesos (approximately US\$500,000.00) every year to offer students instruction in seven different languages. The program is offered as a scholarship to undergraduate students with outstanding academic performance.

According to REUNE (*Red Universitaria de Extensión*), an official university database, during the second semester of 2006 there were 1,764 students enrolled in the program, while 365 students either dropped out or failed. Forty four percent of these claimed academic overload, 36% work overload, and 16% other reasons such as illness, as the reason for their withdrawal from the program. I hypothesize that, when students have to choose whether to carry on with their language study or to carry on with their undergraduate studies, they choose to drop out of language study because they lack the appropriate skills to cope with both activities. Therefore, exploring the LLSs students use may be a starting point for designing a LLSs training program for both students and teachers which will encourage persistence in the language program.

Context

The *Multilingua* program is offered to undergraduate students beginning from the second semester of undergraduate study. The program has been in place since 1997 and it is not part of any curriculum. The program offers seven languages: French, English, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and German. Every program has 5 levels, and every level is 80 hours long, during a semester. The program promotes the development of communicative competences, student understanding of the culture where the language is spoken, and autonomy in language study.

Research Objective

To explore the LLSs which students of the *Multilingua* program use to develop their communicative competence.

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Theoretical Framework

In this section of this paper, I will discuss and answer the following questions: What are LLSs? What are the characteristics of LLSs? How can LLSs be divided? Why are LLSs important for second language (L2)/FL learning and teaching? Finally, I will refer to some studies

which pinpoint the importance of researching LLSs to improve learning and teaching processes.

What are LLSs?

The answer to the first question can be traced back to 1987. At that time, Wenden (1991) and Rubin (1994) suggested that LLSs are plans, routines, and operations used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information. They suggest that the objective for using LLSs is memorizing language information, recalling that information, and using it in a different situation. In other words, they suggest that LLSs refer to what students do to learn and also to regulate their learning.

Later, Richards and Platt (1992) defined LLSs as an intentional behavior that helps learners understand, learn, and remember new information. They suggested that there are different reasons for using LLSs. The difference between the Wenden and Rubin definition and Richards and Platt's lies in the fact that, according to Richards and Platt, LLSs are used *consciously*, that is, learners are aware of what works best for them, according to the learning objective or situation (1992).

Oxford (1990) broadens the scope of the definition by stating that the objective of using LLSs is to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, self directed, effective, and even transferrable to new situations. Finally, Cohen (1998), like Richards and Platt, establishes that LLSs are consciously selected by the learner. Language learning strategies can therefore be defined as conscious, selected behaviors used for overcoming certain educational challenges which depend on the matter to be solved. They are used to memorize information, to synthesize it, or to use that information in speaking or writing.

What are the Characteristics of LLSs?

The answer to our second question is established by Rebecca Oxford (1990). She states that LLSs allow learners to be more self-directed. They are problem-oriented and can be taught. They are transferable to new situations and also are influenced by factors such as gender, age, social status, etc. Language learning strategies are complex behaviors which may change according to the learning task, and they vary from one person to another.

How May LLSs be Divided?

Rubin (1994), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Cohen (1998) give an answer to our third question. Rubin (1994) divides LLSs into three groups: *learning* strategies which contribute directly to the learning process; *communication* strategies which are used by

learners while they are performing in the language (the danger is that when learners use them, these strategies may produce the sensation that a student's linguistic level is higher than it really is); and *social* strategies which are used by learners as they engage in situations with others in order to practice the language.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggest that LLSs can be divided into three groups: *metacognitive* strategies, *cognitive* strategies, and *socio-affective* strategies. His first group (metacognitive strategies) refers to the activities learners use to plan, to pace, and to monitor their own learning. The second group (cognitive strategies) refers to the activities learners use to obtain, store, retrieve, and use language information. The third group (socio-affective strategies) refers to activities that are related to social-mediating activities and interacting with others.

Oxford (1990) establishes two general groups into which LLSs may be divided: *direct* strategies and *indirect* strategies. The first group refers to the activities that have a direct influence on the learning process such as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies which help learners to overcome knowledge gaps in order to continue the communication. The second group refers to the activities that have an indirect influence on the learning process. Oxford states that metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies are part of the second group. Cohen (1998) also suggests two groupings for LLSs: those which refer to the *activities* learners use to help them obtain and store language information, and *language-use* strategies which help learners to retrieve language information and to perform in the language.

Why are LLSs Important for L2/FL Learning and Teaching?

Language learning strategies are important for L2/FL learning and teaching because they develop learning autonomy, they develop language competence, and they are tools for active and self-directed involvement. Effective LLSs can also help “unsuccessful” students realize why they are “unsuccessful,” and assist learners in planning their learning (Brown, 1994; Chamot, 1999; Cohen, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Gregersent, 2001). Likewise, they help teachers plan their teaching (Rubin, 1994; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Griffiths & Parr, 2001; Lessard-Clouston, 1997; Murat, 2000).

Studies show the importance of advancing LLSs research. Murat (2000) states that the ultimate aim of the empirical work conducted in this area is to develop knowledge that can be useful for improving language learning and teaching in L2 and FL classrooms. However, attempts at making strategy instruction a central component of instructed language learning remain at the level of isolated initiatives rather than

being part of mainstream pedagogical recommendations and practices. Manchon's conclusion is that although some progress has been made in the conceptualization of strategies and their benefits, more grounding and theoretical work is needed in the field.

Type of Study

This was an ethnographic, small scale, inductive study (Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Freeman, 1998). It was small in that only 120 students answered the questionnaire, 7 students were interviewed, and 120 hours of lesson observation (LO) were carried out. It was inductive because the categories used to analyze the data were taken from Oxford's (1990) classification and categorization of LLSs, in her strategy inventory for language learning (SILL). Also, it could be considered to be an ethnographic study since there was observation of a phenomenon in the location where it was taking place, in a natural setting, involving interaction with the participants, and, in the end, the research describes the behavior of a group (Freeman, 1998).

Participants

The participants in this study were students of French, English, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and German at a public university non-credit language institute-style program. The students were chosen at random and they were from different levels of instruction [from the beginner level (1) to the advanced level (5)]. Participants were young adults, between 19 and 25 years old, of a low to middle-low economic strata, and their native language was Spanish.

Instruments

The three instruments used in this study were: A questionnaire, an interview, and a series of LOs. The questionnaire contained 24 questions. The questions were adapted from the questions used by Oxford (1990) in her SILL. The objective of the questionnaire was to identify the strategies the students use. Each question represented an activity which, in turn, represented a particular learning strategy. The questions were also chosen on the basis of how observable they were.

The interview was semi-structured, open-ended, and it contained six questions: there was a friendly question whose objective was to put the informant at ease, and there were five hypothetical/descriptive questions whose objective was to have the informants report what they do in specific situations. Such situations were hypothetical language tasks: a grammar quiz, an oral presentation, a listening task, a reading task, and a written composition.

The LO form contained the research question as well as the date, language being studied, and the level. The objective of this instrument was to detect what sort of LLSs the students used while in the classroom. For the researcher, using the LO forms was an extraordinary opportunity to witness compensation, affective, and social strategies in action. It was also a tremendous chance to record the effectiveness of the strategies students used when preparing a language task. The information from the LOs was kept in protocols according to the date and language observed to facilitate its retrieval and analysis.

Findings

The findings will be reported task by task, beginning with an overview of different grammar-learning activities. Then, we will look at oral presentations, written compositions, listening tasks, and finally, reading tasks.

Grammar

For grammar learning, the students who participated in this study use cognitive³ and memory strategies. The students recognize and use formulas in new contexts and they associate the new information with the information they already have internalized. The LOs showed evidence of the use of memorization, cognitive, and compensation strategies. This means that when having students prepare a grammar task, a quiz, exam, or any other activity that involves the mastering of a grammatical structure, the students in the program rely mainly on memorization strategies.

It seems that the learning of grammar is still viewed by students as purely memory-based as opposed to being an organic and progressive discovery. For example, Pablo, a student of English, reported the following: *Trato de leer muchas veces las estructuras para que se grabe el patrón de frases en la cabeza.*⁴ Students under the research consider that grammar is more easily learned if the structures are memorized in isolation. On a positive note, later, the students tried to use the new formulas in new contexts and also tried to deduce rules from the exercises given in class.

An example of deducing grammar rules and practicing specific language examples for the learning of grammar was stated by Luis (a

³ It may be important to remind the reader that cognitive strategies, as previously defined by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) in this article, are "the activities learners use to obtain, store, retrieve, and use language information."

⁴ [I try to read the structures many times so that the sentence model gets stuck in my head].

student of French) in the following terms: *Intento de varias formas, por ejemplo, si es con varios verbos, intento cambiar las palabritas primero y después reformar la oración completamente, después me imagino más ejemplos y los escribo.*⁵

It should be added here that textbooks play a very important role in the development of LLSs since they are based on the use of particular strategies such as cognitive and memory strategies. For example, some textbook tasks are designed to have the students link images and words, and other tasks are designed to have the students analyze grammatical structures. Such textbook strategies help students master the explored topics.

Oral Presentations

For the preparation of an oral presentation, the students reported the use of *compensation* strategies; these are used when knowledge is lacking on a specific matter and the student effectively fills these “gaps” with supplementary knowledge or a mother tongue translation. Compensation strategies enable the learner to use the L2 for comprehension or production, as explained by Oxford (1990). The use of compensation strategies was evident in an LO from an English class when a teacher asked one of the students a question. The student tried to answer the question in English, but he lacked the vocabulary to get his intended meaning across, so he decided to switch into Spanish and asked *¿Cómo se dice —?*⁶ Another example of this strategy appeared in another LO which recorded the situation with these words: “Before saying something in English, one of the students first said the same thing in Spanish with a question intonation to make sure the idea was correct.” In still another LO, students said something in English, and immediately translated their words into Spanish to make sure that everybody understood what was meant.

Compensation strategies demonstrate the linguistic level of the students. The students reported the use of cognitive and compensation strategies that help them retrieve information and fill-in empty spaces in their speech when there is a lack of linguistic knowledge. An example of the use of cognitive strategies to prepare an oral presentation is evident in the following LO taken from an Italian lesson:

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The students have to prepare a conversation; they play the roles of the characters of the situation in a restaurant. After practicing the conversation

⁵ [I try in various ways. For example, if it's with various verbs, I try to change the little words first, and then to completely redo the sentence. After that, I imagine more examples and write them down].

⁶ [How do you say—?]

several times, they should have memorized the pronunciation and the grammar, so that finally the students can repeat the conversation fluently.

Written Compositions

For the writing of a composition, the students write directly in the target language; but when there is an aspect they do not comprehend, they write it first in Spanish and look it up later in a dictionary, or they look for help from different sources: asking a classmate, a teacher, or by doing a search on the internet. For example, Juan, a student of German, reported this: *Me imagino la frase en español pero con palabras alemanas. Hago la frase en español, ya los sustantivos que uso en esa frase los pongo en alemán en la mente y luego los transcribo.*⁷ The native language is viewed as a tool. Since in a Colombian classroom everybody shares the same language, Spanish, it is commonly used to clarify concepts, rules, certain target language structures that need to be explained, etc.

The students also mentioned their cognitive strategies such as the use of resources like the dictionary, textbooks, and notes taken in class. Pedro, a student of Italian, stated the following: *Miro qué tema de gramática hemos visto para saber qué herramientas tengo para escribir.*⁸ In this case, Pedro goes to his notes on grammar to have more tools at his disposition for writing in Italian.

The students also reported the use of several other strategies for preparing compositions, including: note-taking, summarizing, word-grouping, associating, and translating. They reported that they use *note-taking* before writing begins. In these notes, they designed outlines and kept in mind the expressions, words, or structures studied in class which they considered to help them in the writing process. The students also *summarized* before writing, sometimes writing a summary of the topic, or a series of ideas that would help them to write more fluently later. Students also described that before writing they would *group words*, that is, they would take the words that were taught previously and try to use the new ones together with them. In addition, before writing a composition, students reported that they often relate what they know with the information they want to learn, which we could call the strategy of *association*. Language learners informed the researcher

⁷ [I imagine what the sentence would be like in Spanish, but with German words. I create the sentence in Spanish, putting the nouns to be used in the sentence in German in my mind, and then I transcribe them].

⁸ [I look at which grammatical topic we've (already) seen to know which tools I (already) have in order to do the writing].

of having compared linguistic aspects that they are challenged to learn with similar linguistic aspects of their native tongue, Spanish. Finally, the student participants also informed the researcher that they *translate* what they have to write into Spanish. The custom is for many of them first to write in Spanish, and then, afterwards, to translate the composition word-by-word into the target language.

For me, the writing of compositions was the most difficult task to observe and investigate, since it seems that, in general, teachers, students, and textbooks are neglectful of it. According to my observations, there is an average of one written activity per every five pages of *Multilingua* textbook. Even so, half of these were mixed with grammar practice and were not *pure* (content-based, imaginative) written assignments. Teachers, likewise, tend to ignore writing tasks, likely because these assignments imply more afterhours work for them. In general, students consider writing exercises to be the simple writing of essays. They do not seem to consider the mundane task of taking a phone message to be “writing.” There is, therefore, a great need to reconceptualize the meaning of writing.

The students only mentioned the use of cognitive strategies for the preparation of written compositions although, according to the researcher’s LOs, compensation strategies are also being used. The strategies used in writing tasks are actually very difficult to observe, since writing is often considered to be more of a private skill that should not be developed in the classroom. As a consequence of this educational outlook, the promotion of writing tasks has been neglected in the *Multilingua* program, which proposes communicative courses to students.

Listening Tasks

For the preparation of a listening task, the students often repeat several times what they hear. For example, when asked how he deals with listening assignments, Pablo, a student of English, said: *Escuchando y repitiendo. Si no entiendo, vuelvo y lo pongo. O repitiendo partecitas especificas donde no haya entendido una palabra.*⁹ In my classroom observation, it was evident that there was a real promotion of this strategy on behalf of the teachers. The repetition of linguistic aspects such as affixes that determine the differences between masculine or feminine adjectives, plural and singular nouns, with certain structures such as those of questions or negative sentences, are among the aspects both teachers and students repeat when performing a listening task. For

⁹ [Listening and repeating. If I don’t understand, I go back and write it down. Or repeating little specific parts where I may not have understood a word].

example, this LO from an Italian class states (T = teacher, S = student): “The T has Ss listen to some conversations where Ss have to spot the difference between masculine and feminine adjectives.”

Another observation made in the research is that when teachers bring a listening exercise to the classroom—they end up practicing it more than the students, in many cases. In part, this occurs because the text is often far beyond the linguistic abilities of the students. It also may be due to distracting background noise, or simply because the students do not feel like listening.

Reading Tasks

When reading, *Multilingua* students use two general sources for grasping the message of the text: linguistic and nonlinguistic ones. Among the linguistic sources, the students use the context to determine the meaning of unknown words or expressions. For instance, Isabel, a student of Portuguese, reported: *Empiezo a leerlo como si fuera en español. Si encuentro una palabra o una estructura que desconozco, trato de sacarla por contexto. Si no la encuentro por contexto, busco en el diccionario.*¹⁰

The students also break the expressions into smaller parts and structures to get to their meaning. Among the nonlinguistic clues (Oxford, 1990), students use their dictionaries and the images accompanying the texts to comprehend the meaning. For example, Clara, a student of Mandarin Chinese, shared details about some specific characteristics of this language. When learning Mandarin on the beginner’s level, the characters in the textbooks have the phonetic spelling above them, but as the learning process advances, this pronunciation aid is utilized less and less. The student commented that she uses this clue but that, ideally, students should not be dependent on it. She said: *En los primeros niveles de chino, encima del carácter está la pronunciación. Lo ideal es irse alejando de esa pronunciación. Ya después, en el tercer libro, los diálogos no tienen esa pronunciación.*¹¹

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has aimed at exploring the LLSs used by students of several languages. The results showed that the students use

¹⁰ [I begin to read it as if it were Spanish. If I find a word or a structure that I’m not familiar with, I try to understand it from the context. If I can’t understand it from the context, I look for it in the dictionary].

¹¹ [In the first levels of Chinese, on top of the character is the pronunciation. The ideal thing to do is to get away from using that pronunciation. Later, in the third book, the dialogues do not have that pronunciation].

strategies based on their mother tongue (Spanish), such as translating. Interestingly, the study also showed that there is a tendency to deduce word meanings from the context and even to write and speak words in new contexts which denotes high-level thinking processes and means that the students are being creative.

Reading and listening are ideal sources of language input for students. Paradoxically, teachers and textbooks often use such input for another purpose: to obtain linguistic *output* (such as the production of a written text) from students.

When approaching a text to read, students tend to resort to their native language to understand it. They use Spanish cognates (true or false ones) to guess the meaning of unknown words; even to translate titles and subtitles while determining a topic. When all is said and done, the students use a mixture of strategies (such as skimming and scanning), and the ubiquitous custom of translating words into Spanish also persists. They don't seem to have been taught that using their native language as a basis for the learning of a foreign language may be problematic at further levels of the language-learning process.

Finally, the observation should be made that there is a strong link, with great potential to be exploited, between the strategies students use, the strategies teachers promote, and the strategies proposed by the textbooks. Many textbooks base their exercises and tasks on the use of certain LLSs, while students and teachers choose their strategies based on their favorite learning styles and educational beliefs. Yet very often, teachers do not promote certain textbook strategies because these do not seem to them to match the students' learning styles or the teachers' pedagogy. The outcome is that teachers are not applying the most effective LLSs.

Teachers and students need to be trained on the identification and use of the strategies that best suit their learning styles and preferences through *strategy instruction*. This study, with its evidence of the faulty and inefficient strategies being used by students, shows that training on the identification and use of LLSs may produce positive language learning results, helping students to reach their study objectives and become more independent and effective language students.

It is worth mentioning that before training students on the use of LLSs, it is paramount to train teachers in strategy instruction and assessment. Teachers should be trained on how to implement strategy instruction in their everyday pedagogical practices. By taking training courses, teachers will be made aware of the strategies their students need, and they will be able to expose their students to the strategies which will help them to experience a more effective learning process.

In conclusion, there is a need for more research on the use of LLSs and the factors that affect the student's choice of strategies such as student gender, age, cultural background, beliefs, etc. The identification and exploration of LLSs is critical for helping students have a more effective learning process. In view of this, research which will broaden the theories of LLSs will also make current language education practices more effective.

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El Autor

***Jorge E. Pineda** es licenciado en enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras de la Universidad de Antioquia, con un magíster en didáctica del inglés, Universidad de Caldas. Es miembro del grupo de investigación en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de las Lenguas Extranjeras (EALE). Se desempeña actualmente como profesor de la Sección Servicios de la Escuela de Idiomas de la Universidad de Antioquia.