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ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY CROATIAN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

In this article the authoresses explore the differences in use of language speaking strategies between successful and less successful learners in different English as a foreign language (EFL) education levels. A total of 638 Croatian learners took part in this exploratory study: 329 primary and 309 secondary school learners. All the subjects learned EFL as a compulsory school subject. The main findings suggested that successful learners reported significantly more use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies, whereas less successful learners reported significantly more use of compensational strategies.

Key words: language learning, speaking strategies, successful learners, less successful learners, English as a foreign language

LE STRATEGIE CHE GLI ALLIEVI CROATI ATTIVANO NELL'APPRENDIMENTO DELL'INGLESE COME LINGUA STRANIERA

SINTESI

Il presente articolo intende indagare le differenze nell'uso delle strategie linguistiche tra gli allievi con alte e basse abilità nell'apprendimento dell'inglese inclusa nel curriculum dei diversi livelli educativi come lingua straniera. I soggetti coinvolti in questo studio esplorativo erano in totale 638, di cui 329 provenienti dalla scuola elementare e 309 dalla scuola media inferiore e superiore. Per tutti questi partecipanti l'inglese era una lingua straniera obbligatoria. Le scoperte principali suggeriscono che gli allievi con alte abilità nell'apprendimento della lingua straniera farebbero un uso maggiore di memoria, strategie cognitive, metacognitive e sociali, mentre i soggetti con basse abilità nell'apprendimento userebbero di più le strategie compensative.

Parole chiave: apprendimento della lingua, strategie linguistiche usate dai parlanti, allievi con alte e basse abilità nell'apprendimento della lingua, inglese come lingua straniera

INTRODUCTION

Research on language learning strategies has focused mainly on descriptive studies that have identified characteristics of "the successful language learner" and compared the strategies of successful and less successful language learners. In 1975, Rubin suggested that a model of "the successful language learner" could be identified by looking at the special strategies used by students who were successful in their second language learning. Stern (1975) also identified a number of learner characteristics and strategic techniques associated with successful language learners. These studies were followed by the work of Naiman, Frólich and Todesco (1975, 1978), which further pursued the notion that second language learning ability resides at least in part in the strategies one uses for learning. Taken together, these studies identified the successful language learner as one who has the following characteristics: is an active learner; monitors language production; practices communicating in the language; uses prior linguistic knowledge; uses various memorization techniques; ask questions for clarification.

Other studies comparing successful and less successful language students have repeatedly revealed that less successful learners do use learning strategies, sometimes even as frequently as their more successful peers, but they use the strategies differently (Vann, Abraham, 1990). Research indicated that more successful language learners are aware of the strategies they use and why they use them (Green, Oxford, 1995) and that they generally tailor their strategies appropriate to their own personal needs as learners (Wenden, 1991). According to Oxford, Nyikos (1989) successful students use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, purpose for learning the language, type of language and gender. McDonough (1999) says that strategy use affects and is affected by other factors such as motivation, gender, cognitive style, language proficiency level, and age.

Successful language learners are thought to: seek ways to practice the second language and maintain a conversation (Naiman et al., 1975; O'Malley et al., 1985; Rubin, 1987); have a positive attitude toward speakers of the target language (Oxford, 1990); organize and plan learning around preferred ways of learning (Ellis, Sinclair, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1987); monitor their speech and that of others (Ellis, Sinclair, 1989; Naiman et al., 1978; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987); seek verification, seek clarification, attend to both form and meaning, look for patterns, use deduction, and make inferences (Ellis, Sinclair, 1989; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987; Stern, 1980); and be active participants in the learning process (Wenden, 1987).

Students who are less successful in language learning are also able to identify their own strategies, but do not

know how to choose the appropriate strategies or how to link them into a useful 'strategy chain' (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, Robbins, 1999). These studies have been critically important in laying down the groundwork for understanding how language learners use learning strategies. They have also provided important information for guiding experimental studies, in order to identify the effects of learning strategies instruction on students.

Due to the growing importance of English as a foreign language and the tendency of an earlier approach to its teaching, it is of great importance to become acquainted with different factors and mechanisms which help in its acquisition.

The aim of the present study is to explore the following specific questions:

Is there a difference in the use of language learning strategies in oral communication between successful and less successful EFL learners?

Is there a difference in language learning strategies in oral communication between primary and secondary school learners?

What strategies were significant predictors in successful learning of EFL?

METHODS

Participants

A total of 638 Croatian learners took part in this exploratory study: 330 primary and 309 secondary school learners. All the subjects learned EFL as a compulsory school subject. The primary school sample consisted of learners from three different schools (ranging from fifth to eighth grades; age 11–14). The secondary school included four classes (ranging from first to fourth grade; age 15–18) from Croatian grammar school. The learners in primary school learned EFL for 2 to 4 years and those attending secondary school for 5 to 8 years.

Instruments

The use of *language learning strategies for oral communication* was assessed by means of a questionnaire developed by Kostić-Bobanović (2004). The 41-item instrument asked learners to report the frequency with which they used certain speaking language learning strategies. It consisted of six groups of strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social.

1. *Memory strategies* help learners enter information in long-term memory and retrieve it when necessary to communicate (e.g., using imagery, sounds, or both to remember new words). It is measured by three items in the questionnaire.

Example: I remember a new English word by using imagery and sounds

2. *Cognitive strategies* involve formation and revision of internal mental models (e.g., reasoning, analyzing, and summarizing). It is measured by seven items.

Example: I practice my speaking skills by repeating the new material.

3. *Compensation strategies* are used to overcome lack of knowledge of the target language (e.g., using circumlocution). It is measured by seven items.

Example: When I cannot think of the correct expression to say or write, I find a different way to express the idea, I use synonyms or I describe the idea

4. *Metacognitive strategies* help learners manage their learning (e.g., monitoring errors). It is measured by nine items.

Example: I am aware of my English mistakes and try to correct them.

5. *Affective strategies* enable learners to control emotions and attitudes related to language learning (e.g., reducing anxiety). It is measured by ten items.

Example: I try to relax my muscles by breathing in deeply every time I feel nervous about speaking English.

6. *Social strategies* facilitate interaction with others (e.g., cooperating with others, asking questions, and becoming culturally aware). It is measured by five items.

Example: I ask other people to correct me when I make mistakes while speaking

The questionnaire asked the respondent to indicate in a multiple-choice fashion, the frequency of use of a given strategy from almost always to almost never on a five-point scale.

Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire for the primary school was .88 and for the secondary school sample .87.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved use of two-way analysis of variance to compare use of six different groups of strategies between successful and less successful language learners in two groups of EFL. Successful learners are identified as those who achieved grade four or five (end-of-term teacher-assigned grade in EFL, where five is the maximum grade), while less successful learners are identified as those who achieved grade two or three.

RESULTS

Is there a difference in the use of language learning strategies in oral communication between successful and less successful EFL learners in primary and secondary school?

Table 1 : Means and standard deviations for strategy use by educational level and success in EFL.

Tabela 1: Povprečja in standardni odkloni pri uporabi strategij glede na stopnjo izobraževanja in uspešnost pri učenju angleščine kot tujega jezika.

Strategy	Primary school		Secondary school		F
	S (n = 189)	LS (n = 140)	S (n = 214)	LS (n = 95)	
Memory	9.11 (2.72)	8.63 (2.63)	7.31 (2.40)	6.49 (2.41)	¹ 85.64 ² 9.24 ³ n.s.
Cognitive	24.93 (5.11)	21.79 (5.04)	21.03 (4.28)	18.31 (5.13)	¹ 84.37 ² 53.21 ³ n.s.
compensation	20.36 (4.75)	21.01 (5.16)	20.53 (3.99)	21.51 (4.51)	¹ n.s. ² 4.58 ³ n.s.
metacognitive	32.52 (6.39)	30.16 (6.32)	25.86 (6.06)	23.69 (6.49)	¹ 157.87 ² 18.79 ³ n.s.
Affective	25.52 (6.69)	26.01 (7.16)	21.50 (5.85)	21.19 (6.27)	¹ 67.57 ² n.s. ³ n.s.
Social	16.87 (3.99)	16.14 (3.82)	14.72 (3.88)	13.45 (4.37)	¹ 53.69 ² 9.13 ³ n.s.

Note. ¹= main effect of educational level; ²= main effect of success; ³= interaction effect of educational level and success.

Legend: S = successful, LS = less successful

Table 2: Regression analyses for six speaking strategies in primary school success.**Tabela 2: Regresijske analize za šest govornih strategij pri uspješnom učenju englesčine kot tujega jezika v osnovni šoli.**

Independent variable	β	Dependent variable t	p
1. Cognitive strategies	.31	4.49	.000
2. Compensational strategies	-.14	-2.42	.016
3. Affective strategies	-.14	-2.17	.031

$R = .40$, $R^2 = .16$; $F_{(6, 323)} = 10.16$, $p < .000$

Table 3: Regression analyses for six speaking strategies in secondary school success.**Tabela 3: Regresijske analize za šest govornih strategij pri uspješnom učenju englesčine kot tujega jezika v srednji šoli.**

Independent variable	β	Dependent variable t	p
1. Cognitive strategies	.28	3.84	.000
2. Compensational strategies	-.18	-3.17	.002

$R = .35$, $R^2 = .12$; $F_{(6, 302)} = 6.99$, $p < .000$

A two-way analysis of variance 2 (success: successful and less successful) \times 2 (school: primary and secondary) design was conducted to determine the relationship between success in language learning and the educational level on use of the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Table 1).

Regarding success, we found a significant effect on the use of memory strategies ($F_{3, 634} = 9.24$; $p < .001$), cognitive ($F_{3, 634} = 53.21$; $p < .001$), compensation ($F_{3, 634} = 4.58$; $p < .03$), metacognitive ($F_{3, 634} = 18.79$; $p < .001$), and social ($F_{3, 634} = 9.13$; $p < .001$). All of these strategies, except for compensational, were more frequently used by successful than by less successful learners.

Our findings revealed a main effect of educational level on the following strategies: memory ($F_{3, 634} = 85.64$; $p < .001$), cognitive ($F_{3, 634} = 84.37$; $p < .001$), metacognitive ($F_{3, 634} = 157.87$; $p < .001$), affective ($F_{3, 634} = 67.57$; $p < .001$), and social ($F_{3, 634} = 53.69$; $p < .001$). All of the above mentioned strategies were more frequently used by primary than by secondary school learners. No significant interaction effects were found.

What speaking strategies were significant predictors in successful learning of EFL?

Multiple regression analysis was used to predict the role of six speaking strategies on overall success for primary and secondary school, separately. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, all six predictor variables were entered simultaneously so that the regression coefficients represent the unique contribution of a variable in the full model, net of other variables. The predictor variables,

for primary school, accounted for 16% of the variance in school achievement [$R^2 = .16$, $F_{(6, 323)} = 10.16$, $p < .000$]. Higher use of cognitive strategies was the strongest predictor in school achievement ($\beta = .31$, $t = 4.49$, $p < .000$) followed by lower use of compensational ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -2.42$, $p < .016$) and affective strategies ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -2.17$, $p < .035$).

The predictor variables for secondary school accounted for 12% of variance in school achievement [$R^2 = .12$, $F_{(6, 323)} = 6.99$, $p < .000$]. Higher use of cognitive strategies was the strongest predictor of school achievement ($\beta = .28$, $t = 3.84$, $p < .000$) followed by lower use of compensational strategies ($\beta = -.18$, $t = -3.17$, $p < .002$). However, affective strategies were not significant predictors in school achievement for secondary school.

DISCUSSION

The following findings have emerged from this study:

1. There is a difference in use of language learning strategies in oral communication between successful and less successful EFL learners. Namely, successful learners reported significantly more use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies than did less successful learners. On the other hand, less successful learners reported significantly more use of compensational strategies than did successful learners. These results seem to conflict with findings of previous research. For example, Abraham and Vann (1987); Vann and Abraham (1990), in two separate studies, researched language learning strategies employed by both



Fig. 1: Modern didactic technology in foreign language acquisition (photo: A. Tominc).

Sl. 1: Sodobni didaktični pripomočki pri usvajanju tujega jezika (foto: A. Tominc).

successful and unsuccessful learners. These distinctions were made by measuring 'the relative speed with which they moved through an intensive English program' (1990, 179). They found that unsuccessful learners used strategies generally considered as useful, and often the same ones as those employed by the successful learners: the difference lay in the degree of flexibility the learners showed when choosing strategies, and how appropriately they were applied to the given situation.

The findings from our research, as well as theirs, raise a question mark over the idea that successful learners either use a larger repertoire of strategies or use them more frequently. This is slightly different from results obtained by Green and Oxford (1995), who in an investigation of the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategy use, found that 'students who were better in their language performance generally reported higher levels of overall strategy use and frequent use of a greater number of strategy categories' (1995, 265).

2. There is a difference in the use of language learning strategies in oral communication between learners in primary and secondary school. Primary school learners more frequently used almost all strategies than did those attending secondary school. It is very interesting that primary school learners used memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies significantly

more frequently than secondary school learners. Our younger respondents, who studied English language for a shorter time, generally report the use of more strategies than their older colleagues. These results were completely opposite of those expected, as well as of previous research which stated that learners in different learning stages use different strategies, with more frequent strategy use by more advanced learners (Green, Oxford, 1995, Bialystock 1981, Chamot, O'Malley, 1987; Politzer, 1983). It is possible that the effect obtained in our research is due to the fact that primary school learners are more encouraged to develop oral communication than other language skills. It is also possible that secondary school learners are still not independent in choosing the most appropriate language learning strategy that can improve their success. These results indicate a need to teach learning strategies at all levels of language development, because their use is neither spontaneous nor continuous, and most learners are not aware of using them. Teaching language learning strategies is especially important in Croatia, where, a few years ago, the Ministry of Education implemented the learning of English as a foreign language in the first grade of primary school (ages 6 to 7). Therefore, teachers should be motivated to teach learners to use language learning strategies at an early age.

3. Higher use of cognitive and affective strategies, and lower use of compensational strategies was the predictor of success in language learning in primary school, while in secondary school higher use of cognitive and lower use of compensational strategies predicted success in language learning. Results of our research might indicate an association between reported strategy use and success in language learning, but the exact nature of this association, particularly the issue of causality, is a subject for further research.

Skehan (1989) and Ressa-Miller (1993) among others have pointed out that the existence of correlation between the two does not necessarily suggest causality in a particular direction. McIntyre (1994) has attempted to unravel the relationship between the two variables. On the one hand, he stresses a need for caution when looking at studies which suggest that more proficient students make better use of strategies. However, in answer to his own question as to whether strategies use results from or leads to increased proficiency, he is rather less cautious: 'The answer, undoubtedly, is both' (1994, 189).

A similar argument to McIntyre's, although offered more tentatively, comes from Green and Oxford (1995). In their Puerto Rico study, they found that about a third of the individual strategies were used more frequently by the more successful learners, almost all of them involving active use of the target language. Although they concede that this is not sufficient evidence of causality, they nevertheless suggest that a causal relationship exists here between strategy use and proficiency level, and that 'this relationship is best visualized not as a one-way arrow leading from cause to effect, but rather as an ascending spiral in which active use strategies help students attain higher proficiency, which in turn makes it more likely that students will select these active use strategies' (1995, 288). On the other hand, as pointed out by Skehan: 'One can... argue that learner strategies do not determine proficiency, but are permitted by it' (1989, 97). This means that strategies do not contribute to proficiency, but are simply features of it.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude that both successful and less successful learners reported the use of language learning strategies. However, they used a different set of strategies. Successful learners reported significantly more use of cognitive and social strategies, whereas less successful learners reported significantly more use of compensational strategies. It is very interesting that primary school learners used almost all strategies more frequently than secondary school learners. Greater use of cognitive and affective strategies and less frequent use of compensational strategies predicted success in language learning in primary school. In secondary school, higher use of cognitive and lower use of compensational strategies predicted success in language learning. The use of different types and numbers of strategies may depend on the kind of learner and setting in which learning occurs and the language task to be completed, suggesting a need for more studies on different learners in different settings.

Though obtaining deeper insights into the correlation between language learning strategies in successful and less successful students at different educational levels, some limitations were found. One of the limitations of this research regards the fact that success was determined subjectively by the grade the teacher assigned at the end of school year and which comprised not only speaking skills but also listening, reading and writing skills. We feel that future research should use specific measures for the estimation of speech success.

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STRATEGIJE, KI JIH HRVAŠKI UČENCI UPORABLJAJU PRI UČENJU ANGLEŠČINE KOT TUJEGA JEZIKA

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POVZETEK

Strategije učenja so še posebej pomembne pri učenju jezika, saj so kot orodje za aktivno in samousmerjevalno učenje nujne pri razvijanju komunikacijske zmožnosti. V članku raziskujemo razlike v uporabi strategij učenja govora med uspešnimi in manj uspešnimi učenci na različnih ravneh izobraževanja pri angleškem jeziku, in sicer kot tujem jeziku. V raziskavi je skupaj sodelovalo 638 hrvaških učencev: 329 osnovnošolskih učencev in 309 srednješolskih dijakov. Za vse je bila angleščina obvezni šolski predmet. Glavne ugotovitve kažejo, da uspešnejši med njimi poročajo o precej večji uporabi spomina, kognitivnih, metakognitivnih in družbenih strategijah, manj uspešni pa o precej večji uporabi kompenzacijskih strategij.

Ključne besede: učenje jezika, govorne strategije, uspešni učenci, manj uspešni učenci, angleščina kot tuji jezik

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