

Strategies in young learners: A study case

Estrategias en jóvenes aprendientes: estudio de caso

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ABSTRACT

Strategies are a determining factor when learning a language. Current studies do not show how new, young students learn in different learning situations. The objective of this study is to analyse which strategies student think they use in learning a language and verify how all the variables are related. The research was conducted on a case study of 70 students aged between 13 and 17 (Canary Islands, Spain), who were also asked to fill in their personal information in Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire (1990). The results show a trend in the use of strategies and the relations between them. This article is a contribution to the research into the linguistics applied in secondary education.

Palabras clave: learning strategies, young learners, language learning

RESUMEN

Las estrategias de aprendizaje son determinantes cuando se está aprendiendo una lengua. En los estudios actuales no sabemos cómo aprenden nuevos alumnos adolescentes en distintas situaciones de aprendizaje. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar qué estrategias creen los estudiantes que usan en el aprendizaje de la lengua, así como verificar como se relacionan todas las variables. Para llevar a cabo la investigación, se preparó un estudio de caso en el que 70 estudiantes entre 13 y 17 años (Islas Canarias, España) cumplimentaron además de sus datos personales, el cuestionario Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) de Oxford (1990). El resultado muestra una tendencia en el uso de las estrategias y la relación que existe entre ellas. Este trabajo es un aporte a la investigación de la lingüística aplicada en Secundaria.

Keywords: estrategias de aprendizaje, jóvenes aprendices, aprendizaje de lenguas.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In the process of teaching/learning a foreign language to young learners, one of the vital factors is to recognise which strategies the good learner uses in the different educational contexts (Garton, Coplan & Burns 2011). 'Many variables are involved' in teaching/learning a language (Brown 2000: 1), including cultural and socio-cultural circumstances. For this reason, the methodology and approach used by teachers will play an important role in determining the success of language learning. But which one should a teacher use?

There has been an increased interest in the way people learn over the last few decades, and more specifically, in the idea that different people deal with the learning process differently. No two people are the same, no two people have the same mind and in general, education works most effectively if these differences are taken into account rather than denied or ignored (Oxford & Nyikos 1989; Griffiths & Oxford 2014). This has given rise to many educational theories, including one of the most widely discussed and used: the learning strategy theory.

Learning a language is the result of a combination of grasping and transforming experience; including Oxford's language learning strategies (Oxford 1990), where she focuses on the importance of language learning strategies when learning a language since they are 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations' (Oxford 1990).

We decided to use Oxford's taxonomy because we found that it related best to language learning as she focuses on the importance of developing students' communicative competence, which is the main objective when learning a language. However, and despite the fact that she is one of the most influential authors on language strategies, her statements and ideas have also been criticised sharply by many other authors. The most controversial aspect of her taxonomy is that many researchers think that it is neither based on factor analysis nor on achievements of cognitive science and that clear distinctions have not been established between strategies of language use and strategies of language learning. (Božinovic 2011). Furthermore, authors such as Dörnyei (2001) think that communication strategies should be in her taxonomy rather than compensation strategies; and that memory strategies are a sub-class of cognitive strategies, making it difficult to separate communication strategies from memory strategies (Božinovic 2011). Moreover, it seems to neglect the importance of cultural context and it seems to fail to provide 'data on the socio-cultural dimension of teaching / learning' (LoCastro 1994; Cáceres-Lorenzo 2015; Huang 2016). Despite all this criticism and the alleged disadvantages, Oxford is still one of the leading scholars in this field because her taxonomy is 'perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date' (Ellis 1995: 539).

As with any highly popular and widely researched matter, there are many different opinions and concepts about the same issue, and this occurs with the definition of learning strategies. But according to Oxford (1990), they all have two things in common: the idea of activities or mental processes that students engage in to improve their learning, and intentionality. It is important to keep in mind that

'learning strategies are the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning' (Wenden & Rubin 1987: 7).

As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, learning a language, and more specifically, a second or foreign language, is different from learning any other subject because 'you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling and acting.' (Brown 2000: 1). Due to the importance researchers give to learning strategies in the field of language learning, there are many language learning strategy taxonomies, such as Rubin's of 1987, where he establishes three strategies that directly or indirectly affect language learning: learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies (Hismanoglu 2000: 1); O'Malley's (1985), who divides strategies into three sub-categories: meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies; or Oxford's (1990), who classifies strategies in six groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies, which, in turn, are further divided in two groups: direct strategies (ones that directly affect the second or foreign language) and indirect strategies (that don't involve the language but are useful as support for the language learning process) (Ruiz & García 2005).

Direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies and the indirect strategies include meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. It is fair to say that all of these taxonomies share the same ideas and the differences between them basically stem from the organisation of the ideas, with some, such as Oxford's, being more specific, and others more generic. In this case, we consider it better for our research to work with Oxford's taxonomy because her classification of the strategies takes into account that 'they are meant primarily to develop students' communicative competence' (Ruiz & García 2005: 6), which is thought to be the primary objective of language learners.

According to Oxford, considered one of the most influential authors in the field of learning strategies for second language learning, 'language learning strategies are among the main factors that help determine how – and how well – our students learn a second or foreign language' (Oxford 2003: 1). In fact, they are so important that authors such as Beltrán Llera (2003) even assert that there is a direct relation between learners' learning strategies and the quality of their learning, as two students with the same characteristics can achieve different academic results depending on the strategies they choose. Oxford goes even further and affirms that making students aware of their learning styles will help them to know which strategies to use to make the most of their learning process and to balance learning with their strategies if their styles create drawbacks (Oxford 1993; Wong & Nunan 2011). Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that 'when left to their own devices and if not encouraged by the teacher or forced by the lesson to use a certain set of strategies, students typically use learning strategies that reflect their basic learning styles' (Oxford 2003: 9), to realise the impact that a teaching style can have on the development of learning strategies by a student, as has already been mentioned in this paper.

Language students are supposed to have different style and strategy preferences depending on different circumstances. Several studies have shown that students' use of strategies will vary depending on many different variables. For example, in research involving 1.200 students learning different languages, Oxford discovered by using the SILL questionnaire that motivation and gender determined students' strategy use. Another survey conducted by Politzer also found that gender and motivation were associated with strategy use, but he also

claimed that variables included course level (age) and teaching methods. Finally, another research project establishes that national origin can also have a very strong influence on strategy choice (Oxford & Crookall 1989).

Based on the above, we pose the following research questions: do learners use all strategy sets to the same extent? Are there any variables that affect the choice of one set over another? The search for answers to these questions is what gave rise to this study. The main aim of this research is to find out which strategies are used by students when learning a language, to see if they affect language learning success and to find possible variables that could affect students' choice.

We hope that this research will serve other studies aimed at identifying the learning strategies used by youngsters in different learning contexts.

2. METHOD

The research project has been designed to answer the questions posed. To such end, a case study was chosen that shows young learners in a learning context.

2.1 Participants

A total of 70 high-school students aged between 13 and 17 participated in the study. The sample can be divided into two groups since 24 of them are from IES Ingenio high school (Canary Islands, Spain), who in turn, can be sub-divided into another two groups formed by 11 3rd-grade students and 13 4th-grade. The remaining 46 are from IES Playa de Arinaga High School (Canary Islands, Spain), and these too can be sub-divided into two groups: 27 2nd-grade students and 19 3rd-grade students. It should be noted that all students from IES Ingenio High School taking part in this study were part of curricular diversification, i.e. they were students with learning difficulties.

2.2 Instruments

The questionnaire used is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (version 7.0: Oxford, 1990) translated into Spanish. Each item is scored on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. 1 is "never or almost never", 2 "I do not generally use it" (less than half of the time), 3 "sometimes" (approximately half the time), 4 "often" (more than half of the time) and 5 "always or almost always". Information has also been compiled on A: subject; B: sex; C: year; D: age; E: native language (L1); F: second language (L2) studied (English); G: third language (L3) studied. We are also interested in how they score (items N, O, P) on a scale of 0-10 points.

Two kinds of statistical analysis were performed with the Addisoft XLSTAT programme, version 2014.3.01: a correlation matrix, using Pearson's correlation coefficient, and a group comparative analysis, based on the results of the selected factors.

2.3 Procedure

To conduct this qualitative and quantitative research, students were given a brief introduction to learning strategy theory and the aim of the research was explained to them in order to make them feel comfortable answering the questions, especially personal ones (N.B. the sample used for this study is not comprised of the researcher's students). Once the introduction was made, students were asked

to fill in a questionnaire, which was divided into three parts: personal questions (age, sex and academic year), SILL test and finally, marks compilation.

All of the questionnaires were analysed individually to see what kind of leaning strategy profile each student had and then, once all the individual data were collected we started the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the survey answer the first research question - do learners use all strategy sets to the same extent? - as can be seen in tables 1 and 2:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P			
1	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	French	2,4	2,4	2,6	2,3	2,7	2,5	4	-	5	-	4	-
2	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	-	2,8	2,4	3,5	2,7	2,7	2	4	7	6	6	-	-
3	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	German	2,7	3	2,5	2,3	2,4	2,8	5	8	5	7	3	2
4	F	3º	16	Spanish	English	French	1,8	2,1	2	1,4	2	1,6	4	6	3	7	2	-
5	F	3º	16	Spanish	English	-	2,3	2,6	3,2	2,3	2,9	2,3	7	8	7	7	-	-
6	F	3º	16	Spanish	English	-	3,2	2,8	3,3	3,1	3	3,6	3	7	7	7	-	-
7	M	3º	16	Spanish	English	French	2,7	2,5	2,7	2,5	2,4	2	4	6	4	7	5	-
8	F	3º	16	Spanish	English	French	2,3	1,8	3,2	1,9	2	2,9	4	6	7	8	2	-
9	M	3º	16	Spanish	English	French	2,3	2	3,2	2	2	2	5	5	6	6	5	-
10	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	French	2,3	2,1	1,3	2,8	2,4	2,8	4	6	7	8	4	-
11	M	3º	16	Spanish	English	German	2,8	2,4	3,3	1	2,2	1,5	4	7	4	6	2	-
12	F	4º	18	Spanish	English	-	1,9	2,4	2	2,6	2,5	1,8	5	5	7	5	-	-
13	F	4º	16	Spanish	English	French	1,2	1,7	3,3	1,8	2,6	2,4	5	5	5	6	5	6
14	F	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	1,3	2,1	2,8	2	2,9	2,9	4	3	9	7	-	-
15	F	4º	17	Spanish	English	French	2,6	2,8	3	2	2,7	2,4	5	4	7	6	-	-
16	F	4º	16	Spanish	English	-	3,1	2,6	1,8	2,9	2,7	2,8	4	3	7	5	7	-
17	F	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	2,5	2,9	2,8	2,3	2,3	2	5	5	7	7	-	-
18	F	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	2	2,8	2,8	2,8	3	2,6	5	4	9	7	-	-
19	F	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	2	1,8	2,3	2,3	1,8	1,8	4	5	7	7	-	-
20	F	4º	16	Spanish	English	French	2	2,3	3,7	2	2	1,5	4	8	6	6	6	6
21	M	4º	16	Spanish	English	-	1,5	1,9	1,7	2,5	1,9	2,4	4	6	4	6	-	-
22	M	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	3,3	2,6	3	1,9	2,1	2,3	2	4	8	6	-	-
23	M	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	2,1	2,4	2,3	2	2,1	2,8	4	4	8	8	-	-
24	M	4º	17	Spanish	English	-	1,6	1,8	2,8	2,2	1,8	2,1	4	5	9	8	-	-

Table 1. Students from IES Ingenio. A: subject; B: sex; C: year; D: age; E: native language (L1); F: second language (L2) studied (English); G: third language (L3) studied (if any); H: memory strategies; I: cognitive strategies; J: compensation strategies; K: meta-cognitive strategies; L: affective strategies; M: social strategies; N: Spanish mark last year (grey) and this year; O: English mark last year (grey) and this year; P: L3 mark last year (grey) and this year

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P			
1	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	1,9	1,6	2,2	2,1	1,8	2,4	5	5	5	4	5	7
2	F	2º	15	Spanish	English	-	2,3	1,9	2,7	1,8	2,4	2,8	3	2	-	3	-	-
3	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	1,8	2,4	1,5	2,6	2	1,5	8	8	9	7	10	7
4	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	3,1	3,1	3,2	2,7	2,5	2,4	7	8	7	7	7	10
5	F	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,1			2,6	2	2,5	4	3	3	2	5	3
6	F	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,5			1,9	1,9	2	9	8	9	8	10	8
7	M	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	1,3			1,9	2,2	1,9	4	2	5	4	1	7
8	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	-				1,4	1,9	2,8	5	6	4	4	-	-
9	F	2º	14	Italian/Spanish	English	French	1,7	1,4	1,5	1,6	1,8	2,1	5	4	6	7	5	7
10	M	2º	14	English/Spanish	German	French	2	2,1	3,2	1,8	2,2	2,5	8	7	10	10	9	7
11	F	2º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,5	2,1		2,2	2,1	2,4	5	5	5	5	5	-
12	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	1,6			1,7	2,3	2,3	8	7	7	7	8	10
13	M	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	1,8	1,8	2,2	2	2	1,4	7	7	7	8	-	10
14	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German				2,2	2,3	2,1	7	6	6	4	7	10
15	M	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,7	2,1	3,3	1,4	1,7	2,1	-	3	-	5	-	6
16	M	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	1,9	2,4	3	2,3	2,1	2	5	5	4	7	6	8
17	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	2,8	2,8	3	3,2	2,8	2,6	5	5	5	6	7	5
18	M	2º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,1	1,8	1,3	2,2	2,3	2,8	-	7	-	5	-	8
19	M	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	3,1	2,9	3	2,3	2,5	2,5	10	9	9	9	8	10
20	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	1,7	1,9	2,2	1,8	1,9	2,3	6	6	6	6	5	6
21	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	2,3	2	2,8	2,1	2,3	2,3	9	10	9	9	10	10
22	M	2º	14	Spanish	English	French	1,6	1,9	2,2	1,8	2	1,8	7	8	7	7	7	9
23	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	French	2,8	2,6	3,8	2,2	2,7	2,6	6	6	7	7	7	8
24	F	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,8	2,6	2,5	2,1	2,9	2,1	5	3	5	4	8	8
25	F	2º	13	Spanish	English	German	2	2,4	2,8	2	1,7	2,1	5	5	5	5	6	6
26	F	2º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,6	2,5		2,2	2,2	1,8	-	5	-	5	-	7
27	M	2º	14	Spanish	English	German	3,4	2,6	2,7	1,8	2,9	1,5	5	4	4	5	6	5
28	M	3º	15	Spanish	English	French	2,3	2,1	2,8	1,8	1,9	2,4	-	7	-	5	-	9
29	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	3,1	2,8	2,3	2	2,7	2,5	7	7	8	9	8	10
30	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	French	1,8	2,9	3	2,7	2,2	2,5	9	8	8	9	9	9
31	F	3º	14	Spanish	English	French	2	1,9	2	2,3	2,3	2	5	5	5	4	5	5
32	F	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	3,2	2,3	3,7	2,8	3	2,4	10	10	10	9	10	10
33	M	3º	15	Spanish	English	French	2,9	3,6	4	2,8	2,8	2,8	-	4	-	3	-	3
34	M	3º	16	Spanish	English	-	2,3	2,1	2	2	2,3	2,4	5	5	5	5	-	-
35	M	3º	15	Spanish	English	German	2,9	2,5	3,2	3,3	2,5	2,6	4	6	4	6	-	8
36	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	2	2,2	3	2	2,5	1,8	5	6	5	6	5	5
37	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,4	2,7	2,2	2	1,8	2,6	6	4	5	4	7	7
38	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	2,1	2,9	2,7	2,7	2,3	2,6	8	8	10	9	10	10
39	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	German	1	1,9	2,3	1,4	1,3	1,1	9	9	9	9	10	10
40	F	3º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,7	2,4	2,5	2,3	2,2	2	8	9	8	7	9	10
41	F	3º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,2	1,8	1	1,4	1,5	1,8	-	7	-	7	-	10
42	M	3º	15	Spanish	English	-	2,3	2,3	1,8	2,2	2,1	2,5	-	4	-	4	-	-
43	M	3º	14	Spanish	English	French	2,5	2,8	2,8	2,4	2,3	2,5	9	8	10	9	10	10
44	M	3º	16	Spanish	English	German	2,6	2,4	2,5	1,8	2,2	2,3	5	5	7	4	7	7
45	F	3º	14	Spanish	English	German	1,8	1,8	2,2	2,6	2,5	2,5	4	5	4	4	6	7
46	F	3º	15	Spanish	English	French	1,2	1,6	0,3	1,7	1,8	2,1	-	8	-	7	-	9

Table 2. Students from IES Playa de Arinaga.

At first glance, the tables suggest that little difference could be found among the 70 student questionnaires analysed with respect to the selection of strategies. A study of the variables of age and academic year does not however corroborate Chen's findings (2014: 146), as can be seen from Table 4.

Gender						
	H	I	J	K	L	M
Female	2.2	2.25	2.52	2.2	2.3	2.27
Male	2.3	2.38	2.67	2.11	2.21	2.25
Age						
2nd grade	2.2	2.2	2.6	1.94	2.21	2.1
3rd grade	2.48	2.57	2.8	2.32	2.45	2.46
4th grade	2.1	2.3	2.63	2.3	2.4	2.35

Table 3. Average strategy use according to variables of gender and age.

Although it is true that strategies should be taken as a whole kit that guides us through the process of language learning to make it more useful and successful (O'Malley & Chamot 1990), we wondered what strategies were most widely-used in this process. For example, among the high school students (young learners) of Russian and Spanish, the strategies most used were the cognitive ones, while social and affective strategies were rarely used. (Oxford & Crookall 1989); Meanwhile, Tabanlıoğlu (2003: 2) affirms that cognitive strategies 'are perhaps the most popular strategies with language learners', but the results obtained in our sample reveal that compensation strategies were the most widely used, used up to an average of 2.6. The average use of the other strategies was 2.3 and the least used were meta-cognitive strategies, although average use is not far behind the others at 2.167. Since we have repeatedly talked in terms of averages, it is important to highlight that the standard deviation was not higher than 0.5. This is a very important detail because when studies have a high standard deviation, it can mean that there is something wrong with the study approach.

We tested the relations between all the variables by submitting some values to Pearson's correlation coefficient. See Table 4 below.

Pearson's correlation coefficient							
Variables	D	H	I	J	K	L	M
D	1	-0.028	0.016	0.050	0.039	0.137	0.068
H	-0.028	1	0.612	0.400	0.315	0.482	0.274
I	0.016	0.612	1	0.470	0.461	0.532	0.269
J	0.050	0.400	0.470	1	0.171	0.405	0.137
K	0.039	0.315	0.461	0.171	1	0.538	0.422
L	0.137	0.482	0.532	0.405	0.538	1	0.413
M	0.068	0.274	0.269	0.137	0.422	0.413	1

Values in bold type are different from 0 with an alpha level of significance = 0.05

Table 4. Pearson's correlation coefficient.

An analysis of these data enables us to answer the second research question - are there any variables that affect the selection of one set over another? The results provide information: for example, the table highlights the fact that memory-related strategies (H) are related to cognitive strategies (I); cognitive strategies (I), in turn, are also related to affective strategies (L); and finally, meta-cognitive (K) strategies are also related to affective strategies (L). The only strategies that do not appear to have any relation with the others are the compensation (J) and social (M) strategies. It is true that 'LLS [Language Learning Strategies]² are interconnected' (Oxford 1990; Lessard-Clouston 1997), but we have found nothing in the literature that suggests the possibility of strategy profiles. We searched for research that could support the idea that came out of this study almost by accident, but it was absolutely impossible to find anything

about the concept of 'strategy use profile', which could mean that little or no research has been done on this matter. The closest we came to finding anything about this was O'Malley & Chamot's statement, claiming that strategies usually work together to support each other since a combination of strategies could have a better impact than one single strategy. The example they gave to support this claim is the fact that cognitive strategies were often used with meta-cognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The aims of this study were to analyse what kind of strategies were most often used by young language learners, to see if they affected language learning success and to find out what possible variables could affect students' strategy use, and we believe that we have achieved these aims.

In this case study, it turned out that all strategies were used to a similar extent, with small variations. Information such as which strategies are most widely used by students, can be of great value to teachers as the methodology/approach that they use is supposed to be good enough to help learners to develop their strategy set so that they can address the learning process in a more individual and confident manner. This information is valuable to both teachers and learners too (Garton, Coplan & Burns 2011). Dansereau (1978: 2) states that 'by not stressing learning strategies, educators, in essence, discourage students from developing and exploring new strategies, and, in so doing, limit students' awareness of their cognitive capabilities'. He also affirms that the lack of a student's awareness of their own learning strategies can limit the ability to face a certain situation in which they may need new strategies, so note the importance, for both teachers and learners, of knowing the set of strategies used by learners in order to avoid these problems. Going forward, we believe that it would be highly useful to analyse students' learning styles too. Most students do not face learning difficulties with any thematic content if they are taught in accordance with their own learning styles. Learning success may be based on the ability of each student to adjust their own way of learning (Wong & Nunan 2011).

This study was also meant to identify possible relations between learners' use of strategies and different variables. The two variables that we focused on were age and gender, as some case studies have shown that age and gender can affect students' language learning proficiency due to their choice of strategies. Nevertheless, we found that with the sample used, no big differences could be found in relation to students' strategy preferences when taking these two variables into account. Nonetheless, we need to remember that the older students were part of curricular diversification (This is the Spanish term for students with learning difficulties), which means that they have special learning profiles and needs irrespective of their age, so this could perhaps affect the negative result, although that issue was not part of the remit of this research, but it could be the aim of a future project.

This research could be completed in the future, using students from other schools and other educational contexts, as shown by the work of Huang (2016). Furthermore, taking into account that compensation strategies turned out to be the most widely used, albeit with very little variation, we found it unusual that this set of strategies was not related to any other. We are unable to pinpoint the possible reasons for this, if indeed there are any, but it could certainly form part of a possible future project to conduct an in-depth study of these relations. We

hope that our analysis will be useful for those planning classroom schedules, and we also hope that those who create educational materials will give consideration to the value of the individuality of the student in the process of teaching / learning.

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