

영어교육 50권 2호 1995년 여름

The Effect of Gender and Learning Context on the Use of Language Learning Strategies

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Kim, Young-Min. (1995). The effect of gender and learning context on the use of language learning strategies. *English Teaching, 50*(2), 331-345.

The present study investigated the use of language learning strategies of Korean adult learners of English as a second language, with a consideration of variables such as gender and learning context. The subjects in the study were 80 Korean adults who were learning English as a second language in a university or in a community program in the U. S. Analysis of variance was conducted to see the effects of gender and learning context on the choice of strategies. The major findings are as follows: (1) Overall, there was a strong use of language learning strategies by Korean adults who are learning English as a second language. (2) There was no significant difference between men and women in the use of learning strategies. (3) There was a significant difference between university students and community students in using cognitive strategies with university students' significantly higher use of them.

I. INTRODUCTION

During the decades, a considerable number of studies has been conducted on second language acquisition and learning, factors related to second language learning, and the impact of cultural and societal status on second language learning (Brown, 1987; Canale & Swain, 1980; Cummins, 1984; Fillmore & Swain, 1984). As cognitive components which affect second language learning, learning strategies are investigated by many researchers (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990a:

Ramirez, 1986). Language learning strategies are defined as often-conscious actions or behaviors that learners use to improve their own learning process — including techniques that aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and the use of information (Rigley, 1978; Oxford, 1990a, b). In regard to learning strategies, studies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Chamot & O'Malley, 1984; Naiman et al., 1978; Ramirez, 1986; Rubin, 1975) suggest that good language learners use a variety of strategies to assist them gaining command over new language skills.

However, the research on learning strategies are fragmented and incompleated. Few empirical studies have attempted to indicate characteristics of learners with diverse language abilities and thus, from a diverse cultural background. By identifying learning strategies of different backgrounds, educators can become more aware of the range of possible strategies to help learners become more self-directed.

In this study, specific strategies of Korean adults learning English as a second language in the U. S. will be described and analyzed in terms of gender difference and learning context difference. Learning context is distinguished into a university setting and a community setting.

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of Korean adult learners of English as a second language in terms of learning strategies?
2. What's the effect of gender and learning context on the use of learning strategies?

For the purpose of this study, the following assumption was made: language learner's gender and learning context will affect the use of strategies in language learning. That is, there will be significant differences in the choice of strategies between males and females. Also, there will be significant differences in the choice of strategies between learners in university and those in community setting.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Language Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are techniques or approaches which learner use to

comprehend, store, and remember new information and skills (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). The goal of strategy use is to "affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or interacts new knowledge" (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986, p. 315).

The classification framework of learning strategies emerged from efforts for identifying the characteristics of the "good language learner" (Nainam et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975). Rubin (1981), for example, proposed a classification scheme that subsume learning strategies under two primary groupings and a number of subgroups. Rubin's first primary category, consisting of strategies that directly affect learning, includes clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing, inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning and practicing. The second primary category, consisting of strategies that contribute indirectly to learning, includes creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as communication strategies. Recently, Oxford (1990b) has compiled an extensive list of strategies and classified language learning strategies into six groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social (Table 1).

Memory strategies, such as creating mental linkages and employing actions, aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving information when needed for communication. Cognitive strategies, such as analyzing and reasoning, are used for forming and revising internal mental codes and receiving and producing messages in the target language. Compensation strategies, such as guessing unknown words while listening and reading or using circumlocution in speaking and writing, are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language. Metacognitive strategies help learners exercise executive control through planning, arranging, focusing, and evaluating their own learning process. Affective strategies enable learners to control feelings, motivations, and attitudes related to language learning. Social strategies, such as asking questions and cooperation with others, facilitate interaction with others.

TABLE 1
Oxford's Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Type of Strategy	Example
DIRECT	
Memory	creating mental image employing actions retrieving information
Cognitive	analyzing and reasoning skimming and scanning recognizing and using patterns and formula
Compensation	guessing switch to mother tongue using mime or gestures using circumlocution
INDIRECT	
Metacognitive	setting goals and objectives planning for a language task self-monitoring self-evaluating
Affective lowering anxieties	making positive statements encouraging oneself
Social	asking questions for clarification cooperating with others developing cultural understanding becoming aware of other's thoughts or feelings

(adapted from Oxford, 1990a)

often in a discourse situation (Oxford, 1990b). All these types of strategies are important to good language learning, although cultural

and ethnic background, personality, sex, language learning purpose, and other factors influence the degree to which and the way in which learners use specific strategies (Oxford, R.L., & Crookall, 1989.)

2. Factors Affecting the Use of Strategies

Various researchers studied factors related to choice of language learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford, Nyikos & Ehrman, 1988; Politzer, 1983). Politzer (1983), who studied sex differences in language learning use, reported that females used social learning strategies significantly more than males. Research using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Ehrman and Oxford (1989) with both students and instructors at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute led to the conclusion that females reported using learning strategies significantly more often than males and they also used a wider range of strategies.

In addition, Oxford and Nyikos' (1989) study reported that university students tend to use formal rule-related strategies more frequently and functional strategies least frequently. The findings indicate that the university students frequently reported strategies (e.g., formal rule-related practice strategies and general study strategies) likely to be useful in a traditional, structure-oriented, discrete-point foreign language instructional environment geared toward tests and assignments.

III. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The subjects of this study were Korean adults who were learning English as a second language (ESL) in a university or a community ESL program in a Southwest community of the United States. Of the 80 subjects who participated, 29 were men; and 51 were women. Fifty four were attending a university; and 26 were attending community ESL programs (Table 2). No men enrolled in the community program, so the university setting was the only one in which men were studied.

TABLE 2
Subject Distribution by Gender and Learning Context

Gender	Learning Context					
	University		Community		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	29	36.25	0	0	29	36.25
Female	25	31.25	26	32.50	51	63.75
Total	54	67.50	26	32.50	80	100.00

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, a self-reporting questionnaire developed by Oxford (1992), was used to measure language learners' perception of their strategy use. The SILL is to measure how often individual language learners use a wide range of strategies, with a standard, five-point-Likert scale ranging from "never or almost never" to "always or almost always." The SILL is consisted of 50 items. Reliability and validity data on the SILL are documented in detail (Oxford, 1992; Phillips, 1990).

The data were collected by the author for two months. Subjects selected were required to read a letter which described the research project and to sign a consent form. Then they were given the SILL. They could have as much time as they wanted to fill it out. For those who could not understand the questionnaire, Korean translation was provided by the researcher. Most of them had no difficulty in understanding the questionnaire. But items which had the expression of "remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation," "physically act out," and "start out conversation in English" are examples of items many Koreans had difficulty in identifying the meaning. Name, sex, and learning context were recorded for each subject.

The statistical procedures to answer the research questions are as follows:

1. Descriptive statistics were obtained through the SAS statistical package for the SILL results.
2. The SAS general linear model was used to conduct analysis of

variance (ANOVA), with gender and learning context as independent variables and the SILL scores as the dependent variables to see whether there was an effect of gender and an effect of learning context on the use of specific learning strategies respectively. The independent variables, gender and learning context, had two levels, respectively: male and female in gender, and university and community setting in learning context. The SILL scores, dependent variables, were divided into seven levels: Part A, Part B, Part C, Part D, Part E, Part F, and the overall score. Results were considered statistically significant at the .05 level.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, there was a strong use of learning strategies by Korean adults who are learning English as a second language. They used strategies at high and medium levels without low-usage category.

TABLE 3
Average Frequency of the SILL Results

Category	Description	Mean	Std Dev	Average Frequency
Part A	Memory Strategies	2.67	0.61	Medium (6)*
Part B	Cognitive Strategies	3.29	0.57	Medium (2)
Part C	Compensation Strategies	3.53	0.56	High (1)
Part D	Metacognitive Strategies	3.27	0.71	Medium (3)
Part E	Affective Strategies	2.75	0.58	Medium (5)
Part F	Social Strategies	3.23	0.78	Medium (4)
Overall		3.13	0.49	Medium

* Numbers in the parenthesis represent the rank order of average frequency.

Compensation strategies, including guessing and using gestures, was the most frequently used strategies at a high level usage which can be explained by the urgent need to cope with various communicational, interactional situations in naturalistic practice situations. Cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies were used with the average score of nearly 3.2 at medium usages. The least frequently used strategies were memory, and affective strategies. Particularly, writing in a language learning diary was the least frequently used item of all.

Average frequency of strategy use in terms of gender is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Average Frequency of the SILL Results by Gender

Category	Description	Male (N=29)		Female (N=51)	
		Mean	Ave Freq	Mean	Ave Freq
Part A	Memory	2.61	Medium (6)*	2.70	Medium (6)
Part B	Cognitive	3.31	Medium (2)	3.27	Medium (3)
Part C	Compensation	3.62	High (1)	3.48	Medium (1)
Part D	Metacognitive	3.15	Medium (4)	3.34	Medium (2)
Part E	Affective	2.71	Medium (5)	2.77	Medium (5)
Part F	Social	3.16	Medium (3)	3.27	Medium (4)
Overall		3.10	Medium	3.14	Medium

* Numbers in the parenthesis represent the rank order of average frequency.

In the overall strategies, women showed greater use of strategies than men. In the specific categories of strategies, women showed higher frequency in memory, metacognitive, affective and social strategies than men. Men showed greater use in cognitive and compensation strategies than women. These differences can be explained, to a degree, by Maccoby and Jacklin's work (1974) on sex differences suggesting that females are superior to, or at least very different from, males in many social skills,

with females showing a greater social orientation. The greater use of cognitive strategies by men can be explained that males tend toward analytic, logical thinking, while females tend toward intuitive thinking (Bardwick, 1971).

In terms of learning context, university students showed more frequent use of strategies than students in community programs as evidenced by the overall scores in Table 5.

TABLE 5
Average Frequency of the SILL Results by Learning Context

Category	Description	University(N=54)		Community(N=26)	
		Mean	Ave Freq	Mean	Ave Freq
Part A	Memory	2.66	Medium (6)*	2.67	Medium (6)
Part B	Cognitive	3.38	Medium (2)	3.08	Medium (3)
Part C	Compensation	3.60	High (1)	3.39	Medium (1)
Part D	Metacognitive	3.23	Medium (4)	3.35	Medium (2)
Part E	Affective	2.76	Medium (5)	2.73	Medium (5)
Part F	Social	3.30	Medium (3)	3.08	Medium (4)
Overall		3.17	Medium	3.05	Medium

* Numbers in the parenthesis represent the rank order of average frequency.

In terms of specific strategies, university students outscored community students in cognitive, compensation, affective and social strategies. In the use of language learning strategies, university students can be described as more sophisticated language learners, who use more strategies in a much wider range than the students in community ESL programs.

The result of ANOVA for the SILL is reported to see the effect of gender and learning context in Table 6.

TABLE 6
ANOVA for the SILL

The SILL	Source	df	SS	MS	F	Pr > F
Part A	Gender	1	.1648	.1648	.43	.5150
	Setting	1	.0256	.0256	.07	.7974
	Error	77	29.3853	.3853		
Part B	Gender	1	.3361	.3361	1.10	.2965
	Setting	1	1.8915	1.8914	6.62	.0148*
	Error	77	23.4291	.3043		
Part C	Gender	1	.0222	.0222	.07	.7908
	Setting	1	.4551	.4551	1.45	.2322
	Error	77	24.1644	.3138		
Part D	Gender	1	.3424	.4324	.84	.3614
	Setting	1	.0059	.0059	.01	.9148
	Error	77	39.4925	.5129		
Part E	Gender	1	.1547	.1547	.45	.5054
	Setting	1	.1015	.1015	.29	.5894
	Error	77	26.6052	.3455		
Part F	Gender	1	1.2551	1.2551	2.08	.1532
	Setting	1	1.9360	1.9360	3.21	.0771
	Error	77	46.4285	.6030		
Overall	Gender	1	.2678	.2678	1.10	.2976
	Setting	1	.4822	.4822	1.98	.1635
	Error	77	46.4285	.6030		

* $p < .05$

There appears to be no statistically significant difference between male and female students in the choice of learning strategies, which is contradictory to the original assumption. There was an effect of learning context, however, on the use of Part B strategies. To see the direction of the difference, the mean scores of Part B for groups by learning context is compared (see Table 5). University students used cognitive strategies significantly more often than community students. The need for

university students to do more cognitively-demanding tasks would activate them to use cognitive strategies which include taking notes, summarizing, and analyzing more often than the students in community programs.

V. CONCLUSION

The conclusions are drawn based on the major findings as follows:

First, the general pattern of frequency in strategy use by Korean adult learners of ESL was similar to other cultural groups: more frequent use of compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies than affective and memory strategies. Especially, the most frequent use of compensation strategies reflect the efforts of learners to overcome the limitation or gaps they feel in speaking and writing through using both linguistic and non-linguistic cues.

Second, the findings of this study did not support the assumption that sex difference will affect the choice of strategies. Most of the prior research showed significant difference between men and women in the use of strategies, with women's overall dominance in frequency, and range of the strategies. Women, in particular, were expected to use more social strategies because of their superiority on verbal performance, and inclination toward social approval. However, no significant differences were found between male and female in the use of strategies in this study.

Third, however, findings confirmed the assumption that learning context would affect the use of strategies. University students were more sophisticated learners than community students in that they used certain strategies more often than community students. University students' significantly higher use of cognitive strategies such as taking notes, summarizing, translating, reasoning, and analyzing can be explained by the fact that they may be required to do more cognitively-demanding academic tasks than community students: so they need to work with manipulating the task materials, and moving toward task completion.

1. Educational Implication of the Study

The findings of this study have educational implications for instruction and curriculum development. First, learners of English as a second language should learn to recognize the strategies they are using and be advised to select most appropriate techniques for the instructional environment. Second, language curricula, materials and instructional approaches should incorporate diversified activities to accommodate the various characteristics of the learners found in the second language classroom.

Use of appropriate learning strategies enable students to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction (Dickinson, 1987). These factors are important because learners need to keep on learning even when they are no longer in a formal classroom setting (Oxford & Crookall, 1988). Moreover, cognitive psychology shows that learning strategies help learners to assimilate new information into their own existing mental structures or schemata, thus creating increasingly rich and complex schemata. Unlike most other characteristics of the learner, such as aptitude, motivation, personality, and general cognitive styles, learning strategies are teachable.

2. Suggestions for Further Research

In order to more fully understand the role of learning strategies, additional research efforts are needed. First, a more detailed look at variables influencing language learning behaviors is needed. Years of residence, and studying English in the United States, and learner's proficiency level, for example, can be investigated as related to learning strategies. Also affective factors such as motivation might relate to the use of different strategies. To consider as many variables as possible will enable to draw a more accurate, and global picture of what is happening to an individual when he/she learns a second language.

Second, a kind of longitudinal research which identifies differences in

the strategy use and changes over time is needed with various methods of learning strategy elicitation. Also, qualitative research studies will provide a thorough look at language learning behavior and examine related factors.

In conclusion, research efforts should be made with the purpose of creating a fully integrated profile of the language learner in terms of affective and cognitive influences governing second language development.

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