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## Factors Affecting Language Learning Strategies Used By a Greek Female Learner of English

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### ABSTRACT

Not much research has examined variables influencing learning strategies used by study-abroad ESL learners. This paper reports on an investigation of English learning strategies used by a Greek female university student based in the UK. It aims to explore what strategies she used and how her choice of strategies was affected by other individual difference variables. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and a combination of both inductive and deductive approach was employed in the qualitative analysis to generate interpretations. The findings showed a clear relationship between the learner's strategy use and three factors: motivation, gender and personality. Her strategy use varied according to the evolution of her learning motivation over time, and her preference of using social strategies seemed to be closely tied to integrative motivation. Gender was a crucial factor as the female learner used more social strategies as compared to a male student and she only used those strategies suiting her gender role. The learner was also found to choose strategies corresponding with her extroverted personality. Pedagogical implications of these findings are drawn and presented to enhance the effectiveness of her English language learning.

**Keywords:** learning strategies; motivation; gender; personality.

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### 1. Introduction

Since 1970s, the concept of “learning strategy” has attracted a considerable attention of many researchers and practitioners, and many of them have attempted to define and categorize language learning strategies (e.g., Stern 1983; Chamot 1987; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). Although there is no agreement on the precise definition of learning strategy, few researchers would deny that learning strategy is one of the most important individual difference factors in second language acquisition and that learners' language learning can be more effective by implementing appropriate learning strategies. Therefore, there have been many studies (e.g. Gu 2008; Lan 2008; Cohen 2014; Oxford 2017) examining language learning strategies.

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Most studies of language learning strategies have mainly focused on what strategies successful language learners tend to use, how these strategies can enhance learners' second language learning, what strategies learners use in different language areas, or how to measure learners' strategy use (e.g., Stern 1975; Naiman et al. 1996; Cohen and Apeh 1981; Oxford 1986).

Other studies have also explored the link between learning strategies and other variables. Wharton (2000), for example, argued that the use of strategies depends on the environmental context in which language learning takes place and the task to be completed. Horwitz (2007) also emphasized the relationship between learner beliefs and learners' choices of language learning strategies. Park (1995) found self-reports of strategy use in Korean learners of English are strongly related to specific beliefs they hold. Oxford (2011) concluded that the variables affecting strategy choice may include gender, nationality, culture, age, motivation, anxiety, and learning styles. These studies seem to show clearly that learning strategies cannot be considered in isolation from other individual difference variables.

Despite intensive research, relatively few empirical studies have looked at more than one factor at a time. More important, not many have examined factors influencing learning strategies that study-abroad ESL learners select in relation to their needs. The present study attempts to focus on the choice of strategies by a Greek learner of English in a study-abroad context and to conduct a multifactorial analysis involving three variables: motivation, gender and personality, which are believed to be key determinants of learners' strategy use (e.g., Wharton 2000; Gu 2002; Hong-Nam and Leavell 2006).

## **2. The relationship between strategy use and three other variables**

This section provides a review of studies which have investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and three other individual learner factors: motivation, gender and personality.

The link between motivation and language learning strategy has received much attention in second language acquisition. Motivation, according to Gardner (2010:23), can be seen as "a primary variable that influences the individual's degree of success in learning a second language". He described motivation as the aggregate of three components: efforts to learn the language, desire to learn the language and attitudes toward learning the language. Gardner and Lambert (1959) proposed that motivation can be classified into two orientations: integrative and instrumental. Some empirical studies have shown that motivation orientation is closely associated with learners' strategy use and may affect both the type and quantity of strategy use. For instance, in a study of students of foreign languages in universities in the USA, Oxford and Nyikos (Ellis, 1994:542) observed that "the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies". Schmidt and Watanabe (2002) carried out a survey of motivation and reported use of language learning strategies with 2,089 learners of five different foreign languages at the university of Hawaii. Their findings showed that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies was most affected by motivation. Chang and Liu (2013) examined the use of English learning strategies by Taiwanese first-year EFL university students and its relation with language learning motivation. They found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies had higher correlations with motivation and that the frequency of strategy use had positive correlation with motivation. Mochizuki's (1999) study on Japanese EFL students suggested that motivation affected the learners' strategy choice more strongly than other factors. As for the contexts where the above-mentioned empirical studies were conducted, they range from USA to Taiwan and Japan. Given that few publications have focused on the interaction between motivation and learning strategies within Greek learners of English, further research needs to be conducted in this area.

Gender is believed to be another significant factor affecting learners' choices of strategies. Many empirical studies indicate that females use more strategies when learning a language. For example, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) found that females showed greater use of four strategy categories than males. Similarly, in a study of the strategy use of 55 ESL students, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) found that females used strategies more frequently than males and that females used social and metacognitive strategies most. In contrast, some other studies show different results. For instance, Wharton (2000) investigated strategies used by 678 university students learning Japanese and French as foreign languages in Singapore and found that males used a greater number of language learning

strategies more frequently than females. Griffiths (2003) looked at language learning strategies used by 114 male students and 234 female students and found no significant relationship between gender and strategy use. In view of conflicting results in these studies, more work needs to be done on the role of gender differences in language learners' strategy use.

In language learning strategy research, efforts have also been made to explore the relationship between personality and strategy use. The extroversion/introversion dichotomy proposed by Jung (1971) has become a widely accepted personality construct. According to Oxford and Nyikos, "successful language learners choose strategies to suit their personalities" (Liyanage, 2004). In the study of 20 adults learning Turkish in the US, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) found personality type influenced the learners' choices of strategies: extroverts preferred social strategies whereas introverts preferred to learn alone. Brown et al. (1996) conducted a study among 320 Japanese university students and suggested that social strategies positively correlated with extroversion. Wakamoto (2009) also combined extroversion/introversion with learning strategies and investigated the impact of personality type on the use of different types of learning strategies in a Japanese EFL setting. She found that extroverts and introverts did prefer different strategies. It can be seen that the research literature seems to show a significantly positive correlation between personality and strategy choice.

### **3. Methodology**

A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the Greek female ESL learner's strategy use as well as possible influencing factors. Such an approach helps the researcher to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009:23).

#### **3.1 Participants**

Given that few empirical studies have been conducted on strategies used by Greek learners of English in a study-abroad context, a Greek female learner of English was chosen as the major informant of the study. She had an English study experience for nearly 10 years and was a first-year English major university student in the UK when the present study was carried out. Moreover, in order to better address the role of gender in the female learner's use of language learning strategies, a Chinese male student learning English at the same UK university was selected randomly for comparison.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

The interview technique can be used to understand "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013:9). In this study, semi-structured interviews were adopted to elicit data from the participants and to help the researcher delve deeper into their strategy use. In doing so, a set of topics were prepared in advance, including learning strategies, motivation, gender and personality. While the interview with the female learner dealt with all these issues, the one with the male learner focused mainly on identifying strategies he used. I also prepared some questions on these topics. The types of questions roughly fell into three categories identified by Spradley (1979): descriptive, structural and contrast. For example, I asked the informants: "Have you used any English learning strategies? (descriptive question)", "If yes, what strategies do you often use? (structural question)" "Is there any difference in your strategy use after studying in the UK? (contrast question)". The two interviews with them happened in a cafeteria, according to their wishes, and each took about 1 hour. During the interviews, the informants were allowed to speak freely, so that they could feel more comfortable and "unveil whatever...maybe of relevance to the topic at hand" (Peer et al, 2012:81). New questions were also allowed to emerge based on what they said. Both the interviews were fully audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

#### **3.3 Data analysis**

In the qualitative analysis of interview data, I used both inductive ("bottom-up") and deductive ("top-down") approaches to generate interpretations. Therefore, the process of analysis is "both a data-gear and theory-driven activity" (Mills, 2010:751). Moreover, the strategy use reported by the learner was analyzed roughly based on the categories proposed by O'Mally and Chamot(1990): cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective.

## 4. Results

The following sections present the findings from the interviews, and they examine, respectively, the three influencing factors in relation to learning strategies.

### 4.1 Motivation and learning strategies

According to her report, the female learner's motivation has changed and will possibly continue to change during her language learning process, which may indicate that learner motivation is dynamic and can evolve over time. With the change of her language learning goals, her learning process can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage began when she started to learn English in a private school at the age of eight with the purpose of preparing herself for the study in primary school. From then on, she had a strong instrumental orientation for learning English for a long period of time, because her aim was solely to achieve higher scores and to become a so-called good student. Her instrumental motivation can also be seen clearly from her choice of suspending English learning for preparing other subjects in high school.

In the second stage of her learning process, in order to obtain the opportunity to receive better higher education in the UK and to pass the IELTS examination, she decided to continue to learn English in high school after a four-year suspension. In this case, she stayed highly motivated and her instrumental orientation seemed to be even stronger than ever.

In the third stage, when she finally arrived in the UK, her motivation evolved; she revealed a mixture of integrative and instrumental orientations. Because of her interest in British culture and her positive attitude towards British people, she was anxious to integrate into the local community. In this period, her integrative motivation appeared to be stronger than instrumental orientation.

When making a comparison between any two of these stages, it seems obvious that the female learner's strategy use tended to vary with her motivation. In the first stage, she preferred to use cognitive strategies rather than metacognitive and social strategies. For example, she mentioned taking notes, repeating new words and comparing the meaning of an English word with that of a word in her first language. However, classifying the words and using context to guess the meaning of new words were seldom used.

In the second stage, the learner with a higher motivation level seemed to use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as evaluating her performance in language activities, correcting errors after completing tasks, and guessing the meaning of a new word from the context or its affix instead of using dictionary when reading newspapers and magazines.

In the third stage of her learning process, she used more strategies, especially social and metacognitive strategies. For example, she explained that the strategies she preferred to use outside the classroom include watching English videos, learning English songs and working with friends to practice her English. It seems clear that the change of her strategy choice resulted from her great interest in how to use English as a second language as well as her desire to get involved in the target group, for the use of these new strategies could help her quickly improve listening and speaking abilities. Moreover, she reported that memorizing a new word by repetition often made her use it in a wrong way, while practicing English with a proficient speaker of English could lead to better vocabulary learning outcomes because in conversation she could learn not only a new word but also the way it is usually used. More importantly, she added that using good strategies to finish a task successfully made her feel more confident and encouraged her to have a stronger desire to do it better, which suggested that not only motivation could affect strategy selection, but also strategy use could in turn influence their motivation levels.

Based on the above analysis, we can draw a conclusion that the learner tended to use different learning strategies when having different types of motivation. Among the three categories of strategies, the use of social strategies was found to be closely tied to integrative motivation. The findings also show a strong association between the degree of motivation and the range of strategy use, which seems to confirm that highly motivated learners use more strategies (Ellis, 1994:542).

#### 4.2 Gender and learning strategies

As mentioned in Section 3.1, in order to observe gender differences more obviously, a Chinese male student studying English at the same university was also interviewed to compare with the female learner. The data shows that there were significant differences in the type of their strategies. The female student used more social strategies than the male student, such as discussing with classmates, asking for explanation inside the classroom and practicing English with friends outside the classroom. In contrast, the male student preferred to practice English independently. He reported that the vocabulary strategies he usually used was imagining a situation and alternating roles to think and talk, and he believed that this strategy was much more useful than peer learning particularly when the new words were related to a topic that was not often mentioned by the people around him. These findings seem to be consistent with Maltz and Borke's statement that "girls are more likely to stress cooperation" (Ellis, 1994:204).

Moreover, according to Oxford (Liyanage, 2004), females and males prefer different learning styles and they are very likely to choose the strategies corresponding with their different innate style preferences. Here we can see that the Greek female student had a communicative learning style while the Chinese male student had an analytical style. Such gender-differentiated learning styles probably led to their different choices of English learning strategies.

Additionally, an interesting point the female learner mentioned is that, despite her strong integrative motivation, she had never attempted to take the initiative to talk to an unfamiliar male in order to practice English. She explained that she simply behaved like a female, because in her native culture men were expected to start a conversation instead of women. It can be seen clearly that her explanation for not to start a conversation is strongly related to the concept of "female" in her native culture. This may sufficiently illustrate that gender is a social concept that interacts with culture factors to affect choice of strategies. Thus, we can see that in most cases both males and females tend to behave in a "right" way in their culture, and adopt those language learning strategies appropriate for their respective gender roles.

#### 4.3 Personality and learning strategies

The Greek female learner described herself as a sociable, extroverted and adventurous person, and revealed that learning English would be more enjoyable for her if she adopted some social and metacognitive strategies such as cooperating with others and taking risks to use new words in both speaking and writing tasks. Therefore, it seems that she was able to consciously use strategies corresponding with her personality and that to some extent personality types can determine the learner's strategy use.

Furthermore, the learner said she seldom used affective strategies, for instance, taking a deep breath before taking an exam or delivering a speech, talking to herself to calm down, and rewarding herself after finishing a good task. She further explained that the main reason for the lower frequency of using affective strategies seemed to be closely related to one of her main personality traits—confidence and her positive state of mind.

She also mentioned she was really concerned about grammatical accuracy. To produce accurate English, she often thought about the form of her utterances and monitored her output, especially in oral activities. As a result of using this metacognitive strategy, she usually spoke hesitantly, which appeared to be inconsistent with Rossier's view that "there is a link between extroversion and oral fluency" (Cook, 2008:152).

### 5. Implications for language teaching

The above analysis may suggest that the Greek female learner of English made good use of learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies and social strategies. However, considering the strong relationship between learning strategy and motivation, whether she will continue using these strategies to facilitate her English learning is to some extent determined by her motivation. Therefore, how to keep her highly motivated in the ESL classroom seems to be a central problem in English language teaching.

One of the good ways to keep her motivated is to focus on what she likes, for example, English songs, movies and British culture can be used in class to arouse her learning interest. Another way to enhance the learner's integrative motivation is to provide opportunities for her to use English as the medium of communication and encourage her to interact with English users both inside and outside the classroom. For instance, organizing pair work or group work in class and giving her interview assignments would be helpful.

Since learning motivation may evolve and fluctuate, the learner would be more motivated if learning activities have relevance to her future. For example, the learner's integrative motivation for learning English will probably turn into an instrumental one like doing better on her job, if she returns to Greece. Then some words and structures expected to be useful in her future life and career seem to be a good choice for present teaching.

Compared with motivation, gender and personality are two relatively stable factors. Classroom language teaching should also suit the learner's gender role and personality traits. Cook (2001:138), for instance, claimed that "the extroverts might be expected to prefer audiolingual and communicative teaching style that emphasize group participation and social know-how". So it seems obvious that for the extrovert female learner, ESL teachers should increase opportunities for her to interact with people.

In addition, given that the learner mentioned she received little strategy training in her English lessons, the idea of incorporating strategy instruction into language classes should be adopted to promote her language learning. According to Cohen (2014:120), strategy instruction can enable students to choose their own strategies and to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategy use.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, the Greek female learner has a strong awareness of her use of language learning strategies. She has recalled the whole process of her English learning and commented on her own strategy use. Through an analysis of her past and current choices of strategies and its association with her personal motivation, gender and personality, we can see that she used more metacognitive and social strategies than cognitive and affective strategies and that her strategy use was significantly influenced by these three individual learner factors. With the change of the learner's motivation, significant differences were found in her strategy use in the three stages of her English learning process. Her use of social strategies seemed to be linked to integrative motivation. Gender is also an important factor for the female learner was found to use more social strategies than the male student, and more interestingly, she only used those strategies appropriate for her gender role. She was also found to choose strategies that suited her extroverted personality. Moreover, with careful consideration of the characteristics of the learner and the relationship between learning strategies and three other variables, some feasible pedagogical suggestions have been made in the hope of enhancing her language learning, such as creating opportunities to use English as the medium of communication and providing strategy training.

These findings clearly have implications for strategy-related policy making and implementation. The UK University the Greek girl was studying at has no explicit language policy regarding language learning strategy use, but it is possible that the policy is implicit in classroom practices. Even so, the policy is effective only if it is explicitly written and supported by not only administrators, but also teachers and learners. In this case, classroom practitioners can be fully aware of the meaning of the language policy, and ensure consistency in their practices. Therefore, when developing the strategy-related language policy, teachers and students need to work in collaboration with administrators to tailor it to student characteristics, including motivation, gender and personality. For example, as for the extroverted female learner, the policy should probably aimed at influencing her English learning strategies to move in the direction of communicating with others in the L2 rather than memorizing grammar and vocabulary. Thus, the policy that values collaboration and includes diversified assessment tools, such as strategy diaries and language portfolios, would work better for her, since this policy, as Oxford (2017:111) claimed, "helps to move an individual's L2 learning strategies toward setting goals, finding conversation partners, asking questions, monitoring strategy use and progress, and self-evaluation".

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