

Strategies used by Successful English Learners in a Chilean University

Estrategias empleadas por estudiantes exitosos de inglés en una universidad chilena

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore the language learning strategies most frequently used by successful English language learners at a Chilean University. 185 undergraduate students answered a questionnaire out of a total of 421 students registered in the English Language Program. *The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL), which consisted of a general questionnaire (Oxford, 1990), was the instrument used in this quantitative study. The results revealed that cognitive strategies were most frequently used by successful English learners. In general, students need to know more about the use of metacognitive strategies.

Keywords: learning strategies, language learning, English learners, successful students.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es explorar las estrategias de aprendizaje de una lengua que usan con más frecuencia los aprendices del idioma inglés de una universidad chilena. De un total de 421 alumnos registrados en el programa de inglés, 185 respondieron un cuestionario. El método cuantitativo fue seleccionado para llevar a cabo el análisis a través de un instrumento llamado inventario de estrategias para el aprendizaje de una lengua (SILL por

sus siglas en inglés) el cual es un cuestionario general (Oxford, 1990). Los resultados revelan que la estrategia cognitiva es la que usan con mayor frecuencia los aprendices del idioma inglés que tienen éxito. En general, se requiere que los estudiantes conozcan más acerca del uso de estrategias metacognitivas.

Palabras clave: estrategias de aprendizaje, aprendizaje de idiomas, estudiantes de inglés, estudiantes exitosos.

Globalization has demanded Latin American countries to be part of the changes in the world's economy and social trends. English is considered a global language (Crystal, 1997) and also a means to have access to updated information, new knowledge, and current technology. Graddol (2000) considers English the global language because it is used to create music, to write books, to spread news, to follow directions in the airport, to do business, to present a paper in a conference, to use technology, to follow diplomatic protocols, and to run publicity, among others.

A four per cent of the Chilean population speaks English (Narvaez, 2011). Chile has a population of 15,017,800 inhabitants and is located down the coast of Southern South America between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Spanish is the official language although some other Indian dialects remain. This country which is highly populated by European descendants and natives from several ethnic groups is well known for having the highest literacy rate among all Latin America. Chile is surrounded by Spanish speaking countries: Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina; the English language is a relevant subject in the educational system because it represents the opportunity for international development (Culture of Chile, 2013).

Higher education institutions have to provide their students with the social, professional, and linguistic skills required to face the global world, including the Chilean university where this study was conducted. At this university, the mission is to contribute to the creation of new knowledge in and outside the classroom through a constant professional

training of students. Thus, this institution has national and international impact on the area of engineering, science and technology (UTFSM, 2013).

English is a compulsory subject for all the Engineering programs in this university. Most of the Engineering Programs used to have two reading-oriented courses of *English for Special Purposes* and comprised fifty hours. Nevertheless, according to the *Common European Reference Framework* this number of hours is not enough to reach any level in a foreign language. The Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) provides guidance on the number of teaching hours required to fulfil the objectives of levels A, B, and C of the *Common European Reference Framework* where the A1 level—the first level considered—requires approximately 90-100 hours (CEF, 2001). This information led the Chilean university in this study to increase the number of credit hours of English per semester for the following students' undergraduate majors: *Information Technology*, *Computing Engineering*, *Industrial*, *Electrical Engineering*, and *Commercial Engineering*. Students in the programs *Information Technology* and *Computing Engineering* attend a total of 75 hours equivalent to two semesters; in *Industrial* and *Electrical Engineering* students attend a total of 100 hours equivalent to two semesters; and in *Commercial Engineering* students attend a total of 350 hours equivalent to 7 semesters (USM, 2012).

The latest reports issued by the Undergraduate Program Accreditation Board in Chile state that students should develop oral and written English-language communicative skills to become independent language users and thus be able to get better jobs. In order to reach the minimum level required, and be consistent with the undergraduate program accreditation board in Chile, the university decided to set up a six-semester trial plan for the students to reach a B1 Alte level (USM, 2012).

This study is significant because in 2010 a program to improve the quality and equity of education called MECESUP (acronym in Spanish) was started as part of the Chilean government strategy to move towards an economy based on knowledge where the English-

Language Programs were to strengthen the English language skills for future engineers. Yet, Chilean students lagged behind the level required by higher education programs (MECESUP, 1999).

The purpose of this study was to find out the learning strategies most frequently used by successful English learners so that instructors could promote practice of those strategies among less successful English-language learners. In the Chilean system of evaluation, the passing grade is 55% out of the maximum average possible which is 100%. For this study, the grade to determine whether students were considered successful was the average they obtained in the English course they were registered: Successful English learners were those who obtained 76% or higher; and less successful English learners, those who had 75% or lower. There were 178 participants in total: 100 successful English learners and 78 less successful English learners.

Some research work had to be done in order to find out the language learning strategies of the engineering students. The research questions were the following:

- What are the language strategies most frequently used by successful English learners?
- What are the language strategies most frequently used by less successful English learners?

The hypothesis for this study was that successful English-language learners would use metacognitive strategies more frequently as they are the strategies with which students are able to administer their own learning.

The limitations were that not all the students registered in the English-Language Program answered the questionnaire. In addition to this, the researcher had no control over the way students interpreted the questions or the strategies that students reported to use

more frequently. Another limitation was that this study was only conducted in one Chilean university.

Language Strategies and Behavior

In this particular study, the term “strategies” will be used. According to Wenden (1987 cited in Alderson 2000, p.308) strategies are also “techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, basic skills functional skills, cognitive abilities, language processing strategies, [and] problem solving procedures.” One of the difficulties when researching language learning strategies is that they are not generally observed directly; but are inferred through the behavior of the language learner (Griffiths, 2004). Research on foreign language learning strategies goes back to the sixties as part of cognitive psychology. Observations of students’ learning process led to identify what good learners reported to do when they learned the foreign language (Rodríguez y García-Merás, n.d).

Language Learning or Language Acquisition

There is a distinction between the learning and acquisition process of a language. Oxford (1990) defines learning as conscious knowledge of language rules which does not necessarily lead to conversational fluency, where learning is derived from formal instruction. Brown (1994) states that acquisition: 1) occurs spontaneously and unconsciously; 2) leads to conversational fluency; and 3) arises from naturalistic language use. Then, students who take English Courses are “learning” as they are taught the rules and uses of the English language but they not always acquire a conversational level.

Autonomy or Self-instruction on Language Learning

Research on language strategies has been the work of several authors. For Holec (1979) the autonomous learner takes control of his learning situation, determines his own objectives, defines the content to learn and the progression of the course, selects methods and techniques, monitors the procedure, and evaluates what he/she has learned. For Dickinson (1987) self-instruction refers to “situations in which the learner is working without the direct control of the teacher” (p. 11). Therefore, autonomy involves the specific needs of the learner while self-instruction involves the learning of diverse topics.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) state that strategies begin as declarative knowledge that can be carried on through an autonomous practice. Strategies are considered complex cognitive skills since there are skills that follow an overt behavior and others follow a covert behavior. Overt behavior strategies are easy to observe, for example: note taking or use of the dictionary. Covert behavior strategies, on the other hand, require introspective forms of data collection in which informants describe the strategy they usually practice, for example, self-monitoring, summarizing, inferencing, and so on.

Learning strategies and successful English learners

Bilingualism is said to be related to students' academic success. However, this statement is still controversial because some other factors have to be considered. Chipongian (2000) stated that research confirms that bilingualism has positive cognitive advantages. For instance, it is thought “to foster classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills, creativity and other cognitive gains” (Childhood Bilingualism and the Development of Cognitive Skills, para 1). She added that bilingualism improves “meta-linguistic abilities including sensitivity to the details and structure of language, early word-referent distinction, recognition of ambiguities, and control of language processing and correction of ungrammatical sentences” (Bilinguals' Enhanced

Metalinguistic Awareness, para 1). Academic growth in a student's first language is usually linked to second language academic success.

The use of language strategies are related to success in the learning of a foreign language. This is so because "certain cognitive strategies such as analyzing, and particular memory strategies, like the keyword technique, are highly useful for understanding and recalling new information-important functions in the process of becoming competent in using the new language" (Oxford, 1990, p. 9).

According to Rubin (1975) second/foreign language learners can succeed in different ways, so it is necessary to analyze in detail what strategies successful language learners use. It is common knowledge to observe that some people are more successful than others at learning a second language. At this point, it is important to consider the distinction made by Oxford (1990) and Brown (1994) as to learning and acquisition of a second language where acquisition occurs spontaneously and unconsciously in very young children.

For Rubin (1975, p. 43), some of the strategies that are important for successful learners are the following:

- The good learner gathers and stores information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved. He/she is able to infer incomplete information. He/she may look for clues that lead him/her to meaning considering the topic, the setting, or the speaker's attitudes.
- The good learner is willing to appear foolish in order to get his/her message across.
- The good learner will try out his/her knowledge by making up new sentences and by using his/her new acquired competence.

In short, successful learners get the information they need to communicate not only from words, but also body language, and from the context in general. They would do

anything possible to make others understand their message and make up sentences using the material that they are just learning.

Research Studies on Language Learning Strategies

Students' language learning strategies have been studied in higher-education institutions in the United States, Taiwan, Palestine, Colombia, and Mexico, among others.

In the United States, a longitudinal study sponsored by the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, in Monterey California, with the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, in Alexandria, Virginia explored learners' foreign language learning strategies. The instrument used was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Learners who were more proficient and more motivated consistently reported to use a wider range of strategies. Successful students used these strategies more frequently than did learners who were less proficient and less motivated. Concurrent validity of these results was also provided in a study conducted by the Foreign Service Institute with 80 adults. In this second study, the results showed that adults who used more strategies were more highly skilled than those who used fewer strategies (Oxford, 1990).

In Taiwan, college students were evaluated throughout a semester of English-language instruction that trained in language learning strategies. Findings showed that "language-learning strategies can be taught and can help foreign language learners in the learning process" (Huang, 2001, p.1).

A research work on the frequency use of learning strategies was carried out by Arabic-speaking students registered in English-language majors at An-Najah National University, Palestine. Findings revealed that gender made no difference in the use of

strategies. However, students in the highest ranks used metacognitive strategies while the lowest ranked students used compensation strategies (Abu, 2003).

One study conducted in Tecnológico de Monterrey, in Monterrey, Mexico, explored language learning strategies among 1,283 higher education students to determine which were the most frequently used strategies by academically successful learners. The data were analyzed using a mixed methodology. They used the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* for the quantitative analysis, and a semi-structured interview for the qualitative analysis. The results showed that language learning strategies—along with other personal and family factors—led to academic success (Del Angel, 2009).

In a more recent study in Colombia with 12 adult English-language learners, language-learning strategies also worked in connection with students' foreign-language success. This study also used SILL and semi-structured interviews; additionally, the study used focus groups. The results revealed that both external and internal factors in learners' use of language learning strategies should be considered for inclusion in any study of language learner strategies use by adult learners (Paredes, 2010).

Methodology

According to Seliger and Shohamy (1990) research methodologies directly respond to the focus of a particular research (guided by the research question), the researcher's philosophy, and the conditions under which the research is conducted. The focus of this research is foreign language-learning strategies and the two main questions guiding this study are: 1) What are the language strategies most frequently used by successful English learners? And, 2) What are the language strategies most frequently used by less successful English learners? Our hypothesis was that successful English learners would make more use of metacognitive strategies because these are the cognitive instruments students employ to administer their own learning.

This study uses a quantitative methodology. The instrument we used was SILL. Originally we had a prospective population of 421 engineering students registered in the English-Language Program at a Chilean University during the second academic semester 2010. Students who answered the questionnaire or survey were 185. Seven students were not included in this study because of incomplete information. Therefore, the data finally resulted from 178 students. We described the data collected through the survey in order to test our hypothesis (Gay, 1996).

The instrument

The *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) is an instrument on strategy system designed by Oxford (1990). We adapted additional items from early surveys and strategy lists by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Rubin (1975). We chose Version 7 (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) composed of fifty items, because it is directed to students of English as a Foreign Language. This version uses a 5 Likert-scale (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) for learners to respond to questions. With this instrument, students analyze themselves and report the frequency they use different language strategies.

Oxford (1990) divides learning strategies into two types: *direct* and *indirect* strategies. On one hand, direct strategies involve the target language as they require mental processing of the language (memory, cognitive and compensation). On the other hand, indirect strategies support and manage learning without directly involving the target language; that is, learning strategies students use to other areas of knowledge, and which involve metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. SILL consists of 50 questions which are divided into six parts:

Part A: Memory (Questions 1- 9) also called mnemonics. Mnemonics have been used for thousands of years. Orators used to remember long speeches by linking different parts of speech with mental images.

Part B: Cognitive (Questions 10-23): These strategies range from repeating, analyzing expressions, to summarizing. These are the most common strategies for language learners.

Part C: Compensation (Questions 24-29): These strategies help learners use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge.

Part D: Metacognitive (Questions 30-38): They are indirect strategies that refer to actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices and provide the learners with a way to coordinate their own learning process.

Part E: Affective (Questions 39-44): These strategies refer to emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values. A learner can gain control through affective strategies.

Part F: Social (Questions 45-50): These strategies involve appropriate social strategies for communication.

Students' profile

The engineering students enrolled in this Chilean higher-education institution are a selected group who obtained a high score in the *National Test*—an entrance exam that prospective students take to be admitted at Chilean colleges. These students have also taken an English placement test called *Quick Placement Test* from *Oxford University Press*. In the Chilean assessment system, the passing grade for courses is 55 (fifty five) over a total of 100 (one hundred). For this study, the grade to determine whether students were successful or less successful was the final grade they obtained in the English-language course they were took in the second semester of 2010. According to this clasification, there were two groups: Successful students who passed with 76% or higher and less successful students whose grade percentage was 75% or lower. Based on these percentages, we found that 100 students were successful, and that 78 students were less successful out of a total of 178 students.

Analysis

After we discarded the incomplete surveys, we coded the answers and started the data analysis. First, we got the average score in each part of the survey for every student. Then the average answers—provided by all students—for each section was calculated to find out which strategy was used the most by successful students. The results revealed that on a scale of 1 to 5 successful students ranked Part B with the highest score, 3.186, as shown in *Figure 1*. In descending order, *Figure 1* shows how the other sections of the survey (C, D, E, and F) were ranked:

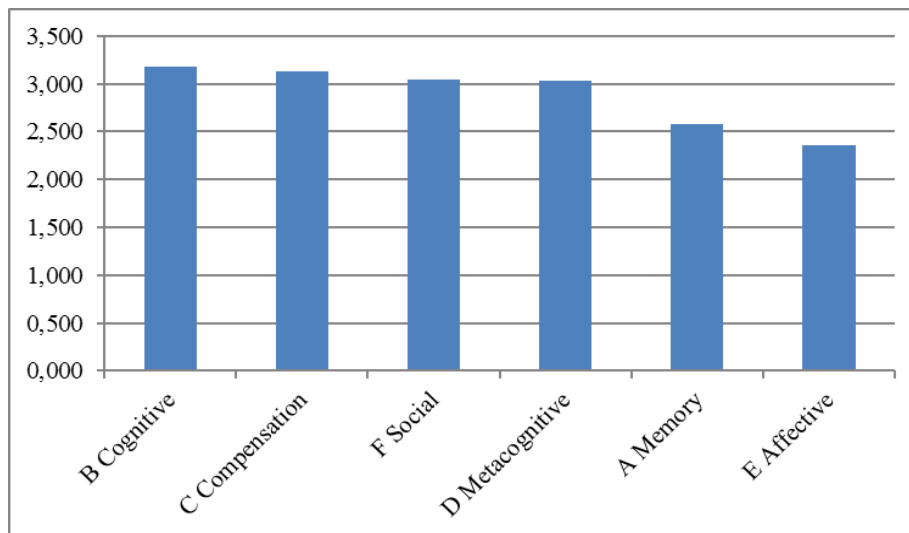


Figure 1. Strategies most frequently used by successful learners.

Cognitive Strategies (Part B) were the items successful students most agreed of doing. (See Table 1).

Table 1

Cognitive Strategies most frequently used by successful learners.

Item number	Frequency	Question
15	4.350	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to the movies spoken in English.
18	3.640	I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
22	3.640	I try not to translate word for word.
11	3.530	I try to talk like native English speakers.
21	3.510	I find the meaning of an English word by diving it into parts that I understand.

In contrast, the results revealed that on a scale of 1 to 5 less successful students ranked Part C with an average score of 3.058 as shown on Figure 2 in descending order.

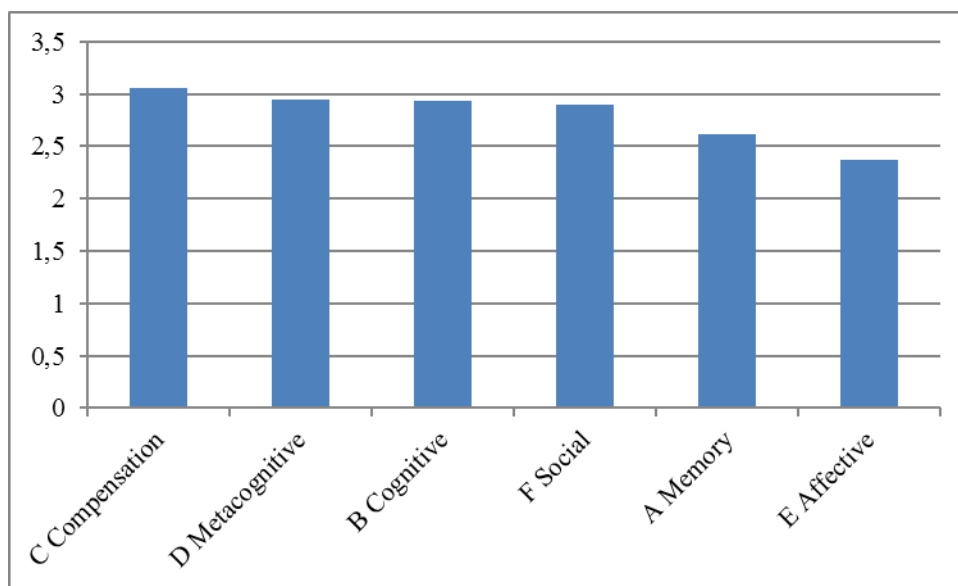


Figure 2. Strategies most frequently used by less successful learners.

Compensation strategies (Part C) were the ones less successful students most agreed with. **Table 2** shows how students marked the items in terms of frequency and question.

Table 2

Compensation Strategies most frequently used by less successful learners.

Item number	Frequency	Question
29	3.538	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.
25	3.423	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
27	3.231	I read English without looking up every new word.
24	2.91	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
26	2.679	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.

Conclusions

The first research question was: What are the language strategies most frequently used by successful English learners? The answer is *cognitive strategies* that range from repeating, analyzing expressions, to summarizing. Students who use cognitive strategies watch English-language TV shows spoken in English or see movies in English. They skim an English-language passage, then go back and read carefully. They try not to translate word for word and speak like native English speakers. They find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts. In other words, students who practice cognitive strategies use English outside the class; enjoy reading in English; imitate native speakers and relate their knowledge of their native language with the foreign language.

The second research question was: What are the language strategies most frequently used by less successful English learners? The answer is *compensation strategies* which help learners use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge. Students who use compensation strategies if they are unable to think of an English word use a word or phrase that means the same thing; when they cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, they use gestures; they read English without looking up every new word; they make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words; and they make up new words if they do not know the right ones in English.

Rubin (1975) describes the good language learner as someone who is responsible for his own learning:

...uses the language when he[she] is not required to do so and seeks opportunities to hear the language (attends foreign language movies, joins foreign language clubs, listens to T.V. or the radio, uses the foreign language with other students outside the class) (p.44).

Results show that while successful learners first look for opportunities to learn the language in real settings, less successful students first use compensation strategies to get their message across. Both strategies most frequently used by both groups are strategies used by successful learners (Rubin, 1975). Thus, there might be some other factors that affect the performance of less successful students that are not included in this study.

The hypothesis for this research was that successful English learners would use metacognitive strategies as they are the strategies with which students are able to administer their own learning. This hypothesis was not true, as successful students used cognitive strategies more frequently. However according to Jordan (2013) the use of cognitive strategies can increase the efficiency and confidence in the learner when performing a learning task as well as his/her ability to develop a product, retain information. Thus, successful students' use of cognitive strategies contributes to their own learning.

Researchers suggest higher education instructors to promote the use of language learning strategies with students because the more strategies students use, the more highly skilled students become (Oxford, 1990). For Jordan (2013) in a classroom where cognitive strategies are practiced, the teacher plays an essential role to bridge the gap between the student and the content to be learned. Finally, researchers suggest future studies where the results of two higher education institutions can be compared in order to know if the

frequency in use of foreign language learning strategies changes according to the cultural context.

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