

# What Learning Strategies Do Learners Actually Use to Improve Their Proficiency in English?

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## 1. Introduction

Exploring the differences between learners who improve and do not improve their proficiency has been one focus of research in second and foreign language education. One part of such research has been conducted in the area of good language learner studies. Another part has been done from the viewpoint of individual learner differences. Among the results that such research has indicated is the use of learning strategies, which is regarded as one factor that distinguishes proficient and not proficient learners. In short, the higher the learner's proficiency is, the wider and more frequent use of learning strategies is observed. This preliminary study attempted to go one step further than this finding and examine what differences are detected in terms of learning strategy use between those who actually

improve and those who do not improve their proficiency over a certain period of time.

## 2. Literature Review

Several researchers have defined learning strategies that learners use in acquiring a foreign language. For example, for Nunan (1999), "learning strategies are the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language" (p. 55). Contrary to Nunan's somewhat abstract definition, Ellis (1997) provided a much clearer articulation that learning strategies, which can be behavioral or mental, are the particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn a second language (L2). Furthermore, Oxford (1990) maintained that "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations" (p. 8). Although there are differences in the choice of words in these definitions, it might be safe to say that learning strategies are learners' cognitive and behavioral activities that help their own learning.

One of the most powerful influences in the research of learning strategies was from the development of a scale to assess learners' strategy use in a form called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990). In this, researchers obtained a useful instrument to measure the use of learning strategies by learners, which seem to be otherwise unobservable cognitive activities. In particular, SILL enabled researchers to assess numerically how much or less a learner uses strategies in learning a foreign language in each of six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

Strategies in these six categories seem interrelated in part, but according to Oxford (1990), memory strategies help learners effectively store verbal material and retrieve it when it is needed for communication. Cognitive strategies concern manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner which includes repeating, analyzing, and summarizing. Learners are said to be using compensation strategies when they intend to make up for an inadequate form of grammar and vocabulary. Strategies used by learners in an attempt to coordinate their own learning are metacognitive strategies, which contain organizing, setting goals and objectives, considering the purpose, and planning for a language task. Affective strategies are used when learners attempt to control their emotions, attitudes, motivation, and values. Finally, social strategies are those which relate others to one's own learning by asking questions, cooperating, and empathizing with others.

Using learning strategies is regarded as significant in learning a foreign language. According to Nunan (1999) and Oxford (1990), learning strategies are essential for developing communicative competence, result in improved proficiency, and encourage greater self-direction. From a perspective of practitioners, learning strategies have positive impact in that learning strategies change teachers' status from managerial and instructional to facilitative and consultative. Learning strategies are also easier to teach and modify. Moreover, by having learners use learning strategies, practitioners can motivate them.

Numerous studies have been conducted to provide a general picture of how learning strategies are used under different circumstances. For example, Bialystok (1979) focused on age and found that the older learners are, the more often and more varied strategies

are used. When the use of learning strategies was examined in terms of proficiency level, it was detected that the higher the level, the more and more varied strategies are used (O'Malley et al., 1989). Some researchers clarified how learners' beliefs affected the choice of learning strategies: learners who relied more on learning used cognitive strategies, and those who emphasized communication used communication strategies (Wenden, 1987). Oxford and Nyikos (1988) detected that more motivated learners used more strategies than less motivated learners. The importance of strategy training has been stressed because of the research finding that higher level learners use more learning strategies, as well as the notion that strategies can be taught. However, the results of research on the effect of strategy training are rather mixed (Nunan, 1999).

### **3. Problem Statement**

As mentioned above, factors affecting the use of learning strategies have been identified and a general pattern of how learners use learning strategies has been provided. However, investigation into the use of learning strategies by learners who improve and do not improve their proficiency over a certain period of time is scarce. Although a research finding was obtained that the higher the level, the more learning strategies learners use, it does not tell us whether the use of learning strategies has been related to improvement or not. If it could be demonstrated that there is a tendency that learners who improve proficiency use more learning strategies than those who do not, then learning strategies could be said to be worth using in order to improve learners' proficiency. It is highly expected that such a finding will add a new perspective to studies on learning strategies.

#### 4. Research Question

The following research question was formulated in order to respond to the problem mentioned above:

Are there differences in the use of strategies in each of Oxford's (1990) six categories and in total between learners who improve and learners who do not improve proficiency?

#### 5. Purpose

The purpose of this preliminary study was to examine if there are differences in the use of learning strategies between learners who improve and learners who do not improve proficiency. The use of learning strategies between the two groups was compared in terms of Oxford's (1990) six categories. After the data analysis, information on types and frequency of learning strategies used by each of the two groups was provided.

#### 6. Method

##### 6.1 Data Analysis

In order to answer the research question, a series of  $t$  tests was employed. In each  $t$  test, if a statistically significant difference was detected, it was assumed to be safe to conclude that there would be a difference in the use of learning strategies in a category or in total. If a statistically significant difference was not found, the use of learning strategies by both groups would be concluded to be the same.

## 6.2 Subjects

A total of 29 first year college students in Japan who were in three courses taught by the researcher were the subjects. Course titles, department, and the number of students in each course are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*General Description of Subjects*

Course Title	Department	Number of Students
English Special Seminar	Education	16
Introduction to English Writing	Letters	10
TOEFL Preparation Intermediate	Law Engineering	2 1
Total		29

The number of students enrolled in each course was greater than these; however, the subjects in this study were limited to those who took the Institutional Testing Program (ITP) TOEFL test in both April and December, 2008. Then the number inevitably decreased because taking the test was not mandatory, although it was strongly recommended. The range of the scores in the ITP TOEFL test among the subjects was 350-487 in April, 2008 and 360-533 in December, 2008.

## 6.3 Institutional Testing Program (ITP) TOEFL Test

Institutional Testing Program (ITP) is an older form of the paper-based TOEFL test. The score on the ITP TOEFL test is not used for university admission purposes but is solely used for administrative purposes within an institution. The university the researcher is working at administers the ITP TOEFL test as a placement test in April and an achievement test in December each year. The standard error

of measurement of the ITP TOEFL test is approximately 14, which means an examinee's score could vary 14 points higher or lower than his or her true score depending on the testing situations (Educational Testing Service, 2001).

#### **6.4 Distinguishing learners who improved and learners who did not improve proficiency**

The purpose of this study was to compare the use of learning strategies by learners who improved and learners who did not improve their proficiency over a certain period of time. In distinguishing learners who improved and learners who did not improve proficiency, the standard error of measurement of the ITP TOEFL test, which is 14, was taken into consideration. The index describes the degree of imprecision inherent in a test score. In the case of the ITP TOEFL test, a learner's score could be higher or lower than the examinee's true score by 14. In this study, therefore, those who showed improvement of 14 or more were categorized as learners who improved and were referred to as successful learners. This categorization was conservative enough to declare that an examinee's score has actually improved. The rest of the subjects were all categorized as those who did not improve proficiency and were referred to as unsuccessful learners, which means that their increase was less than 14, their score was exactly the same, or decreased from the first test. In this way, the 29 subjects were categorized into two groups: 19 successful and 10 unsuccessful learners.

#### **6.5 Questionnaire**

In the last class in the fall semester, 2008, subjects in each course were asked to answer SILL, Version 7.0 for Speakers of Other

Languages Learning English (Oxford, 1990). SILL contains fifty questions to assess how often learners use each of six types of strategies. There are nine questions for memory strategies (Part A), fourteen for cognitive strategies (Part B), six for compensation strategies (Part C), nine for metacognitive strategies (Part D), six affective strategies (Part E), and six for social strategies (Part F). Subjects indicated a number from 1 (never) to 5 (always) to answer each question to express the extent to which they use the strategy. The original questionnaire was written in English,<sup>1</sup> but in this study, the Japanese version translated by the researcher was employed to ensure the subjects' complete understanding of each question (see Appendix A for the sample questionnaire and B for the sample answer sheet).

### 6.6 Procedure

Subjects took the ITP TOEFL test in both April and December, 2008. In the last class of each course in January, 2009, they were asked to answer SILL in about 30 minutes which was long enough for them to do this. When the subjects completed SILL, they scored it by themselves. They calculated the six mean scores for each category of strategies and one in total. After all the subjects completed these calculations, all the SILL answer sheets were collected. Then, the researcher confirmed all the calculations were correct.

## 7. Results

Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the subjects' responses to the questions in each category and total in SILL. In addition, it indicates the results of a series of *t* tests that compared the mean scores of successful and unsuccessful learners in each



category and total.

Table 2

*Comparison of Strategy Use between Successful and Unsuccessful Learners*

Strategy	Successful			Unsuccessful			<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Memory	19	2.88	0.39	10	2.84	0.64	27	0.23
Cognitive	19	3.19	0.49	10	3.24	0.46	27	-0.27
Compensation	19	3.42	0.57	10	3.28	0.53	27	0.65
Metacognitive	19	3.23	0.70	10	3.41	0.50	27	-0.73
Affective	19	2.75	0.64	10	2.85	0.38	27	-0.44
Social	19	3.19	0.78	10	3.49	0.65	27	-1.04
Total	19	3.12	0.45	10	3.17	0.33	27	-0.33

Overall, mean scores of both groups in each category do not appear to be particularly different; in addition, no statistically significant differences were found in any strategy category or in total between successful and unsuccessful learners. These results indicate that successful and unsuccessful learners could be homogeneous in terms of the use of learning strategies. In other words, how both successful and unsuccessful learners used and did not use strategies was similar.

## 8. Discussion

The research question formulated in this study was as follows: Are there differences in the use of strategies in each of Oxford's (1990) six categories and in total between learners who improve and learners who do not improve proficiency? As far as the results of this preliminary study are concerned, it does not seem that the learners

who improved their proficiency used learning strategies more variously and frequently. The differences between successful and unsuccessful learners may not be explained by the use of learning strategies. In order to improve their proficiency, successful learners appear to have done something else that was not directly related to learning strategies.

For further theoretical exploration of this phenomenon, another series of *t* tests was conducted with the same data but after the same subjects were rank-ordered by the score on the ITP TOEFL test in December, 2008 only. Then, all the subjects were divided into two groups: high and low proficiency levels. Thus, in this categorization, it does not take into account the score increase of each subject between the two tests, April and December ITP TOEFL tests in 2008.

Table 3 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the subjects' responses to the questions in each category and total in the new groups. It also indicates the results of a series of *t* tests that compared the mean scores of high and low level learners in each category and total.

There was an overall tendency that subjects at the higher level used more strategies than those at the lower level. This tendency is stronger than that in the previous comparison when the subjects were divided into two groups in terms of whether they improved their proficiency or not. Moreover, a statistically significant difference was detected in the comparison of the mean scores of the two groups in compensation strategies.

Table 3

*Comparison of Strategy Use between High and Low Level Learners*

Strategy	High			Low			df	t
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
Memory	15	2.86	0.46	14	2.88	0.52	27	-1.02
Cognitive	15	3.35	0.48	14	3.06	0.43	27	1.71
Compensation	15	3.58	0.47	14	3.15	0.56	27	2.25*
Metacognitive	15	3.50	0.63	14	3.06	0.58	27	1.93
Affective	15	2.89	0.65	14	2.67	0.44	27	1.07
Social	15	3.31	0.86	14	3.28	0.62	27	0.10
Total	15	3.25	0.44	14	3.01	0.35	27	1.56

\* $p < .05$ .

Interpretation of these phenomena must be presented to explain why there was no difference in terms of the strategy use when subjects were divided into two groups by improvement, while there was when they were divided into two by level. To be sure, subjects in this preliminary study indicated their actual use of learning strategies. Especially, as shown in Table 3, subjects at the higher level used learning strategies more often than those at the lower level, and this corresponds to research findings (O'Malley et al., 1989). However, the fact that the same subjects did not exhibit differences with regards to the strategy use when they were divided in terms of improvement suggests that subjects failed to intentionally use learning strategies for the purpose of improvement of their proficiency. In short, their use of learning strategies and improvement was not effectively and systematically related.

At this point, therefore, the importance of strategy training is emphasized where learners are explicitly taught what learning strategies are, why learners are encouraged to use strategies, and

when and how they should use them. In the educational environment in Japan, rote memorization is often stressed, particularly to prepare for the entrance examinations to junior high, high school, and university. Under such circumstances, it may be rare for students to learn various skills and techniques to enhance their learning. It may be even more difficult for them to use those skills intentionally depending on the learning situation. For learners brought up in such a context, it might be quite natural that they cannot use learning strategies in a more sophisticated manner. If the subjects in this study had been able to do so, the results would have shown that there were differences in the use of learning strategies when the subjects were compared after being divided into two groups by improvement.

## 9. Conclusion

In this study, successful and unsuccessful learners were compared with regard to the use of learning strategies. The analysis did not detect any statistically significant difference between the groups, which suggested that both groups were homogeneous in terms of strategy use. However, when they were divided into two groups based on the score in the ITP TOEFL test in December, 2008 only, an overall tendency that learners at the higher level used learning strategies more often was found, and a significant difference was observed in one category. The researcher's interpretation of these contradictory results was that subjects can use strategies but cannot effectively relate them to improvement in proficiency. Therefore, the importance of explicit strategy training was emphasized. This study had a limited number of subjects; thus, research must be replicated with a similar design and more subjects involved. Especially, conducting a study that

includes strategy training between the pre and post proficiency tests is strongly encouraged.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> The English version is not included in Appendixes because it is a copyrighted material. It is advisable that those who are interested in the English version refer to pages from 293 to 296 in Oxford (1990) for the questionnaire in English.

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## Appendix A

### 言語学習意識調査

この言語学習意識調査は、英語の学習者用に作成されたものです。英語学習に関するさまざまな文が表記されていますので、注意して読んでください。そして、別紙のワークシートにその文の内容が回答（1. 2. 3. 4. 5）のどれにあてはまるか記入してください。

1. 全然、あるいはほとんどあてはまらない
2. 通常あてはまらない
3. いくらかあてはまる
4. 通常あてはまる
5. 常に、あるいはほとんどあてはまる

どの項目も、英語学習の際、自分が平均的にとる行動として考えて下さい。どの場合も正解や間違った答えはありません。使用時間は約20～30分以内です。質問がある時は担当の教員に聞いて下さい。

パート A

1. 新しく英語で学ぶ内容を、自分がすでに知っている内容と関連づけて考える。
2. 覚えやすいように文の中で新語を使う。
3. 単語を覚えるために、新語の音とその単語のイメージや絵を結びつける。
4. 単語が使われる場を心に描いて新語を覚える。
5. 新語を覚えるのに韻を使う。
6. 新語を覚えるのにフラッシュカードを使う。
7. 新語を身体で表現して覚える。
8. 授業の復習をよくする。
9. 新語を覚えるのにその語がページや、黒板、あるいは道路標識などの、どの位置にあったか記憶しておく。

パート B

10. 新語を数回書いたり言ったりする。
11. 英語のネイティブ・スピーカーのように話すよう心掛ける。
12. 英語の発音練習をする。
13. 知っている単語をいろいろな文脈で使う。
14. 積極的に英語で会話を始める。
15. 英語のテレビ番組や英語の映画を見る。
16. 英語で読むのが楽しい。
17. 英語でメモ、メッセージ、手紙、報告を書く。
18. 英語の章節をまずスキミング（ざっと読みとる）し、再び前に戻って注意深く読む。
19. 英語の新語に似た語を自国語の中に探す。
20. 英語の中にパターンを見つけようとする。
21. むずかしい英単語は分解して、意味を知ろうとする。
22. 逐語訳（一語一語訳すこと）はなるべくしない。
23. 読んだり聞いたりしたことを英語で要約する。

## パート C

24. 知らない単語を理解しようと推測する。
25. 英語での会話中適切な語が思いつかないとき、ジェスチャーを使う。
26. 英語で適切な語が分らないとき新語を作る。
27. 英語を読むとき、一語一語調べない。
28. 他の人が次に英語で何と言うか推測しようと心掛ける。
29. 英語の単語が思いつかないとき、同じ意味を持つ語や句を使う。

## パート D

30. いろいろな方法を見つけて英語を使うよう心掛ける。
31. 自分の英語の間違いに気づき、そこから学んで上達しようと努力する。
32. 他の人が英語を使っている時は、集中する。
33. すぐれた英語学習者になるためにどうしたらよいか心掛ける。
34. スケジュールを立て英語の学習に十分時間をあてる。
35. 英語で話しかけることのできる人を探す。
36. できるだけ英語で読む機会を探す。
37. 英語の技能を高めるための明確な目標がある。
38. 自分の英語学習の進歩について考える。

## パート E

39. 英語を使うのに自信がないときは、いつもリラックスするよう心掛ける。
40. 間違いを恐れず英語を話すよう自分を励ます。
41. うまくいったとき、自分を褒める。
42. 英語を勉強しているときや使っているときに、緊張しているか神経質になっているか気づく。
43. 言語学習日記に自分の感情を書き留める。
44. 英語を勉強しているとき、自分がどう感じているか他の人に話す。



パート F

45. 英語が分からないとき、ゆっくり話してもらうか、もう一度言ってもらう。
46. 話しているとき、英語のネイティブ・スピーカーに間違いを直してもらう。
47. 他の学生と英語を練習する。
48. 困ったとき、英語のネイティブ・スピーカーからの助けを求める。
49. 英語で質問をする。
50. 英語話者の文化を学ぶよう心掛ける。

*Thank you very much for your cooperation!!*

Appendix B

言語学習意識調査：回答ワークシート

回答した日： 平成 年 月 日

回答に際して：

1. \_\_\_\_\_には各項目の番号が付いています。
2. \_\_\_\_\_に各項目の回答（1から5の数字）を記入して下さい。
3. 各コラムの得点を合計し、その数を小計\_\_\_\_\_に書き入れて下さい。
4. 小計を問題数で割って平均点を書き入れて下さい。その点は、小数点第三位まで求め、第三位を四捨五入し、第二位まで求めて下さい。
5. 総平均を計算して下さい。そのためには、それぞれの小計を合計し50で割って下さい。

A	B	C	D	E	F	全体
1. _____	10. _____	24. _____	30. _____	39. _____	45. _____	小計A _____
2. _____	11. _____	25. _____	31. _____	40. _____	46. _____	小計B _____
3. _____	12. _____	26. _____	32. _____	41. _____	47. _____	小計C _____
4. _____	13. _____	27. _____	33. _____	42. _____	48. _____	小計D _____
5. _____	14. _____	28. _____	34. _____	43. _____	49. _____	小計E _____
6. _____	15. _____	29. _____	35. _____	44. _____	50. _____	小計F _____
7. _____	16. _____		36. _____			
8. _____	17. _____		37. _____			
9. _____	18. _____		38. _____			
	19. _____					
	20. _____					
	21. _____					
	22. _____					
	23. _____					

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小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_ 小計 \_\_\_\_\_

÷9= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷14= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷6= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷9= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷6= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷6= \_\_\_\_\_ ÷50= \_\_\_\_\_

(全体平均)