
Language Learning Strategies: A Study Among Spanish Students in the University of Malaya

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Abstract

This study investigates the types of strategies generally used by students in one of the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia in the course of learning Spanish, and the relationship between the use of these strategies and other factors such as ethnicity, motivation and language proficiency level. The subjects of this study consist of first, second and third year Spanish students from the Faculty Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya and the research data was collected using the background questionnaire, Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL) adapted from Oxford (1990b) and interview. The findings indicate that generally, the use of language learning strategy is not very common among the students in this faculty. For those who apply the strategies, metacognitive types were used more often while affective strategies were shunned. Among the ethnic groups involved in this research, the Malay students top the list of those who use learning strategies. Students with high motivation use language learning strategies more often than those with lower motivation. Likewise, excellent students use language learning strategies more than average and weak students.

Introduction

This study is to identify the types of strategies generally used by students in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya in the course of learning Spanish and the relationship between the use of these strategies and its corresponding factors such as ethnicity, motivation and language proficiency level. This research is vital in order to formulate strategies that could help the learners to achieve efficiency in language learning.

Learning strategies are important tools in language learning. They promote independence which is central in the learner-centered approach. As a learning tool, strategies enable learning to take place more effectively. According to Oxford (1986), the use of appropriate learning strategies is related to successful language learner performance.

In the past two decades, many researchers and teachers have shown great interest in shifting the focus from teacher-centered classroom to learner-centered classroom. This has resulted in an increasing number of studies undertaken from the perspective of the learner, many of which have sought to shed light on the relationship between second or foreign language learner variable and achievement (Wharton 1997). Some of the variables such as gender, age, motivation, cultural background and others are found to be influencing the language learning achievement.

Language learning is an interactive process, generated from the interaction between learners and teachers or learners and learners. It involves the acquisition of some basic learning skills by every learner similar to the learning techniques for a particular subject. Spanish language is a foreign language for Malaysians and according to the researcher's observations, some learners tend to memorize new words and its meaning, gender and grammar. Apart from this, some learners were found to be more practical as they can master the language by watching television programs, videos and pictures. However, there were learners who learn Spanish through entertainment. For example, they liked to listen to Spanish songs and watch Spanish movies.

The Spanish language belongs to the Indo-European language family particularly the Italic subfamily. Spanish has two major dialects which are Andalusian and Castilian. Spanish is the fourth language in the world in terms of its number of speakers, after Mandarin, English and Hindi, with 322 million to 358 million speakers. It is the official language in 21 countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Republic Dominican, Uruguay and Venezuela.

In Malaysia, the number of Spanish students has traditionally been low. This situation is changing slowly because the awareness of the international

role of Spanish is growing due to the increasing exploration of the Latin American markets by the Malaysian economic agents. Malaysia has already been dealing with Spanish speaking countries already in international forums such as APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Council), NAM (Non-aligned Movement), G15 (Group 15), ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations), MERCOSUR (the Southern Common Market), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement).

University of Malaya has been offering tuition in Spanish language since 1979 with classes open to both the university's students and to the public. The enrolment is possible for any person interested. In 1998, University of Malaya started the course Bachelor in Languages and Linguistics with specialisation in Spanish, the first in Malaysia (*Buku Panduan Fakulti Bahasa dan Linguistik 2003/2004*). This pioneering study will form a new generation of Malaysian professionals capable of linking Malaysia to the Spanish speaking world and to extend this capacity to other Malaysians so that each day more people are involved in international business that will benefit from closer relations among the countries.

Language Learning Strategies

According to Oxford (1990b), learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, apart from being more effective, enjoyable, self-directed and transferable to new situations. Learning strategies are also defined as 'techniques, steps or behaviors which learners use to enhance learning' (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall 1989). Hence, in short, language learning strategies are the methods and techniques used by learners to learn or master new languages effectively.

Since 1970s, a lot of researches on language learning strategies have been conducted and new concepts formulated. However, there are still many inconsistencies in the categorization of the strategies due to the differences of opinions among researchers. Nevertheless, all the efforts have laid a good foundation for the future development of this kind of studies.

Studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Rubin (1975, 1981) and Naiman et al (1978) had concentrated largely on listing down strategies reportedly used by language learners. With the increasing number of strategies discovered, researchers are motivated to classify these strategies which are of more or less the same category.

In the earlier attempts, researchers tend to categorize the strategies into what learners do to learn but later on, the category tends to be the classification of methods that learners adopt. Thus, strategy in this light can be interpreted as types and classes of strategies.

In the mid-seventies, Rubin (1975) began to pursue the idea of understanding language learning by studying the strategies of successful language learners. Rubin delineated strategies which successful language learners use in their language learning process by listing seven characteristics of the good language learner which are:

- (i) willing and accurate guesser
- (ii) strong drive to communicate or to learn from communication and willing to preserve to get the message across.
- (iii) often uninhibited and willing to appear foolish or make mistakes in order to learn or communicate
- (iv) pay attention to form by looking for linguistic patterns and by continually classifying, analyzing and synthesizing linguistic information.
- (v) make use of all practice opportunities
- (vi) monitor own and others speech and actively participate
- (vii) attend to meaning and not just to surface structure or grammar.

O'Malley et al. (1985) classifies language learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective. Metacognitive strategies involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of comprehension or production and self evaluation of learning after the learning activity is completed. Cognitive strategies are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entailed direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials. Socioaffective strategies help learners learn through interaction with others.

In Malaysia, Mohamed Amin Embi (1996) in his study on learners in a mixed setting, proposed three categories of language learning strategies. These are classroom language learning strategies, out-of-class language learning strategies and exam language learning strategies.

The classification of language learning strategies has undergone a lot of changes and the most recent and comprehensive is the Oxford's (1990b). Oxford has listed 80 strategies under two major classes which are direct and indirect strategies. These two classes of strategies are subdivided into a total of six groups, memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. By using these 80 strategies, Oxford went on further to design a questionnaire named the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL is a survey that could provide information on the learning strategies used by language learners.

Direct strategies are the language learning strategies that directly involve the target language. Direct strategies require mental processing of the language. It consists of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Memory

strategies such as grouping or using imagery have a highly specific function like helping students store and retrieve new information. For example, creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action. Memory strategies enable learners to store information and then retrieve it when needed.

Cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language. Cognitive strategies such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means. These strategies are practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output.

Compensation strategies allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge, such as guessing or using synonyms. These strategies are guessing intelligently by using linguistic clues or other clues. Besides, compensation strategies are also overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. These included switching to the mother tongue, using gesture or mime, getting help, selecting the topic, avoiding communication partially or totally, adjusting or approximating the message, coining words and using a circumlocution or synonym.

On the other hand, indirect strategies are the strategies that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. Indirect strategies are divided into three groups, which are metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition, that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as arranging, centering, planning and evaluating.

Affective strategies are the strategies that help to regulate emotions, motivations and attitudes of learners. For example, lowering one's anxiety by using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, music or laughter, encouraging one's self like making positive statements, taking risk wisely or rewarding oneself, and taking one's emotional temperature by writing a language learning diary or discussing one's feelings with others.

Social strategies help learners learn through interaction with others. Social strategies included asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others such as developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

Studies on Language Learning Strategies

Research on learning strategies overlaps between both the field of cognitive psychology and the field of second language acquisition. In the 1960s, the concept of teaching and learning processes changed in many ways due to the

change in orientation from behaviourist theories to cognitive theories of learning (Ma Rong 1996).

In the cognitive view, learners were perceived as active participants in the learning process rather than just passive recipients of the materials presented by the teachers. Learning was viewed as a creative and dynamic process that occurred within the learner and which could be influenced by what the learner knew (prior knowledge) and what the learner did (learning strategies) (Ellis 1994). Learners use learning strategies when they are faced with some problems, such as how to remember a new word, etc. They are aware of the strategies they use and when asked, they can explain what they did to try to learn something (Ellis 1997).

In the 1970s, parallel to the explosion of methodologies in the field of second language teaching, there was a growing interest in defining how learners could take charge of their own learning and clarify how teachers could help students become more autonomous (Rubin 1987). Researchers and teachers noticed that given the same learning environment, native language, target language and language level, certain learners seemed to be more successful than others in spite of the methods of teaching. From these observations, they saw the need to look more to the learners themselves to gain insight into language learning strategies, such as to find out more about how language was learned or how to learn a language effectively (Ma Rong 1996).

O' Malley et al. (1985) studied language learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate English as Second Language (ESL) students in the US. Data was collected from interviews and observations from high school students and teachers. O' Malley et al. found that intermediate-level students tended to use metacognitive strategies more often than beginning-level students and strategies were used more frequently in vocabulary learning and pronunciation.

Ma Rong (1996) examined language learning strategies used by a group of 265 tertiary level students of English as Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Data was collected from SILL version 7.0 that consisted of 50 strategies designed by Oxford, College English Test and interviews. The researcher found that these students sometimes use all the six strategies and among them, compensation strategy was more frequently used whereas memory strategy was the less frequently used.

Factors Influencing the Use of Language Learning Strategies

According to the findings from the researchers, the choice of language learning strategy used by individual learner is influenced by factors such as gender,

age, cultural background and so forth. Naiman et al. (1978) said that learning a language is not only limited to the findings of correct learning techniques but also depends on factors like attitudes, motivation and personality.

Oxford (1990a) found that factors such as age, gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, motivation, learning style, type of task and tolerance of ambiguity have influenced the choice of language learning strategies used by individual learners.

(1) Ethnicity

Numerous studies have shown that ethnicity has a great influence on the kinds of strategies used by language learners. Politzer (1983) found that Hispanics and Asians differed strongly in the kinds of strategies they used for language learning. Hispanics chose more social, interactive strategies, while Asians opted for greater rote memorization. According to Reid (1987), some Asian students preferred strategies such as working independently and resisted cooperative and social learning unlike students of other cultural backgrounds such as Hispanic.

Mohamad Nazali et al.'s (1999) studied the relationship between the use of Malay language learning strategies among secondary school students and variables such as gender, ethnicity, language achievement and learners' socio-economic status found that the Malay students tend to be frequent and efficient in using learning strategies compared to the Indian and Chinese students.

(2) Motivation

Motivation is an important factor in the process of language learning. It can influence the individual learners' choice of language learning strategies. Oxford (1990a) found that highly motivated students tend to use more strategies than less motivated students.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989), in their research focusing on the foreign language university students found that highly motivated students tend to use four strategies which are formal practice, functional practice, general study and input elicitation strategies.

(3) Language Proficiency Level

The language proficiency level of a learner is related to the frequency of using language learning strategy and the types of strategy that they use. In Ma Rong's (1996) study, successful EFL students were found to use learning strategies frequently compared to less successful students. In addition,

successful students tend to use memory, metacognitive and affective strategies more frequently

Apart from the above-mentioned factors, the following factors were found to influence the choice of strategies used among students learning a second or foreign language. These include gender, attitudes and beliefs, type of task and so forth (Oxford 1990a).

- (a) Gender – females reported greater overall strategy use than males in many studies.
- (b) Attitudes and beliefs – these were reported to have a profound effect on the strategies learner choose, with negative attitudes and beliefs often causing poor strategy use or lack of orchestration of strategies.
- (c) Type of task – the nature of the task helped determine the strategies naturally employed to carry out the task.

Methodology

The subjects of this study consist of eighteen students from the first, second and third year Spanish language majors at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University Malaya. They are from the Year 2001, 2002 and 2003 intake and among them, six Chinese, six Malays, five Indians and one Iban.

Three instruments were used to elicit information for this study. They were SILL version 5.1 designed by Oxford (1990b), background questionnaire and interviews. SILL was the main instrument used in this study. This 80-item instrument required students to report the frequency of the usage of language learning strategies. A typical SILL item asked the respondent to indicate, in a multiple-choice fashion, the frequency of use of a given strategy. The overall average indicated how often the learners tend to use the language learning strategies. For example, an average score of 4.5 would indicate that students always use these strategies whereas an average score of 1.4 would indicate that the students generally never use these strategies.

A background questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the background of a student such as age, gender, ethnic group, academic year, native language, etc. This background information is useful to enable a better understanding on the factors that would influence the use of language learning strategies by the student.

In order to obtain more information about the learners' learning strategies, an interview was conducted to get some personal insights into the learning process of the learner. Apart from this, it also elicited information on the degree of motivation among the learners to determine the factors that encourage them to learn the Spanish language.

Data collection was conducted at the Faculty Languages and Linguistic, University of Malaya. Firstly, the respondents were briefed about the correct procedure. This was done in English as well as in Bahasa Malaysia to ensure that the respondents thoroughly understood the instruction. Then, the background questionnaire and the SILL were administered. The respondents took around one hour to complete them. In addition, the researcher also obtained the examination results for Spanish Language Proficiency of the respondents from the faculty. This is to enable the researcher to find out the relationship between language proficiency level and the use of language learning strategies.

The data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics. Averaging and percentage were used to summarize the subjects' responses to the SILL items as well as from the background questionnaire.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the level of language learning strategies is only average among the subjects because they sometimes use the six strategies. The following table shows the types of language learning strategies used by the subjects.

Table 1
Types of Language Learning Strategies

| Types of Strategies | Average Score | Percentage (%) | Ranking |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------|----------|
| Memory | 3.14 | 16.19 | 5 |
| Cognitive | 3.21 | 16.55 | 4 |
| Compensation | 3.33 | 17.16 | 2 |
| Metacognitive | 3.37 | 17.37 | 1 |
| Affective | 3.08 | 15.88 | 6 |
| Social | 3.27 | 16.86 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 19.40 | 100.00 | |

Metacognitive strategies with an average score of 3.37 (17.37%) is the most frequently used strategy. The Spanish language students are found to plan and arrange their language learning efficiently such as plan their goals for Spanish language and arrange their schedule to study, pay attention, seek out opportunities to practice Spanish language in naturalistic situations such as watching Spanish movies and evaluate their progress in the Spanish language.

This is followed by compensation strategies with an average score 3.33 (17.16%). Compensation strategies allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge such as using synonyms or guessing. These strategies such as getting help, switching to the mother tongue, using gesture, selecting the topic, avoiding communication partially or totally, adjusting

or approximating the message, coining words and using a synonym are used by the subjects.

The third frequently used strategy is social strategies with an average score 3.27 (16.86%). Social strategies help learners learn through interaction with others. For example, the Spanish language students ask their lecturers for clarification, verification or correction especially in conversation, work with course mates and learn about the Spanish culture.

Cognitive strategies with an average score 3.21 (16.55%) is the fourth frequently used strategy. Cognitive strategies such as summarizing or reasoning deductively enable the learners to understand and produce Spanish language by many different means. These strategies are practising, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output. The Spanish language students take notes in class, make a summary from a longer passage and also translate the words from Spanish to their mother tongue or English.

The fifth frequently used strategy is memory strategies with average score 3.14 (16.19%). Memory strategies enable learners to store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed for communication. These strategies such as grouping or using imagery have a highly specific function like helping students to store and retrieve new information. For example, applying images and sounds, creating mental linkages, reviewing well and employing action. The students remember new words according to the types of word like verbs, nouns, subject pronouns and also according to their sound.

Affective strategies with an average score 3.08 (15.88%) is the least frequently used strategy among the subjects. Affective strategies are the strategies that help to regulate attitudes, emotions and motivations of learners. For example, the students try to relax whenever they feel anxious about using Spanish language and discuss their feelings with others such as family members and friends.

This finding is in line with the findings of researchers Goh & Kwah (1997), Bremner (1999), Wharton (1997) and Lee (2003). Goh & Kwah (1997) studied the language learning strategies used by China students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in Singapore and found that these students mostly used metacognitive strategies and compensation strategies. Bremner's (1999) study on English language learning strategies used by 149 students in City University, Hong Kong found that the strategies used frequently were compensation and metacognitive and the strategies used least frequently were memory and affective. According to Wharton (1997), the language learning strategy that has least frequently used by the Japanese and French language students in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore was affective strategies. This is also further confirmed by Lee's (2003) research on 325

secondary students learning EFL in Pusan, Korea that affective strategies were seldom used. This may be due to the affective strategies which involve emotional expressions where the learners feel shy to discuss their feelings with fellow friends, teachers and family whenever they faced problems in the new language learning process.

This study shows that ethnicity is related to the use of language learning strategies by the Spanish language students. It indicates that the Malay students (average score 3.46) use strategies frequently compared to the Indian (average score 3.12) and Chinese students (average score 3.10). In this study, the Iban student was not used in comparison with the three ethnic groups because there was only one Iban student. It is also confirmed by the findings of researchers Mohamad Nazali et al.'s (1999). The language learning strategies used according to ethnicity is shown in the following table.

Table 2
Language Learning Strategies Used According to Ethnicity

| Types of Strategies | Average Score | | | |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Malay | Chinese | Indian | Others |
| Memory | 3.36 | 2.94 | 3.01 | 3.60 |
| Cognitive | 3.40 | 3.11 | 3.01 | 3.72 |
| Compensation | 3.54 | 3.23 | 3.15 | 3.50 |
| Metacognitive | 3.60 | 3.26 | 3.19 | 3.63 |
| Affective | 3.24 | 3.00 | 3.20 | 2.00 |
| Social | 3.65 | 3.06 | 3.18 | 2.78 |
| Average | 3.46 | 3.10 | 3.12 | 3.21 |

In this study, the Malay students used social strategies (average score 3.65) frequently but fewer affective strategies (average score 3.24). However, affective strategies (average score 3.20) were used frequently by the Indian students whereas memory and cognitive strategies (average score 3.01) were used least frequently. For the Chinese students, they used metacognitive strategies (average score 3.26) frequently but rarely used memory strategies (average score 2.94). This finding is similar to the finding of Goh & Kwah's (1997) where the China students used metacognitive strategies more frequently and fewer memory strategies in learning English in Singapore. This shows that Chinese learners use the same strategies to learn a new language.

Students with high motivation (average score 3.50) used more strategies than less motivated students (average score 2.97). This finding is consistent

with Wharton (1997), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Ehrman and Oxford (1989) and Oxford (1990a).

Highly motivated students found in this study used metacognitive strategies (average score 3.68) frequently but used fewer memory strategies (average score 3.13). Low motivation students used memory strategies (average score 3.14) more frequently but used fewer affective strategies (average score 2.64). This is shown in the following table.

Table 3
Language Learning Strategies According to Motivation

| Types of Strategies | Average Skor | |
|---------------------|--------------|------|
| | High | Low |
| Memory | 3.13 | 3.14 |
| Cognitive | 3.44 | 2.98 |
| Compensation | 3.55 | 3.11 |
| Metacognitive | 3.68 | 3.06 |
| Affective | 3.52 | 2.64 |
| Social | 3.65 | 2.89 |
| Average | 3.50 | 2.97 |

Students with excellent results (average score 3.40) in language learning frequently used strategies compared to students who get average (average score 3.21) and poor results (average score 2.96). These findings are also in line with the researches conducted by Chamot and Küpper (1989), Green and Oxford (1995), Ma Rong (1996) and Mohamed Amin Embi (1996). This is shown in the following table.

Jadual 4
Language Learning Strategies Used According to Proficiency Level

| Types of Strategies | Average Score | | |
|---------------------|---------------|---------|------|
| | Excellent | Average | Poor |
| Memory | 3.31 | 3.07 | 2.98 |
| Cognitive | 3.31 | 3.14 | 3.21 |
| Compensation | 3.48 | 3.24 | 3.29 |
| Metacognitive | 3.62 | 3.26 | 3.21 |
| Affective | 3.29 | 3.13 | 2.52 |
| Social | 3.39 | 3.44 | 2.52 |
| Average | 3.40 | 3.21 | 2.96 |

In the studies, excellent students tend to use more metacognitive strategies (average score 3.62) and fewer affective strategies (average score 3.29). Average students use more social strategies (average score 3.44) and fewer memory strategies average score (average score 3.07) whereas weak students use more compensation (average score 3.29) and fewer affective and social strategies (average score 2.52).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings show that in some cases the subjects use the six language learning strategies. Metacognitive strategies were used frequently as compared to affective strategies. The findings also indicate that the Malay students used learning strategies more often than the Indian and Chinese students. Students with high motivation tended to use more strategies than less motivated students. Students with excellent results in language learning frequently used strategies compared to students who get average and poor results. This study shows that factors such as ethnicity, motivation and language proficiency level can influence individual learners' choice of Spanish language learning strategies.

These preliminary findings are beneficial to both the Spanish language teachers and students because they can provide some insights into the different types of patterns found in learning a new language. It is hoped that the findings can assist teachers to plan and monitor language teaching more effectively to cater for the students. However, it is also recommended that more exploration and researches be conducted in the future to enhance the Spanish language learning capability among Malaysian students.

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