Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama *2007, 3 (1): 4-11*
Journal of Theory and Practice in Education *Makaleler/Articles*
ISSN: 1304-9496 http://eku.comu.edu.tr/index/3/1/calptekin.pdf

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY CHOICE: NATURALISTIC VERSUS INSTRUCTED LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

YABANCI DİL ÖĞRENİMİNDE STRATEJİ SEÇİMİ:
DOĞAL VEYA EĞİTSEL DİL EDİNİMİ

Cem ALPTEKİN[1]

ABSTRACT

This study explores whether there are differences in the choice of language learning strategy and in the frequency of its use in the concurrent acquisition of two foreign languages, one being learned in a tutored and the other in a non-tutored manner. Specifically, it investigates the tutored learning of English in a formal setting and the non-tutored acquisition of Turkish in a non-formal setting by international university students at Bogaziçi University. The results indicate that although the students make use of all types of learning strategies irrespective of the learning context, compensation as a direct learning strategy seems to be the one most frequently deployed in both tutored and naturalistic learning. On the other hand, a significant difference is observed in indirect strategy preference with respect to learning context: in tutored English learning students make more use of metacognitive strategies, whereas in non-tutored Turkish acquisition they often use social strategies.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, natural language acquisition, tutored language learning.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, biri doğal yolla diğeri eğitime dayalı olarak iki yabancı dili aynı anda öğrenenlerde dil öğrenim stratejileri seçimi ve kullanım frekansına özgü farklar olup olmadığını araştırmaktadır. Daha somut olarak araştırma, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'ndeki uluslararası öğrencilerin İngilizceyi sınıf ortamında, Türkçeyi ise sokak ortamında öğrenmelerini irdelemektedir. Bulgular, öğrenim bağlamı ne olursa olsun öğrencilerin doğrudan bir strateji türü olan telafi stratejisini yeğlediklerini, ancak dolaylı strateji türlerinde bağlamla ilişkili anlamlı değişkenlikler olduğunu sergilemektedir. Buna göre eğitime dayalı İngilizce öğreniminde bilişötesi strateji kullanımı yeğlenirken, doğal Türkçe ediniminde sosyal stratejiler ön plana çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dil öğrenim stratejileri, doğal dil edinimi, eğitsel dil öğrenimi.

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INTRODUCTION

With pedagogic focus shifting from teacher-centered approaches in foreign language instruction to the learner's active role in language learning, a significant amount of research on language learning strategies has been done in the last few decades, contributing to or stemming from the development of strategy taxonomies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

At the core of strategy taxonomies lies the theory of cognition. O'Malley and Chamot, for instance, view language learning strategies as skills that are acquired as declarative knowledge, which would subsequently become procedural as a result of extensive practice. Strategies would then lead to actions aiming to retrieve and store new information until this information is automatized. Oxford, on the other hand, seems more interested in the 'mental action' aspect of strategies (Macaro, 2004) rather than their knowledge basis when she defines them as 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations' (1990: 8).

According to Ellis (1994: 539), Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies is the most comprehensive classification to date. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) divides strategies into two major categories: direct and indirect. Each category comprises three subcategories. Direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. For example, one type of memory strategy is creating mental linkages; types of cognitive strategy include practicing, analyzing, or reasoning; one type of compensation strategy is guessing intelligently. Their common denominator lies in their involving the target language.

Indirect strategies, on the other hand, are those that support and manage language learning without necessarily involving the target language directly. They consist of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. One type of metacognitive strategy is exemplified in arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning; one type of affective strategy has to do with lowering one's anxiety and encouraging oneself; one type of social strategy involves asking questions and cooperating with others.

SILL has undergone significant revisions and has been translated into numerous languages, with multiple reliability and validity checks performed (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). As such, it has become a suitable instrument to measure the strategy preferences of all language learners, whether the target language is learned as a second or foreign language, or acquired in a naturalistic or instructed context.

Despite the SILL-based research on various aspects of language learning strategies, virtually no research currently exists which investigates the use of the types of learning strategies by learners when they acquire two foreign languages concurrently in two different learning environments, one

being formal and the other non-formal. Most of the research available has focused on variables affecting language learning strategy in relation to the acquisition of a given target language in formal settings (mostly English) or the effects of strategy training on target language acquisition. In fact, Hsiao and Oxford (2002) have drawn attention to the possible relationship that may exist between the use of different learning strategies and different learning environments among other factors, implying the need for further research with SILL.

In this vein, the present study makes use of SILL to focus on understanding what types of strategies language learners frequently use in the concurrent acquisition of two foreign languages, one exemplifying tutored learning and the other non-tutored learning. It is designed to explore how different learning contexts, with their different language-specific demands, affect language learning strategy preferences and frequency of use. The two languages in question are English, which is learned through tutoring, and Turkish, which is learned naturalistically.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 25 international students at Bogaziçi University, in Istanbul. The males represented 60% and the females 40% of the sample. The mean age of the sample was 21.80. The participants represented eight cultural/linguistic backgrounds: 36% Russian, 20% Crimean, 12% Albanian, 8% Chinese, 8% Mongolian, 8% Bulgarian, 4% German, and 4% Swedish. They were selected from a population of more than 300 international students on the campus based on their not having had any formal Turkish instruction before or since arriving in Turkey, in addition to their having English proficiency scores of less than 213 on the computerized version of the TOEFL (the cut-off point for direct admission to the university).

Research Setting

Bogaziçi University is an-English medium university. All students are required to present proof of their English proficiency to be able to pursue their studies in their departments. This means that they must obtain a score of at least 213 on the TOEFL or its equivalent. Otherwise, they attend the Intensive English Program of the university to improve their academic proficiency in English with a view to meeting the necessary TOEFL requirements and being admitted to their course of study.

What is interesting in this context is that international students, like Turkish students, are required to learn English in a Turkish academic setting, yet they also feel the need to learn Turkish, as this is the medium of communication anywhere outside the classroom. For these students, learning Turkish as a foreign language involves acquiring it in social settings without

any tutorial help and chiefly for survival purposes. As such, it is geared to developing basic interpersonal communicative skills, which is quite different from developing cognitive/academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1980)—as is the case with learning English.

Instruments

SILL

SILL version 7.0, which is designed for learners of English, was used for both English and Turkish, accompanied by a set of demographic questions which are considered essential to interpret the results adequately. These questions deal with such issues as the participants' length of English study at Bogaziçi University, length of residence in Turkey, proficiency self-ratings in English and Turkish.

SILL contains 50 items organized according to the six-subset strategy taxonomy. There are nine items on memory strategies, fourteen on cognitive strategies, six on compensation strategies, nine on metacognitive strategies, six on affective strategies, and six on social strategies (Oxford, 1990).

Procedures

So that the participants would have extended exposure to both English and Turkish, SILL was administered at the end of the academic year. There was a one-week interval between the administration of SILL for English and SILL for Turkish to prevent responses given for one language from interfering with those for the other. Each inventory, which was in English, was administered in 15 to 20 minutes, as suggested by Oxford (1990), and no participant needed additional time to complete the inventory.

Data Analysis

Because of the limited number of participants meeting the researcher's criteria for language level, a parametric data analysis could not be performed. Instead nonparametric tests were applied. The data, which included both the demographic information and the responses to SILL items for English and Turkish, were analyzed using the SPSS (version 10.0).

To begin with, intra-comparisons were made for the participants' responses to the different parts of SILL for English and SILL for Turkish by means of the Friedman Test in order to explore the patterns of choice of learning strategies for each language. Secondly, Spearman's rank-order correlations were computed to examine the relationship between strategy use and exposure conditions (e.g. length of residence in Turkey, length of study at Bogaziçi University). Third, inter-comparisons were made between the parallel sections of SILL for English and SILL for Turkish through the use of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test to see whether the learning environment played

a role in the choice of language learning strategies. The significance level was set at .05.

RESULTS

The results concerning strategy preference and frequency of use show that significant intra-group differences exist in terms of the participants' use of types of strategies in English (χ^2= 37.27, p< .001) and in Turkish (χ^2=36.89, p< .001). As seen in tables 1 and 2, in the case of learning Turkish, the participants are high strategy users in terms of their deployment of compensation and social strategies, and medium strategy users in terms of their deployment of cognitive strategies. In the case of learning English, however, the participants seem to make more use of metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies (in a decreasing order of frequency), while they can be labeled as medium strategy users in relation to social strategies.

The inter-comparisons conducted between the parallel sections of SILL for Turkish and SILL for English did not yield statistically significant differences except in the case of metacognitive and social strategies. Metacognitive strategy use was found to be significantly higher in learning English than in learning Turkish (p< .01). By contrast, social strategy use was found to be significantly higher in learning Turkish than in learning English (p< .05).

Table 1: Patterns of language learning strategy use for Turkish

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
A-TKAVG	25	2.7467	.5005	1.89	3.56
B-TKAVG	25	3.1600	.5804	2.14	4.79
C-TKAVG	25	3.5933	.7639	2.00	5.00
D-TKAVG	25	2.7644	.5830	2.00	3.78
E-TKAVG	25	2.7800	.7496	1.67	4.33
F-TKAVG	25	3.4533	.4236	2.83	4.33

Legend

A-TKAVG	Average score on Part A: Memory strategies
B-TKAVG	Average score on Part B: Cognitive strategies
C-TKAVG	Average score on Part C: Compensation strategies
D-TKAVG	Average score on Part D: Metacognitive strategies
E-TKAVG	Average score on Part E: Affective strategies
F-TKAVG	Average score on Part F: Social strategies

Table 2: Patterns of language learning strategy use for English

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
A- ENGAVG	25	2.8267	.5072	1.78	4.11
B- ENGAVG	25	3.2514	.5487	1.86	4.50
C- ENGAVG	25	3.5267	.7323	2.50	5.00
D- ENGAVG	25	3.3689	.7354	2.11	4.44
E- ENGAVG	25	2.6400	.6304	1.00	4.00
F- ENGAVG	25	3.0800	.6806	1.83	4.50

Legend

A- ENGAVG	Average score on Part A: Memory strategies
B- ENGAVG	Average score on Part B: Cognitive strategies
C- ENGAVG	Average score on Part C: Compensation strategies
D- ENGAVG	Average score on Part D: Metacognitive strategies
E- ENGAVG	Average score on Part E: Affective strategies
F- ENGAVG	Average score on Part F: Social strategies

Finally, the nonparametric correlations between the participants' total performance on SILL for Turkish and their length of residence in Turkey did not yield significant results, nor did those between their total performance on SILL for English and their length of study at Bogaziçi University. Likewise, the correlational analyses between each part of SILL for English and the length of study at Bogaziçi University on one hand, and between each part of SILL for Turkish and the length of residence in Turkey on the other did not give significant outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that although university students use a variety of strategies in learning foreign languages, the most commonly operationalized strategy appears to be compensation, irrespective of the learning environment and the manner of acquisition. Compensation strategies, which involve guessing intelligently in listening and reading as well as overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, are used as crucial means of communication embodying all four skills. They are reported to be used frequently in formal language learning environments (Bremmer, 1999) where learners run into communication breakdowns due to inadequate or missing knowledge. It is clear from the findings of this study that they are equally (if not more) indispensable for learners acquiring a foreign language naturalistically, as there is little or no tutoring involved to repair the communication breakdown.

Second, the participants' focus on compensation and to a degree on cognitive strategies suggests that language learners activate direct strategies notwithstanding the nature of the learning context, as these involve the target

language itself. However, an interesting relationship seems to emerge between the learning context and the type of indirect strategy preferred. As indicated before, the role of metacognitive strategies in the instructed learning of English is significantly higher than in the naturalistic acquisition of Turkish. This is to be expected since metacognitive strategies, which allow learners to regulate their cognition, generally support classroom language learning. On the other hand, the contribution of social strategies to the naturalistic acquisition of Turkish becomes quite important because these strategies provide learners with the means to interact with the native speakers of the language.

In sum, the findings of this study seem to indicate that language learners' preferences of learning strategies do not differ in the case of direct strategies whether the learning environment is formal or non-formal. Compensation and cognitive strategies appear to be frequently used in learners' dealing with the target language directly. Learners opt for different strategy use, however, when tackling the target language indirectly. Whereas in cases of tutored learning metacognitive strategies become the backbone of learning, in cases of naturalistic acquisition social strategies play a major role.

Obviously, it would be premature to relate the findings of this study to any type of strategy training pedagogy, given the limited number of participants who conformed to the researcher's criteria for sample selection and the inevitable use of research with a nonparametric design. Where possible, research with a parametric design should corroborate the results. Nevertheless, the study is important in that for the first time it explores the issue of strategy preference with a sample of participants learning *two* foreign languages concurrently, one *tutored* and the other *untutored*.

Note

I would like to recognize Meral Kara's research data used in the development of this article.

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