Beyond language learning strategies: A look at the affective link

Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović
Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

The paper focuses on primary school learners' use of language learning strategies on the one hand and, on the other, on interactions between language learning strategies and three affective learner factors: motivation, language anxiety and attributions. A study carried out with Croatian EFL learners is described and discussed. The author concludes that there is a connection between language learning strategies and the affective factors investigated. The insights into this connection can be used to raise the awareness of what could be done to facilitate foreign language learning.

Second language[1] researchers have been interested in language learning strategies for a long time now but the first concrete attempts to investigate the phenomenon were those made by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). These authors compared the learning behaviours of good and poor language learners and came up with lists of strategies that were considered promising in leading the language learner to successful learning. The numerous other studies (e.g. Cohen 1998; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990) have allowed us to get a deeper insight into language learning strategies but it might be fair to say that we have so far only touched the surface of this interesting and important phenomenon.

Cohen (1998:5) defines language learning strategies as conscious processes that the language learner selects during learning and is at least partially aware of. The pupose of selecting these processes is the enhancement of learning. The stress on enhancement is present in Ehrman and Oxford's (1990:312) definition of strategies as conscious behaviours by means of which language learners improve the acquisition, storage, retention, recall and use of new information on language.

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[1] In this paper the terms *second language* and *foreign language* will be used interchangeably to denote the learning of a non-native language. In this particular context the distinction between *second language acquisition* and *foreign language learning* is not considered relevant.

Affective learner factors have often been pointed out as potentially relevant for understanding language learning strategies. Thus, Oxford and Crookall (1989) claim that strategy use is associated with variables such as motivation and other personality factors. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) argue that while language learning strategies are considered a cognitive variable, they have an affective origin because learner affective characteristics are most probably responsible for strategy use. They also claim that strategies have a motivational basis because they develop from prior experience and the learner has, in the first place, to be motivated to use a strategy. Nyikos (1990) points out that strategies engage the language learner with the language input at a deeper cognitive level. One may postulate that this deeper engagement is associated with the interaction of affective factors.

Motivation is one of the factors that may exert a strong influence on the way language learners use learning strategies. Although in strategy literature this learner factor is often mentioned as relevant, the relationship between strategies and motivation has been the main focus of very few studies (e. g. Kaylani 1996, Levine, Reves & Leaver 1996). The need to study the link between the learner's predisposition to use certain strategies and his motivational pattern has been reiterated in literature (e.g. Skehan 1989, Cohen 1998). One of the main conclusions of the good language learner project in Canada (Naiman, Frölich, Stern & Todesco 1978) concerns the need to relate strategies to motivational (and personality) factors in the learner. Nunan (1996) found that strategies training had a significant effect on learner motivation.

Language learning anxiety is another key affective learner factor. In the context of language learning, anxiety is defined as a feeling of fear or uneasiness experienced when confronted with the need to use a (second/foreign) language one does not feel competent in. In some language learning models (e.g. Gardner's socio-educational model, Gardner and MacIntyre 1993) it is assigned an important role and is considered to influence several other variables determining the language learning process. Gardner and MacIntyre (1989) point out that language learning anxiety develops as a consequence of repeated negative experiences with learning or using the second language. The cumulative effect of the fear initially connected with particular language learning situations results in associating the fear exclusively with the language being learned. Like Spilberg (1962), who claims that the effect of anxiety changes as a function of ability level, Gardner and MacIntyre maintain that language learning anxiety decreases with increasing language competence since the more proficient the learner becomes, the more positive experience in learning and using the new language he obtains. Some authors insist on the facilitating aspects of anxiety (Spilberg 1962, Kleinmann 1977, Scovel 1977, Williams 1991) claiming that such a beneficial influence occurs with high-ability learners (as opposed to average- or low-ability language learners), at higher levels of learning or when the anxiety levels are low.

One of the aspects that language learning anxiety may affect are learning strategies. It is hypothesized that language learning anxiety may influence what strategies the language learner will employ in his efforts to master the language. Ely (1986) found

a connection (though weak) between classroom participation and anxiety as measured by the *Language discomfort scale*. Gardner et al. (1979) demonstrated that anxiety may not always be implicated in language learning achievement. Diary studies (Bailey 1983) have revealed important effects of language learning anxiety on learning. Kellerman (1991) maintains that an inability to use strategies effectively may be a consequence of classroom anxiety. Apparently, the relationship between language learning strategies and language learning anxiety cannot be expected to be simple or straightforward but is probably influenced by the complex effects that other relevant factors have on both of these variables.

What foreign language learners attribute their success or failure in language learning to may in some ways, yet to be discovered, determine how they go about learning. They may decide to stick to the learning strategies that do not lead to success if they ascribe failure to factors that are not under their control (e.g. language aptitude). Or, learners may keep looking for ever more effective ways of learning the language if they ascribe success or failure to factors that are unstable, internal or accessible to their control (e.g. effort).

THE STUDY

Aim

The possibility of there being important connections between language learning strategies and affective learner factors suggested in the findings of several major studies in the area has motivated us to look more closely into this relationship between strategies and affect in case of primary school learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). We have focused on three affective factors: motivation, language anxiety and attributions.

Sample

The sample included 137 Croatian eighth graders (aged 13-14) from five primary schools in Zagreb. 96 of them had been learning EFL for eight years while 41 had learned it for five years at the time the study was carried out. For all of them EFL was a compulsory school subject.

Instruments

The subjects' *language learning strategies* were assessed by means of SILL[2] (Oxford 1990). The 5.1 Version of SILL was translated into Croatian (the subjects' L1). As strategy measures the overall SILL mean as well as the means for the six strategy groups isolated by a factor analysis (Mihaljević Djigunović 2000) were computed. The six strategy groups isolated were the following:

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[2] Strategy Inventory for Language Learning.

- memory strategies - activities aimed at remembering new words
- communicative strategies - self-initiated out-of-class practice activities with an implied communication component
- metacognitive strategies - activities aimed at organizing, monitoring and self-managing own learning
- cognitive strategies - activities implying language analysis, comparing English to Croatian, looking for rules
- comprehension strategies - attempts to make sure the meaning gets across correctly and the communication partner's meaning is correctly understood
- socioaffective strategies - activities aimed at self-encouragement, self-rewarding and sharing with others feelings about language and learning itself.

Since language learning *motivation* is a socio-psychological category and, thus, influenced by the socio-cultural context in which a language is being learned (Gardner 1985), it is essential that the instruments used to assess motivation of particular language learners take into account the characteristics of the learning context, that is the validity of the measure is a key consideration.

In order to capture the full scope of the motivation of Croatian learners of EFL, the phenomenon was measured by an instrument developed specifically for Croatian learners (Mihaljević Djigunović 1998). It consisted of 38 Likert-type five-point scales of agreement measuring three types of motivation and two demotivators isolated by the factor analysis procedure. The types of motivation were: pragmatic-communicative, implying the learner's wish to use English for practical purposes coupled with the wish to be able to communicate with foreigners; integrative motivation, referring to the learner's wish to become a member of the cultural-linguistic group that speaks English as L1; and affective motivation, indicating that the learner wishes to know English because he likes the English language as such. The first demotivator was termed the teaching-setting demotivator and referred to being demotivated for learning English because the learner disliked the methods of teaching used in the course, the teaching materials were not stimulating, or because of some quality attached to the teacher (e.g. the teacher's English was not good enough, the teacher was partial in assigning grades and the like). The second demotivator, the learning difficulties demotivator, implied that the learner did not like learning English because he found it too difficult and complicated to learn or that he lost ground and could not cope with the learning material because of deficient knowledge base (frequent among non-beginners).

Language anxiety was measured by the five-item questionnaire developed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989).

The *attributions questionnaire*, adapted from Julkunen (1989), had five-point Likert type scales of agreement accompanying statements attributing success to knowledge, effort, luck, easy assignments, interest of the assignments and enjoyment in doing the assignments, and statements attributing failure to a lack of each of these.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during regular English lessons. In most cases the subjects' EFL teacher left the classroom after introducing the researcher and, where this did not happen, the researcher made sure that the teacher did not observe what the subjects were writing in the questionnaires.

Results and discussion

Frequency of strategy use

Table 1 presents the overall SILL mean and means for the six groups of strategies used by Croatian EFL learners.

Table 1: Means and SD for whole SILL and strategy groups

Strategy group	Mean	SD
SILL	2.65	.60
Memory	2.31	.71
Communicative	3.04	.77
Metacognitive	2.89	.87
Cognitive	2.73	.74
Comprehension	3.09	.78
Socioaffective	1.86	.66
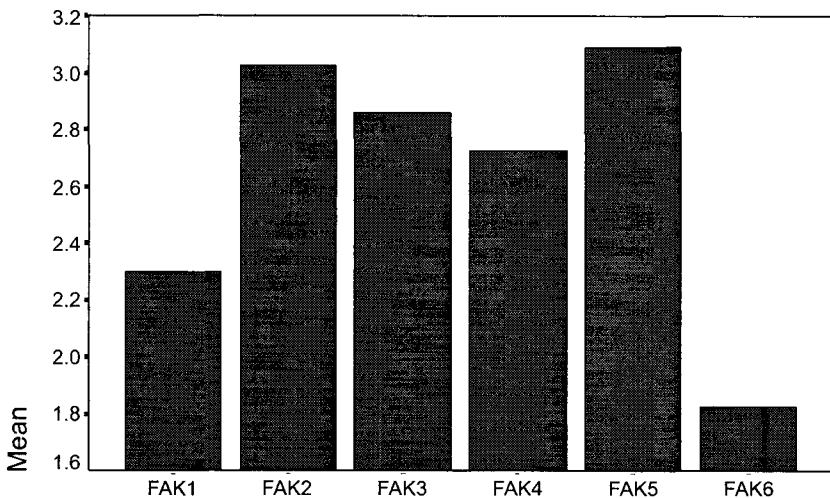
(FAK 1 - memory strategies, FAK 2 - communicative strategies, FAK 3 - metacognitive strategies, FAK 4 - cognitive strategies, FAK 5 - comprehension strategies, FAK 6 - socioaffective strategies)

Figure 1: Means for the six strategy groups

The results indicate that the subjects' overall use of strategies was in the medium range. The same is true for most of the individual types of strategies. Comprehension and communicative strategies were used most frequently and memory and socioaffective strategies were used least frequently.

Language learning strategies and motivation

The overall motivation mean for the sample and the separate means for the three types of motivation are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and SD for motivation

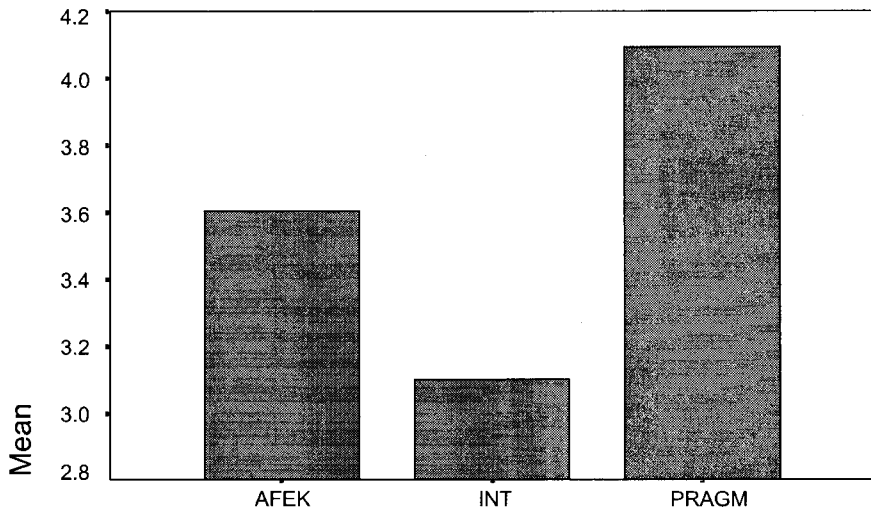|	Mean	SD
Overall motivation	3.93	.49
Affective motivation	3.58	.76
Integrative motivation	3.11	1.09
Pragmatic-communicative motivation	4.09	.56

Figure 2: Means for the three types of motivation

As can be seen above, the subjects reported above average overall motivation. The strongest type was pragmatic-communicative motivation, while integrative motivation was the least intensive type. The same pattern was found in an earlier study with Croatian primary school learners (Mihaljević Djigunović 1998) as well as with a sample that comprised a wide age range (12 - 24 years) (Mihaljević 1991).

To get an insight into the relationship between language learning strategies and learner motivation correlation coefficients were computed between the variables (Tables 3 & 4).

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between overall motivation and learning strategies

	Motivation
SILL	.47**
Memory	.27**
Communicative	.57**
Metacognitive	.46**
Cognitive	.38**
Comprehension	.26**
Socioaffective	.17

**p<.01

Strategies were found to correlate significantly with motivation. The more motivated the learners were to learn English the more frequently they reported using strategies.

When motivation was correlated with each of the six strategy groups, all except the correlation with socioaffective strategies were found statistically significant. Thus, the more motivated the learners were the more memory, communicative, metacognitive, cognitive and comprehension strategies they reported using. The lack of significant correlation with socioaffective strategies may be due to the fact that the use of this group of strategies among Croatian EFL learners is generally reported as very low (Mihaljević Djigunović 2000).

SILL means were also correlated separately with each type of motivation. All the correlations were statistically significant (Table 4).

Table 4: Correlation coefficients between overall SILL and motivation types

	SILL
Affective	.41**
Integrative	.33**
Pragmatic-communicative	.36**

**p<.01; *p<.05

To get a deeper understanding of the connections of learning strategies and motivation, correlation coefficients were also computed between each strategy group and each of the motivation types (Table 5).

Table 5: Correlation coefficients between motivation types and learning strategies

	Memory	Communi-cative	Meta--cognitive	Cognitive	Compre-hension	Socio--affective
Afecctive	.22*	.47**	.37**	.26**	.24**	.17*
Integrative	.18*	.42**	.25**	.28**	.21*	.14
Pragatic--communicative	.14	.53**	.32**	.9 **	.23*	.13
Teaching setting	.20*	.20*	.28**	.02	.13	.04
Learning difficulties	.11	.34**	.27**	.25**	.01	-.12

**p<.01; *p<.05

Only affective motivation correlated significantly with all strategy types. Apparently, the more the learners liked English as a language, the more they were willing to use different ways of learning it.

Integrative motivation correlated significantly with all but socioaffective strategies. As already mentioned, socioaffective strategies were generally used least often.

Pragmatic-communicative motivation correlated significantly with communicative, metacognitive, cognitive and comprehension strategies, but not with memory or socioaffective strategies. One explanation may be that learners with this type of motivation embraced the communicative approach to learning EFL and relied less on memorization of words and mechanical repetition of linguistic material and more on top-down ways of dealing with language.

Language learning strategies and language anxiety

Correlations between overall means for SILL and anxiety as well as the six strategy groups and the five anxiety components were computed (Table 6).

Table 6: Correlations between strategies and anxiety for

	Anxiety	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5
SILL	-.0124	-.0250	.0397	.0627	-.0496	-.0964
Memory	.1125	.0718	.0861	.1541	.0451	.0710
Communicative	-.2353**	-.1769*	-.1363	-.1084	-.2246**	-.2770**
Metacognitive	-.0243	-.0377	.0522	.0146	-.0372	-.0923
Cognitive	-.1105	-.0543	-.0576	-.0471	-.1201	-.1647
Comprehension	.1620	.1078	.1084	.2441**	.0874	.0498
Socioaffective	.2308**	.1038	.2165*	.2220**	.1840*	.1480

**p<.01; * p< .05

(Item 1: embarrassed to volunteer answers in class; Item 2: insecure when speaking English in class; Item 3: feeling that others know English better; Item 4: nervous and confused when speaking English in class; Item 5: afraid of being ridiculed by others)

As can be seen from the coefficients presented in Table 6, the overall SILL mean did not correlate with anxiety. When anxiety was correlated with individual strategy types, two correlations were found significant: that with communicative strategies and the one with socioaffective strategies. The former was, expectedly, negative.

Communicative strategies refer mainly to self-initiated activities that the learner engages in in order to reinforce his learning and to enjoy using the foreign language. Learners who were anxious in class seemed not to be motivated for out-of-class learning. One possible explanation may be that anxious primary school EFL learners also have a low self-concept of themselves as language learners (the correlation coefficient between anxiety and self-concept for this sample was significant and as high as -.5197) and thus feel nervous and confused when speaking in class (item 4), fear being ridiculed by others when using English in class (item 5) and feel embarrassed to volunteer answers in class (item 1). Such a self-concept, combined with the anxiety experienced during English classes, makes it impossible for the learner to enjoy dealing with English out of class. It is perhaps important for teachers to be aware of the fact that the feelings that FL learners experience in class influence their language behaviour out of class too.

High-anxiety learners were found to be using more socioaffective strategies than low-anxiety learners. By sharing their feelings about EFL learning with others or in a diary form and by cooperating with others they seemed to be taking an active stand against their problems. Such learners, if "diagnosed" by the teacher on time, may be helped by her and minimize the negative effects of their anxiety.

The active role that primary school learners play in their learning is perhaps also exemplified by the significant positive correlation between the feeling that others in class are better and the use of comprehension strategies. These strategies may be considered a compensatory action on the part of the learner and thus indicate that learners want to take charge of their learning (by making up for their shortcomings).

Language learning strategies and attributions

Results are presented in Table7.

Table 7: Correlations between language learning strategies and attributions of success

	Success 1	Success 2	Success 3	Success 4	Success 5	Success 6
SILL	.1922*	.4295**	.0424	.0320	.3304**	.3953**
Memory	.1105	.4153**	.0636	.0653	.2393**	.2858
Communicative	.2631**	.2048*	-.0079	-.0089	.2647**	.3836**
Metacognitive	.1714*	.5154**	-.0275	-.0465	.3593**	.4115**
Cognitive	.0753	.1188	.0479	.1075	.1917*	.2765**
Comprehension	.1877*	.3045**	.0082	.0501	.1025	.1733*
Socioaffective	-.0566	.3701**	.0607	-.0049	.2833**	.2167*

**p<.01; *p< .05

(Success 1 - knowledge; Success 2 - effort; Success 3 - luck; Success 4 - easy tasks; Success 5 - task interest; Success 6 - task enjoyment)

Significant correlations were established between the SILL overall mean and attributing success to knowledge, effort, task interest and task enjoyment. Thus, the more the learners attributed success to these factors, the more frequently they used learning strategies. Attributing success to luck or easy tasks was not connected with strategy use.

In terms of individual strategies, all except cognitive strategies correlated significantly with attributing success to effort; all except memory strategies correlated with attributing success to task enjoyment; all except comprehension strategies correlated with task interest. Attributing success to knowledge correlated significantly with communicative, metacognitive and comprehension strategies.

In all, 18 coefficients were statistically significant. Attributing success to task enjoyment correlated with the highest number of strategy types.

Table 8: Correlations between language learning strategies and attributions of failure

	Fail 1	Fail 2	Fail 3	Fail 4	Fail 5	Fail 6
SILL	.0558	.0469	-.0571	.1019	.1059	.1666
Memory	.0393	.0275	-.0435	.2061*	.1611	.1351
Communicative	.0921	.1031	-.0559	-.0077	.0013	.1204
Metacognitive	-.0312	.0397	-.0924	-.0278	.0194	.0591
Cognitive	-.0630	-.0748	-.0463	-.0085	.0717	.1668
Comprehension	.1584	.0905	.0295	.2675**	.1589	.1683*
Socioaffective	.0159	.0003	.0747	.0703	.2055*	.2145*

**p<.01; * p< .05

(Fail 1 - lack of knowledge; Fail 2 - lack of effort; Fail 3 - lack of luck; Fail 4 - difficult tasks; Fail 5 - lack of task interest; Fail 6 - lack of task enjoyment)

The overall SILL mean did not correlate with any of the failure attribution types. The correlation matrix with coefficients between the six strategy groups and the six failure attributions showed only five significant correlations. These were found between memory strategies and attributing failure to task difficulty, between comprehension strategies and attributing failure to task difficulty and a lack of task enjoyment, and between socioaffective strategies and task interest and task enjoyment.

Learners who attributed their failure in EFL learning to task difficulty tended to use memory and comprehension strategies more frequently than learners who did not resort to this pattern of failure attribution. Learners who thought they failed because they found tasks uninteresting used socioaffective strategies frequently. Those who reported attributing failure to a lack of task enjoyment reported also frequent use of comprehension and socioaffective strategies.

Conclusion

Our study of primary school EFL learners' use of language learning strategies and the interaction between strategy use and motivation, language anxiety and attributions has offered several interesting insights.

Croatian primary school EFL learners were found to be using language learning strategies moderately. The most frequently reported strategies were communicative and comprehension strategies, while socioaffective and memory strategies were reported to be used least frequently.

Assuming that language learning strategies can facilitate language learning we may wish for a much higher strategy use by our learners. This could be achieved by introducing strategies-based instruction (SBI) into the teaching of EFL. Teaching learners how to learn is a new role the language teacher is supposed to take on. Attempts at integrating SBI into EFL teaching have so far been sporadic but some of the first experiences have been encouraging (Markočić 2000, personal communication).

The findings in this study point to a definite connection between strategies and motivation. The relationship can be assumed to go both ways: a higher command of strategies may enhance motivation for learning and higher motivation can stimulate the language learner to use more varied strategies as well as to employ strategies more often. The language teacher can intervene either by working on the learner's motivation or by teaching the learner how to use effective language learning strategies.

The relationship between strategies and language anxiety seems to be less definitive. Our results show that some components of anxiety are connected to some types of strategies. We may take these findings as indications of possible intricate connections that should be looked into further. The language teacher can do much to help the learner with managing language anxiety or not developing it in the first place.

While success attributions seem to be connected to strategy use to a larger extent, failure attributions show a weaker relationship. Still, the fact that correlations were established and that some of them were not only statistically significant but very high as well is indicative of the need for further investigation of the relationships. The teacher can do a lot to influence the learner's attributions of success and failure in language learning (e.g. through giving feedback on the learner's performance) and can help the learner to develop the desirable attributional pattern.

The insights obtained from studies like ours can contribute significantly to both the foreign language learning theory and the pragmatics of language teaching.

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STRATEGIJE UČENJA STRANOGA JEZIKA: POVEZANOST S AFEKTIVNIM KARAKTERISTIKAMA UČENIKA

U članku je riječ o strategijama učenja jezika kojima se koriste osnovnoškolci te o interakciji strategija i triju afektivnih faktora: motivacije, straha od jezika i atribucija. Opisuje se istraživanje provedeno s hrvatskim učenicima engleskoga kao stranoga jezika. Autorica zaključuje da su strategije učenja stranoga jezika povezane s ispitanim afektivnim karakteristikama učenika. Spoznaje o toj povezanosti mogu biti korisne pri određivanju načina na koje se može olakšati učenje stranoga jezika.