

Language Learning Strategies: The Case of Foreign Multilinguals in a Philippine Secondary School

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Abstract

Studies have focused on learner-related factors have grown greatly through the years. However, local research directed on foreign language learners and their language learning styles have remained scarce. It is with this reason that this study was conducted. Using Rebecca Oxford's study on language learning styles and strategies (2003) as framework, the paper aims to identify the most and least frequently used language learning strategies by multilingual students in a Philippine secondary school, together with the correlation this has on their English language proficiency scores. The findings of this study were aimed at helping educators identify the learning styles that students prefer and those they don't in order to assist them in designing classroom strategies that correspond to students' manner of learning. Results of the rank order of frequency reveal that the most frequently used strategic category is metacognitive, followed by cognitive, social, compensation, memory, and affective. It has also been found out that there exists a statistically significant relationship between language learning strategies and English language proficiency. Therefore, it may be sound to say that learners with more variety of language learning strategies may have higher language proficiency.

Keywords: language learning strategies; individual differences; multilingual students

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Introduction

Throughout the years, various research have ventured on determining the various factors that may positively or negatively affect the process of language learning. From teacher- focused classroom research, there has been a shift of interest to student-centered variables affecting language learning of both foreign and second language speakers. A number of these carefully undertaken studies focus on variables such as motivation (Benson, 1991; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Holt, 2001), level of anxiety (Aida, 1994; Chen & Lin, 2009; Djigunovic, 2006; Horwitz, 2001), willingness to communicate (Cetinkaya, 2005; MacIntyre, et al., 2003; McCroskey, 1997; Yousef, et al., 2013), and significantly, language learning strategies (Chamot, 2004; Clouston, 1997; Oxford, 1999; Tao, 2011).

Among these factors, one's learning strategies have been gaining much interest for being identified as a crucial factor in the entire process of language learning as results showed that there is a wider array of strategies being employed by the more successful language learners (Vann & Abraham, 1987, 1990, in Lee, 2010, p.143). Generally, language learning strategies are referred to by Weinstein and Mayer (1986) as "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning" and are "intended to influence the learner's encoding process" (p. 315).

Although extensively studied in other countries, studies on this in the Philippines have remained scarce. Moreover, there is also limited literature focusing on the language learning strategies utilized by foreign multilinguals who have migrated to the Philippines. It is with the goal of improving the language learning of this set of learners in the Philippines by bridging this research gap that this study was conducted.

Definition of language learning strategies

Language learning strategies have been defined by various professionals in applied linguistics. One of which was made by O'Malley and Chamot in 1990. According to them, learning strategies are "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p.1). This forms similarity with the definitions of Chamot in 2004 and Schmeck in 1988. Chamot claimed that these are deliberate views and actions employed in attaining a learning objective (p.14), in the same way as Schmeck defined them to be a collection of "learning tactics" that come together to achieve a learning outcome (Schmeck, 1988 in Klassen, et al., n.d.).

In 1975, Rubin also stated that these learner- constructed strategies help build one's language system and directly affects learning (p.22). It is also worth noting that learning strategy differs from learning style as the former is personally selected while the latter is involuntary (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, p. 312). Additional studies of Oxford and Scarcella likewise characterize strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques – such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task – used by students to enhance their own learning" (1992, p. 63).

Categories of language learning strategies

As more studies were conducted on the importance of language learning strategies, much debate also stirred due to the different categories established by different professionals.

One of the earliest classification schemes was introduced by Naiman et al. (1978) whereby thirty-four good language learners were studied. They classified the learning strategies into five primary groups: active task approach, realization of language as a system, realization of language as a means of communication and interaction, management of affective demands, and monitoring L2 performance.

Rubin (1981) presented two primary strategy classifications: strategies that directly affect learning, and process that contribute indirectly to learning. Under the first category are six other subgroups: clarification/verification (e.g., asking for an example of how to use a word or expression, repeating words to confirm understanding), monitoring (e.g., correcting errors in one/ others' pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, style), memorization (e.g., taking note of new items, pronouncing out loud, finding a mnemonic, writing items repeatedly), guessing/ inductive inferencing (e.g., guessing meaning from keywords, structures, pictures, context, etc.), deductive reasoning (e.g., comparing native/ other language to target language, word grouping, looking for rules of co-occurrence), and practice (e.g., experimenting with new sounds, repeating sentences until pronounced easily, and listening carefully and trying to imitate). Lastly, a greatly acknowledged categorization was presented by Oxford in 1990 and was the basis of this research.

Language learning strategies and language learning proficiency

The extensive research on language learning strategies and their effect in over-all language proficiency generally show a positive correlation between the two, creating what is so called a "good language learner". At this point, it is important to establish the working definition of this term. According to the study of Rubin (1975), there is a gap between good and poor learners. Good learners are the ones who use a number of strategies to learn the language easily. They are conscious of the strategies they use and the reason why they use them. They are good guessers, and are willing to communicate, express, and analyze (pp. 46-47).

Research questions

Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What language learning strategies are used most frequently by foreign multilinguals? What language learning strategies are used least?
2. How do language learning strategies affect their proficiency of the English language? How are these correlated with each other?

Theoretical Framework

This research is structured using Rebecca Oxford's study on language learning styles and strategies (2003) where she explored the effect these factors have in L2 learning.

According to Oxford, a strategy may be considered valuable if it is (1) related to the L2 task, (2) associated with the learning style of the student, and (3) used effectively with other strategies (p. 8).

In the similar study, Oxford strongly claimed the positive effects of developing learning strategies not only in language learning but also in other content areas as these kind of students, also referred to as “good language learners” (Rubin, 1975). She noted that the “good language learners” do not have a specific set of strategies, but what they have is a set of varied, organized, and relevant strategies (p. 10).

Additionally, another scaffold of this research is Oxford’s six main categories of L2 learning strategies as seen in her work “Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting” (1990). The six main categories are cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies. The first three categories are under direct strategies because language is involved, while the latter three are classified under indirect because they reinforce language learning using non- language factors.

Significance of the study

The Philippines is known to be one of the Asian countries primarily attracting foreign students to its rich curricular offerings and standards in the field of English language learning, as supported by Ruth Tizon, Programme Director of the Philippines ESL Tour Program when she said in an article in The PIE News that the Philippines was chosen by international students studying English in Australia as an option country (ICEF Monitor, 2013). The Philippine Bureau of Immigration also confirms this through a report made in January 2013 stating that there was a 14% boost in the number of student immigrants in compares to the statistics in 2011, jumping from 41, 443 foreign students to 47, 478 (ICEF Monitor, 2013).

Considering this report and assuming this to be the same in the incoming years, the researchers believe that the study is going to benefit these foreign multilinguals that come to the Philippines with the hope of improving their English proficiency. Not only will this benefit foreigners but will also help Filipino multilinguals.

Through this research, educators may derive insights on what works for students nowadays, and apply these in designing new teaching methodologies. Knowing the strategies being frequently used by students also allows for the teachers to connect directly with the needs of the students. This paper is also significant in furthering local research related to language learning strategies.

Research Design

This research study is descriptive in nature which focused only the identification of the language learning strategies employed by the multilingual learners in learning English. The study also deals with the analysis as to whether these language learning strategies influence the performance and the proficiency in the subject. Furthermore, descriptive statistics was also applied, attaining only the mean and standard deviation as the questionnaire administered to the respondents used the five-point Likert Scale to gather the demographic data of the participants and to calculate their overall

strategy use. As for the data analysis, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine how these language learning strategies correlate to the proficiency of the respondents.

Participants

A total of 30 multilingual students were included in this research study. The participants were heterogeneously mixed Grade 9 and Grade 10 students that could utilize more than two languages. The languages varied from European languages like French and Italian to Asian languages like Korean and Japanese.

Instrument

To address the main objective of the study which is to investigate the relationship and correlation between the language learning strategies and the English language proficiency of the respondents, the research study utilized Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to identify the learning strategies of the participants. The study used the SILL's 50-item questionnaire for learners of English as second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). The SILL uses a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each strategy described: never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and always or almost always true of me. On the SILL, respondents were asked to indicate their response (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) to a strategy description, such as "I physically act out new English words" or "I try to talk like native English speakers". The SILL is a comprehensible and validated approach in the identification of the language learning strategies of the students that include "the social and affective sides of the learner as well as the more intellectual (cognitive) and "executive-managerial"(metacognitive)" (Oxford, 2001). Oxford also emphasized that the SILL assesses the totality of the learner's language performance rather than just the cognitive and metacognitive side of the students.

According to Oxford (2001), six subscales were established from the SILL to facilitate more thorough understanding of the learning strategies of the ESL/EFL. These subscales included:

1. Memory strategies, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing.
2. Cognitive strategies, such as reasoning, analyzing, summarizing (all reflective of deep processing), as well as general practicing.
3. Compensation strategies (to compensate for limited knowledge), such as guessing meanings from the context in reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known.
4. Metacognitive strategies, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress, and monitoring errors.
5. Affective (emotional, motivation-related) strategies, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward.
6. Social strategies, such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware.

These subscales were used to identify the strategies used by the participants. These subscales were also determined to classify which language learning strategies were the most and least employed by the multilingual respondents of the study. For the

English language proficiency, the students' 1st term A.Y. 2014- 2015 English grades were measured as the reflection of their English proficiency.

Procedure

After making the preparations and the time schedule, copies of the questionnaire were made. All students agreed to participate in the study before the distribution of the SILL survey. During the completion of the questionnaire, the students stayed in their respective classrooms to avoid distractions and the teachers offered some necessary help to them by explaining the instructions on the questionnaire and asking them to provide the demographic information first. After that, the students spent 20-30 minutes to finish the 50-item questionnaire.

Method of Analysis

The means and standard deviation for each item analyses of the corpus were computed as the statistical method applied by the research study. Oxford (1990) suggests a mean of lower than 2.5 for "low", a mean range of 2.5 to 3.4 for "medium," and a mean range of 3.5 to 5 for "high" levels of strategy use.

To identify the language learning strategy most or least commonly used by the respondents, the 50-item questionnaire was categorized according to the six subscales of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Oxford (2001). These subscales are (1) Memory Strategies, (2) Cognitive Strategies, (3) Compensation Strategies, (4) Metacognitive Strategies, (5) Affective Strategies, and (6) Social Strategies. The responses of the participants were tallied and analyzed using the scheme above to determine the interpretation according to the 5-point Likert scale. The mean of each statement and the mean of each subscale were also computed to identify the rank of the language learning strategy used.

Results and Discussions

Descriptive statistics was employed to investigate the language learning strategies used by the multilingual ESL/EFL students. Table 1 illustrates that the mean of frequency of overall strategy use was 3.47, which was approximately almost at the high degree of usage (with a range from 1 to 5). According to the results of Table 1, the most frequently used strategy was metacognitive strategies, (M= 3.76) and followed by cognitive strategies, (M =3.71), social strategies (M =3.63), compensation strategies (M=3.24), memory strategies (M =3.17) and lastly, affective strategies (M= 2.96). Metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies were at high level of usage that suggests more students employ these strategies in their English subject.

Table 1: Summary of Descriptive Statistics for Language Learning Strategy Use

Strategy	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Interpretation	Rank
Memory	3.17	0.57	2.33	3.9	Medium	5
Cognitive	3.71	0.47	3.03	4.63	High	2
Compensation	3.24	0.58	2.37	4.20	Medium	4
Metacognitive	3.76	0.44	2.73	4.27	High	1
Affective	2.96	0.64	2.47	3.90	Medium	6
Social	3.63	0.49	3.00	4.40	High	3
Overall Strategy Use	3.47	.58	2.33	4.63	Medium	

Table 2 illustrates the ten most frequently used language learning strategies of the multilingual respondents. The statement “I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English” got the highest mean followed by statements “I ask questions in English” and “I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.” These results might be attributed to the proliferation and availability of media using English as medium. These results also indicate that the respondents learn the language through practice like statements “I start conversations in English”; “I practice English with other students.” and “I try to talk like native English speakers.” The statements “I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.” and “I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.” show that the respondents were conscious about their own learning and improvement.

Table 2: Ten most frequently used language learning strategies of the foreign multilingual respondents

Rank	Statement	Mean	SD
1	15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.	4.63	0.37
2	49. I ask questions in English.	4.40	0.46
3	17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	4.33	0.65
4	14. I start conversations in English.	4.30	0.49
5	32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	4.27	0.58
6	29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing	4.20	0.50
7	31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	4.10	0.64
8.5	33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	4.00	0.76
8.5	47. I practice English with other students.	4.00	0.71
10	11. I try to talk like native English speakers.	3.97	0.81

Table 3 illustrates the least frequently used learning strategies of the foreign multilingual students of the study. Out of all 50 strategies, the statement “I use flashcards to remember new English word.” was the least frequently used by the respondents followed by “I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.” Out of the six items under affective language learning strategy, half falls under the least frequently used by the respondents. It is evident that the respondents were less mindful of their feelings towards language learning with such statements like “I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English” and “I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.” falling under the least frequently employed learning strategy. Some strategies like “I physically act out new English word.” and “I use rhymes to remember new English words.” might have been least used by the respondents due to the fact that these strategies are mostly used by beginner learners.

Table 3: Ten least frequently used language learning strategies of the foreign multilingual respondents

Rank	Statement	Mean	SD
1	6. I use flashcards to remember new English word.	2.33	1.26
2	26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	2.37	1.19
3.5	42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	2.47	0.97
3.5	43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	2.47	1.45
5	44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	2.53	1.25
6	7. I physically act out new English word.	2.57	0.93
7	5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	2.67	0.96
8.5	34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	2.73	0.95
8.5	41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	2.73	1.32
10	46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	3.00	1.12

Table 4 shows the result of the Pearson correlation analysis of each student’s language learning strategies and the students’ language proficiency as reflected with their 1st term A.Y. 2014- 2015 English grades. As seen in the table, the computed r between language learning strategies and language proficiency is .470. The significant value is .009, which is lesser than the significant level of ($p < 0.05$). This implies a moderate relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency. Thus, there is a relationship between these two variables. Apparently, the respondents who employed more language learning strategies got higher English grade proving the

study of Rubin (1975), that good learners utilize more varied and eclectic strategies to improve their language proficiency.

Table 4: Correlation between Language Learning Strategies and Language Proficiency

		Score of Language Learning Strategy	Average English Grade
Score of Language Learning Strategy	Pearson Correlation	1	.470
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009
	N	30	30
Average English Grade	Pearson Correlation	.470 ^{**}	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
	N	30	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study aimed to identify the different language learning strategies of foreign multilingual students using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Additionally, this study wanted to investigate the correlation of these language learning strategies to the language proficiency of the students. From the results, more than half of the strategies are all in medium level of usage. According to the rank order of the frequency of use, the most frequently used strategy was metacognitive and followed by cognitive, social, compensation, memory, and affective. The findings also demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency. This proves that learners with more variety of language learning strategies have higher language proficiency.

Based on the findings of the study, some pedagogical implications may be suggested. Since the importance of using language learning strategies might be a vital understanding to the students; thus, educators should impart this message. According to the results of this study, learners with more language learning strategies used have better language proficiency. With this knowledge, a learner should develop more language learning strategies for further enhancement of one's language proficiency. This could be beneficial in helping the poor learners develop their own language ability. Consequently, educators should have a better understanding of their learners and should help students cultivate and raise awareness of language learning strategies. Educators have been implicitly teaching language learning strategies with the different classroom activities. The following is a list of recommended activities based on the learning strategy categories mentioned in this study:

1. Memory- using schema, presenting words in context and in sentences.
2. Cognitive- grouping, constructing graphic organizers, note-taking, elaborating prior knowledge, summarizing, deducting, inducting, visualizing through imagery, making inferences.
3. Compensation- word parsing, identifying synonyms.
4. Metacognitive- previewing, skimming, identifying the gist, organizational planning, listening or reading selectively, scanning, finding specific information, monitoring comprehension, monitoring production.
5. Affective- speaking in front of an audience, short speeches.

6. Social- questioning for clarification, cooperating or working with classmates, thinking aloud, developing turn-taking skills, assigning buddies.

Moreover, development of methodologies for students with varied language learning strategies may enhance the proficiency of each learner. Once students are aware of advantages of using strategies in their language learning process, they will be willing to and appropriately employ these strategies to facilitate their English learning.

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