

Language learning strategies and Croatian EFL learners

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The article describes a study of the language learning strategies used by Croatian EFL learners. The study was carried out on 362 subjects of different age, gender and proficiency level. The Croatian translation of Oxford's SILL Version 5.1 was used to assess the strategies. The results described in the paper show that Croatian learners' strategy use was in the medium range, that females used strategies more often than males and that strategy use correlated with EFL achievement. Instead of using the six-part division established by Oxford, the author carried out a factor analysis procedure in an effort to capture better the dynamics of the SILL data of her specific sample. The isolated factors revealed the following types of strategies: memory, communicative, metacognitive, cognitive, comprehension and socioaffective strategies.

Introduction

Although the first ideas about learning strategies can, according to some authors (Nisbet and Shucksmith 1986), be traced as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century, in the field of foreign language learning the first concrete attempts to investigate the phenomenon can be found in the work of Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) in the mid-seventies. The insights they obtained by comparing the learning behaviours of good and poor language learners resulted in lists of strategies that were considered promising in leading the language learner to successful learning. The numerous studies carried out by these and other authors (eg. Cohen 1998, O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990) since then have focused on defining the concept of learning strategies, investigating their impact on learning achievement, and studying the connections with other learner variables as well as other aspects of language learning. In spite of all the effort invested so far into studying language learning strategies it might be fair to say that we have only touched the surface of this interesting and important phenomenon.

Cohen (1990:5) defines language learning strategies as conscious processes that the language learner selects during learning and is at least partially aware of. The purpose 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. Oxford lists the following twelve features of language learning strategies:

1. Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
2. Allow learners to become more self-directed.
3. Expand the role of teachers.
4. Are problem-oriented.
5. Are specific actions taken by the learner.
6. Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
7. Support learning both directly and indirectly.
8. Are not always observable.
9. Are often conscious.
10. Can be taught.
11. Are flexible.
12. Are influenced by a variety of factors. (Oxford 1990:9)

With new studies appearing, replete with indications of connections between learning strategies and other aspects of language learning, the term learning strategies became conceptually too narrow. This led to the introduction of the term *learner strategies*. This term came to include language learning and language use strategies. Cohen (1998:5-6), thus, makes use of the term learner strategies as encompassing strategies for identifying what should be learned, grouping the material for easier learning, having repeated contact with it and committing the material to memory (*learning strategies*) and retrieval, rehearsal, cover and communication strategies (*language use strategies*).

Learner strategies are often broken down into cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies and are operationalized as such in strategy lists or inventories (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990) that are then used for research purposes.

One of the major problems that strategy research has had to solve is the problem of methodology since what is being looked into are, generally speaking, mentalistic processes, which do not lend themselves to direct inspection. A number of methods of obtaining data about strategy use have been developed so far. In a comprehensive analysis of strategy research methodology Cohen (1998) mentions the following six major research methods of strategy assessment: oral interviews and written questionnaires, observation, verbal report, diaries and dialogue journals, recollection studies and computer tracking. Each of these seem to have both advantages and disadvantages. Using more than one method in order to substantiate the data on strategy use, thus compiling multiple evidence about the same occurrence of strategy use, is a new approach in strategy research called triangulation (McDonough 1995).

Aims of the study

The study to be presented tried to look at the strategies used by Croatian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Although a few studies have already been done on Croatian EFL learners' strategy use (Bosiljevac 1996 investigated the effectiveness of the keyword method with primary school learners, Kovačević 1998 looked into the strategies that young beginners used after one and two years of EFL learning, and Pavičić 1999 studied vocabulary learning strategies), it is fair to say that this is still, on the whole, an unexplored area. Our aim was to look into general language learning strategies of Croatian EFL learners. A second aim was to compare Croatian results on SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) (Oxford, 1990) to results obtained in other language learning contexts.

Sample

A total of 362 learners participated in the study. There were 137 primary school learners, 169 secondary school learners and 56 university undergraduates. All the subjects had English as a compulsory school subject or university course. The three education levels correspond to three age groups and to three different EFL proficiency levels. The primary school sample consisted of learners from five different schools (six eighth grade classes). The secondary school sample comprised six classes (two grade 1, two grade 2 and two grade 3 classes) from a typical Croatian grammar school. The university sample included freshmen and sophomores majoring in political science and journalism. The biodata asked from the subjects included information about their age, gender and EFL achievement (end-of-term teacher-assigned grade in English).

Instrument

In order to obtain data on learning strategies that Croatian EFL learners use the 5.1 Version of SILL (Oxford 1990), was translated into Croatian, the subjects' L1, and administered in May and June of 1999. The 5.1. Version was preferred to the 7.0 Version of SILL, which is normally meant for EFL learners, because of its greater length (80 items in 5.1 as compared to 50 items in 7.0). Since this was an exploratory study, the greater amount of data obtained by administering the longer version, which is otherwise intended for Speakers of English learning other foreign languages, was considered important.

SILL consists of six groups of strategies: memory (Part A), cognitive (Paert B), compensation (Part C), metacognitive (Part D), affective (Part E) and social (Part F) strategies .

Procedure

The Croatian version of SILL was administered during the regular English lessons. In most cases the subjects' EFL teacher left the classroom after introducing the researcher and, where not, the researcher made sure that the teacher could not see what the subjects were writing in the questionnaire. In an informal chat with the subjects after they had handed in their questionnaires the subjects expressed reservations about some items in SILL. The reservations referred to the content of some items (e.g. items 5, 12, 69), which they found strange, and to the wording (e.g. item 32), which they found at first ambiguous or unclear. Some of the latter reservations were due to not always the best translation solutions.

Results and discussion

Internal reliability

Cronbach's alpha for internal reliability of SILL in this study was .94, which compares well with other SILL studies and indicates highly focused scales and homogeneity.

Factor analysis

In order to obtain as meaningful information as possible in this first attempt to assess general language learning strategies of Croatian EFL learners, we decided to abandon the existing six-part grouping of the SILL strategies. Thus, instead of aiming at instantiation of the pre-existing categories we decided to perform factor analysis on the data we had obtained. Using Varimax rotation with the .30 and higher loadings retained, the factor analysis resulted in six factors (Table 1).

Table 1: Rotated Factor Matrix

Variable (SILL item)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
19	.58633					
9	.52746					
14	.51661					
5	.49782					
18	.48991					
11	.48846					

8	.48454	
13	.47340	
16	.47307	
20	.46961	
2	.44825	
4	.44491	
12	.43521	
3	.40298	
15	.37820	
10	.37406	
7	.34454	
31	.33366	
29	.31534	
27		.68990
23		.61940
25		.58024
24		.56251
21		.54962
28		.52970
61		.49564
78		.49186
26		.48776
67		.43537
80		.40255
79		.40170
37		.38954
17		.35397
22		.33944
30		.31806
54		.66400
53		.59465
62		.57339
55		.55373
63		.52186
66		.48446
64		.46657
60		.46332

33	.45493	
58	.42373	
49	.39431	
56	.37852	
51	.33248	
32	.31152	
52	.30594	
43		.55005
35		.54471
39		.53697
40		.52972
38		.47078
59		.45915
41		.45664
36		.45297
34		.41570
6		.39587
42		.37922
1		.37543
45		.65234
72		.60617
73		.56413
44		.54346
77		.53373
46		.43133
50		.39100
48		.36487
65		.32493
70		.56053
76		.50945
74		.50220
71		.49898
57		.47814
75		.47335
68		.47015
69		.44250
47		.27144

The factors accounted for 62.5 % of the variance in the SILL results. The following six factors were isolated:

Factor one: Memory Strategies

This factor consists of 13 Part A and six Part B strategies. The Part B strategies can be understood as also promoting memorization of the material being learned. On closer inspection, some items in Parts A and B overlap to a certain extent as can be seen in, for example, item 16 (I say or write new expressions repeatedly to practice them.), which is considered to be a cognitive strategy but can just as well be considered to be a memory strategy.

Factor two: Communicative Strategies

The factor consists of 11 Part B, one Part D, one Part E and three Part F strategies. The items reflect the learner's own initiative in learning in out-of-class situations and an active task approach to learning through seeking out opportunities to use language and be exposed to it as much as possible. The communicative component rings through many of the items: some of these refer to participating in a communicative act (e.g. items 23, 61, 78, 80), while others imply behaviours that equip the learner with communication skills (e.g. items 21, 28, 37, 67, 79). The term communicative strategies is used here to avoid confusion with the concept of communication strategies as used in literature and because some other authors (e.g. Watanabe 1990, 1991) also isolated such a group of strategies while performing factor analysis on SILL results.

Factor two reflects the officially proclaimed aim of EFL learning in Croatia: acquiring communicative competence. This aim seems to be readily adopted by learners, as is evident from this factor as well as studies of motivation which have shown the communicative-pragmatic type of motivation to be the most relevant among Croatian EFL learners (Mihaljević 1991, Mihaljević Djigunović 1998). These strategies reflect the learner's awareness of EFL as a means of communication and interaction.

Factor three: Metacognitive Strategies

The 15 items comprising Factor three include two Part B, 12 Part D and one Part E strategies. In a way, they all reflect the learner's attempts to organize and coordinate his learning by planning, setting goals, seeking opportunities for practice, self-evaluation of progress and monitoring errors.

Factor four: Cognitive Strategies

This factor includes two Part A, six Part B, three Part C and one Part D strategies. They are called cognitive strategies here because even the items that are not from Part B, e.g. item 43 (In conversation I anticipate what the other person is going to say based on what has been said so far.), evidence explicit use of the learner's mental processes. The mental processes involved refer to guessing meaning, making inferences about language rules and making cross-lingual comparisons with L1.

Factor five: Comprehension Strategies

Three Part C, two Part D, one Part E and three Part F strategies are included in this factor. These strategies, on the whole, aim at comprehension, be it the learner's comprehension of other people's meaning, or making sure that what he is trying to express is in fact understood by others. The attempts at verifying comprehension reflect, in a way, a kind of monitoring of the learner's performance in EFL on his part.

Rossi-Le (1989) identified a similar group of strategies among Asian and Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. who learned English as a second language (ESL) at two community colleges, and called them *strategies for searching for and communicating meaning*.

Factor six: Socioaffective strategies

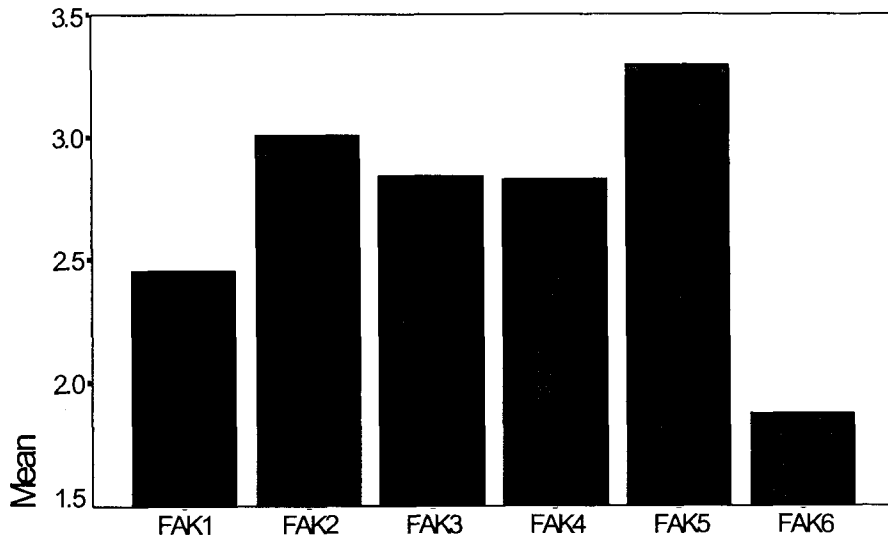
The factor is comprised of one Part C, one Part D, four Part E and three Part F items. Most items refer to managing emotions and cooperating with others in order to learn English. The use of these strategies evidences the learner's reflections about his own learning. Watanabe (1990) also isolated a socioaffective strategy factor from the SILL results of Japanese EFL learners.

Frequency of strategy use

The overall mean for SILL was 2.72, with a standard deviation of .55. This indicates that the subjects' use of strategies was in the medium range (2.5-3.5). The means for individual strategies show that the use of only seven strategies was in the high range (3.5-5.0). These refer to the learner's readiness to appeal to communication partners for help (items 45 and 72) if necessary, to being ready to look for other ways of expressing or comprehending messages (items 37, 41 and 46) and to making use of all possible ways and sources in order to learn English (items 24 and 63). Among the least frequently used strategies were those referring to describing feelings in a diary (item 70) or to other people (item 71), writing lists of already familiar English words in order to

establish associations with the new word being learned (item 9), acting out words (item 12), using flashcards (item 11) or rhymes (item 5) when learning new vocabulary.

In terms of the groups of strategies isolated by factor analysis, the most frequently used strategies were comprehension (mean=3.29, SD=.73) and communicative strategies (3.01, SD=.79), followed by metacognitive (2.85, SD=.79) and cognitive (2.83, SD=.71) strategies, while memory strategies (2.46, SD=.62) and socioaffective strategies (1.89, SD=.64) were used least frequently (Figure 1).



(FAK1 = Factor 1 - memory strategies; FAK2 = Factor 2 - communicative strategies; FAK3 = Factor 3 - metacognitive strategies; FAK4 = Factor 4 - cognitive strategies; FAK5 = Factor 5 - comprehension strategies; FAK6= Factor 6 - socioaffective strategies)

Figure 1: Frequency of the six strategy groups

Effects of gender, age and EFL achievement

In order to see if there were significant differences in the use of strategies between learners of different age, gender and EFL achievement analyses of variance and correlation procedures were performed on the SILL results.

The analysis of variance with gender as the independent variable showed a statistically significant difference in the use of strategies between male and female learners ($F=55.59$, $p < .01$): female learners were found to use strategies more frequently (Mean=2.91, SD= .47) than male learners (Mean=2.49, SD= .55). Female learners were also found to use strategies more frequently in some other studies using SILL (e.g. Green 1991, Noguchi 1991, Kaylani 1996).

The effect of age was not significant at the $p < .05$ level ($F=2.9212$, $p < .0552$). One explanation may be that the age differences in the sample (the subjects were between 13 and 21 years old) were not large enough for the age effect to be observable.

The correlation coefficient for SILL and EFL achievement ($r = .14$, $p = .01$) was statistically significant, thus indicating that the higher the EFL achievement the more strategies the learner used.

Relationship of the six groups of strategies and EFL achievement

In order to see whether all the six strategies isolated by factor analysis were connected with EFL achievement correlation coefficients with EFL achievement were computed for the results of each strategy group (Table 3).

Table 3: Correlation coefficients for EFL achievement and the six strategy groups

	EFL achievement
Factor 1	.0104
Factor 2	.3302*
Factor 3	.1771*
Factor 4	.1245*
Factor 5	.0109
Factor 6	.1562*

(Factor 1 - memory strategies; Factor 2 - communicative strategies; Factor 3 - metacognitive strategies; Factor 4 - cognitive strategies; Factor 5 - comprehension strategies; Factor 6 - socioaffective strategies)

These results indicate that EFL achievement correlated positively with communicative strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and, negatively, with socioaffective strategies. One explanation for the last correlation might be that socioaffective strategies have a remedial function, that is they are used by learners who have difficulties in coping with learning EFL. Memory strategies and comprehension strategies did not correlate with achievement.

Conclusion

This first study of general language learning strategies used by Croatian EFL learners points out, yet again, that strategies are connected with the cultural context in which

English (or any language for that matter) is learned. In this study, perhaps not so surprisingly, the dynamics of the obtained data on strategy use proved to be different from those in other contexts (e.g. Chinese or American). Thus, we may consider language learning strategies to be culture-specific. The extent to which two cultures differ in aspects relevant for language learning may be reflected in the learners' choice of strategies.

The findings of this study also indicate that female learners use strategies more often than male learners. Most of the strategies included in SILL were found to correlate significantly with EFL achievement; the ones that did not show significant correlations were memory and comprehension strategies, while socioaffective strategies showed a significant negative correlation with EFL achievement. Of course, correlation is no proof of causation but this connection reinforces the belief that the good language learner uses either different strategies or makes different uses of strategies than the poor language learner. The fact that no significant effect of age was established may be a consequence of a narrow age range of the subjects in this sample.

It seems logical to assume that, besides the global characteristics of the learning context and achievement, there might be systematic relationships between strategy use and other factors, some of which are learner-dependent (e.g. motivation, attributions), and others which are learner-independent (e.g. teaching materials). The full insight into the phenomenon of language learning strategies will probably be obtained once we can take all of them into account. Before that it will be difficult to separate the effects of strategy use from the effects that other factors may have on the process of language learning.

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STRATEGIJE UČENJA I HRVATSKI UČENICI ENGLESKOGA KAO STRANOG JEZIKA

U članku je riječ o istraživanju strategija učenja kojima se koriste hrvatski učenici engleskog jezika. Istraživanje je provedeno na 362 ispitanika različite dobi, spola i znanja jezika. Uporaba strategija ispitana je pomoću upitnika SILL (Verzija 5.1) koji je sastavila Oxford (1990). Rezultati su pokazali da se hrvatski učenici koriste strategijama umjereno, da se učenice strategijama koriste češće nego učenici te da je uporaba strategija povezana s uspjehom u učenju. Kako bi se dobio bolji uvid u strategije hrvatskih učenika, autorica je odustala od a priorne podjele strategija na šest grupa koje je predložila Oxford i klasificirala strategije na temelju faktorske analize kojoj je podvrgnula rezultate upitnika. Izolirani faktori odnosili su se na strategije pamćenja i komunikacije, metakognitivne i kognitivne strategije, strategije razumijevanja te društveno-afektivne strategije.