Learning to speak German: an investigation of the language learning strategies associated with the achievement of higher levels of oral proficiency in German among second year university students

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Introduction

This paper presents a study designed to identify the language learning strategies associated with the achievement of higher levels of oral proficiency in German for one hundred Irish, third level students. The study also investigates the way in which learners achieving higher levels of proficiency use these strategies.

Language learning strategies: some key concepts and studies

Language learning strategies have been defined as the often-conscious steps or behaviours that learners adopt to help themselves learn (Ehrman and Oxford 1990: 811) and as 'conscious or unconscious mental or behavioural activities that relate directly or indirectly to specific stages in the overall process of second language acquisition' (Purpura 1997: 293).

Based on such definitions, various investigations have produced different inventories of the strategies employed by 'good' language learners, with 'good' generally understood to mean those who perform well in tests or examinations or are rated as such by their teachers.

One such inventory is that compiled by Rebecca Oxford (Oxford and Nyikos 1989: 292; Nyikos and Oxford 1993: 13). Accepting that it is an impossible task to classify all possible strategies, this is one of the more comprehensive listings. It classifies strategies into six groups depending on whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, memory-related, or compensatory strategies. Cognitive strategies involve identifying, retaining, storing, and retrieving words, phrases, and other elements of the second language. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, allow learners to control their own cognition by co-ordinating the planning, organizing, and evaluation of the learning process. Social strategies

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include actions taken to interact with others through the target language, while affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes. Memory-related strategies help to commit material to memory, and finally, compensatory strategies include all of those which help to make up for gaps in knowledge.

A range of studies is devoted to the identification of strategies that appear effective in promoting different aspects of language learning. For example, one group of studies examines the strategies that 'good language learners' report using. These studies conclude that the 'good language learner' is an 'all-rounder' who concentrates on both form and communication, uses metacognitive knowledge to monitor the learning process (Ellis 1994), and engages in a greater variety of approaches to learning (Chamot, Kupper, and Impink-Hernandez 1988).

A second group of studies uses statistical analyses to explore the relationships between reported strategy use and language-learning outcomes for larger groups of language learners. The findings of these studies also stress the importance of metacognitive strategies, particularly self-monitoring (Purpura 1997, Rivers 2001) in achieving higher levels of proficiency.

**Empirical Study**

**Background**

The objective of this study is to identify and analyse the strategies associated with the achievement of higher levels of oral proficiency in German for 100 students of German. The students who participated in this study were in their second year on a range of interdisciplinary degrees at Dublin City University. The degree courses included the B.A. in International Business and Languages, the B.A. in International Marketing and Languages and the B.A. in Applied Computational Linguistics. Students enrolled on these programmes spend their third year studying at a university in a German, French, or Spanish speaking region.

**Measurement instruments**

Levels and types of strategic activity were measured using the 'Strategy Inventory for Language Learning' (S.I.L.L.). The S.I.L.L.
was developed by Rebecca Oxford and is based on her strategy classification described above. It is one of the most widely used and comprehensive strategy assessment questionnaires currently available. This questionnaire assesses the frequency with which learners use 80 language-learning strategies with learners allocating a number from 1 to 5 to each of the strategies listed. A score of '1' indicates that a particular strategy is 'never or almost never true of them', '2' that it is 'generally not true of them', '3' that it is 'somewhat true of them', '4' that it is 'generally true of them', and '5' that it is 'always or almost always true of them'.

Levels of oral proficiency were determined during a group oral examination. Here, groups of three or four students spoke for five minutes each on different aspects of a topic of their choice. They then engaged in a fifteen-minute discussion on the subject with their fellow students, the discussion being facilitated where necessary by their lecturer. A second examiner assisted in the rating process whereby students received an individual mark based on the following criteria: fluency, accuracy, use of idiomatic language, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Each group was further assessed with regard to content, coherence, and the communicative nature of their presentation.

Finally, once the language learning strategies associated with higher levels of oral proficiency had been identified, in-depth interviews were carried out in order to determine what the orally more proficient students mean when they say they use these strategies. Twenty students participated in these relatively unstructured interviews, which took approximately 30 minutes each. Eight students scoring in the middle (2.2) and lower (pass) ends of the range of results were also interviewed for the purpose of comparison.

Procedure

The students completed the S.I.L.L. in weeks 6 and 7 of the Summer semester. The questionnaires were completed during class time with respondents being advised in advance that the results would be used solely for research purposes. In weeks 9 and 10, the students sat their oral examination. A second examiner and class lecturer were present at all of the examinations and an average of both examiners' grades recorded. Finally, following completion of the statistical analysis (see below), the qualitative interviews were conducted.
Data Analysis

Three statistical analyses were carried out. Firstly, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to achieve an initial indication of the strategies associated with higher levels of oral proficiency. This procedure allows the best predictors of the dependent variable (oral proficiency) to be identified from all of the independent variables (learning strategies) considered together.

Bivariate correlations, using the Pearson correlation coefficient, were also calculated between each individual learning strategy employed by each student and each oral proficiency score, further facilitating the identification of strategies associated with the achievement of higher levels of oral proficiency.

Thirdly, a one way ANOVA was used to determine whether significant differences in average use of each strategy exist between students grouped according to their grade in the oral examination. This procedure looks for the same information as the correlational analyses in that it seeks to identify significant differences in strategy use between students achieving different levels of oral proficiency. However, since it uses a different approach, it can be used to both verify and supplement the information obtained using the first two procedures. Once the strategies associated with higher levels of oral proficiency had been identified, their frequency of use was correlated with the individual aspects of oral proficiency assessed during the oral examination, i.e. fluency, accuracy, use of idiomatic language, pronunciation and vocabulary. This allows us to determine whether the frequency of use of particular strategies is associated with performance levels on the aspects of proficiency measured in this study.

Finally, the interview data was transcribed in summary form from audiotapes. The transcription summarizes each interviewee's response to each question in such a way that it reflects the content and spirit of the response.

Results

Significant positive correlations were found between (a) the total number of learning strategies employed and oral proficiency ($r = .263, p = .008$) and (b) the total frequency with which the language learning strategies were employed and oral proficiency ($r = .278, p = .000$). In other words, the more proficient the student, the more
strategies they use more frequently. In terms of the different types of strategies, significant positive correlations were found between (a) the number of cognitive strategies employed and levels of oral proficiency \( (r = .331, p = .001) \) and (b) the number of metacognitive strategies employed and levels of oral proficiency \( (r = .222, p = .026) \).

With regard to the individual strategies, the regression model identified six strategies positively associated with levels of oral proficiency (see Appendix). These are:

- I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German.
- I plan my goals for language learning, for example how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run.
- When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence.
- I have a regular language learning partner.
- I create associations between new material and what I already know.
- I practise the sound or alphabet of German.

The correlational analysis confirmed the existence of the above relationships between the six strategies and levels of oral proficiency. They also indicated that several strategies may, perhaps due to high intercorrelations between the strategies, have been obscured by the regression model. These are:

- I check over what I write in German. \( (r = .331, p = .001) \)
- I try to notice my language errors and find out the reasons for them. \( (r = .235, p = .018) \)
- I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practice German. \( (r = .233, p = .020) \)
- I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or week. \( (r = .206, p = .039) \).

The analyses of variance support the analyses conducted above
with significant differences in average strategy use by category of oral proficiency appearing on the first three strategies selected by the regression model, i.e., 'I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German' ($F = 4.26, p = .007, df = 96$), 'I plan my goals for language learning, for example how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long-run' ($F = 2.82, p = .043, df = 96$), and 'When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence' ($F = 2.84, p = .040, df = 96$), as well as with regard to the first strategy selected by the individual correlational analysis, 'I check over what I write in German' ($F = 5.06, p = .010, df = 96$). Thus, taking all of the statistical analyses into account, ten strategies appear to be positively associated with higher levels of oral proficiency (see Table 1).

**Table 1: The ten 'successful' strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Strategy type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I plan my goals for language learning, for example how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run.</td>
<td>metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or week.</td>
<td>metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practise German.</td>
<td>metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to notice my language errors and find out the reasons for them.</td>
<td>metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I check over what I write in German.</td>
<td>cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I practise the sound or alphabet of German.</td>
<td>cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a regular language learning partner.</td>
<td>social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I create associations between new material and what I already know.</td>
<td>memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence.</td>
<td>memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German.</td>
<td>affective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the results of the correlational analysis between the frequency of use of these strategies and the individual components of oral proficiency indicated results as shown in Table 2, with the
shaded areas highlighting the existence of significant correlations at the 95% confidence level.

Table 2: The 'successful' strategies and the components of oral proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Flu (r =)</th>
<th>Acc (r =)</th>
<th>Voc (r =)</th>
<th>Pron (r =)</th>
<th>Idiom (r =)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I plan my goals for language learning, for example how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>.348</td>
<td>.341</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or week</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practise German</td>
<td>.406</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.293</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to notice my language errors and find out the reasons for them</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>.270</td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I check over what I write in German</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>.244</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I practise the sound or alphabet of German</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td>.242</td>
<td>.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a regular language learning partner</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>-.126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I create associations between new material and what I already know</td>
<td>.349</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence</td>
<td>.401</td>
<td>.349</td>
<td>.299</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German</td>
<td>.320</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.323</td>
<td>.275</td>
<td>.418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Flu = Fluency; Acc = Accuracy; Voc = Vocabulary; Pron = Pronunciation; Idio = Use of idioms

The qualitative information obtained from the in-depth
interviews sheds some light on what students mean when they say they use the ten strategies of Table 1. Since the use of these strategies correlates with a higher level of achievement in the oral examination, it is the students who achieved higher scores in the oral examination who use these strategies more frequently. The discussion which follows presents their comments on how they use these strategies. In some cases, comments by students obtaining lower scores in their oral examination, who may also use the strategies of Table 1, although less frequently, are included for the purpose of comparison.

- I plan my goals for language learning for example how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run.

- I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or week.

Comments by the orally more proficient students indicate that they have long-term goals concerning how proficient they intend to become in German. In the majority of cases, these goals are expressed in terms of an underlying desire for improvement. These students further describe their short-term goals which tend to be realistic and relate both to what they themselves would like to achieve independent of course requirements and to the completion of externally set tasks and assignments. In contrast, students obtaining lower scores on their oral proficiency examination tend to plan neither their short-term nor their long-term goals. Even where goals are expressed, they are ill conceived and half-hearted.

- I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practise German.

Orally more proficient students favour watching German television although several like to read non-course material including general fiction and sports reports in German newspapers.

- I check over what I write in German.

- I try to notice my language errors and find out the reasons for them.

The more proficient students described checking for meaning
as they write, some using a dictionary at the initial stages and others leaving blanks and returning later to fill them, and for grammatical errors once they have finished. When checking for grammatical errors, some students begin at the level of cases, adjectival endings, prepositions, pronouns, and so on, while others focus first on overall sentence structure and word order. However, despite these differences, all are aware of their particular approach to checking their work and do not vary it to any great extent. The majority also expressed an awareness of their grammatical weaknesses. These provide a focus for their checking procedure. In contrast, students scoring less well in their oral examination category assign little importance to the use of this strategy. In addition, all students, regardless of their level of oral proficiency, associate the strategy 'I try to notice my language errors and find out the reasons for them' with corrected written work returned by their lecturer. A distinguishing characteristic of the orally more proficient students is that once they receive a correction, they try to find out the reason(s) for their mistakes. They have a number of preferred sources including lecturers, classmates, friends, notes and grammar books.

• I practise the sound or alphabet of German.

More proficient students tend to use one or both of two approaches: reading a text aloud and imitating the way native speakers talk. Reading aloud tends to be coursework-based and a text to be prepared for a future class often forms the basis of this exercise. Imitation of native speakers is often done in 'a fun way'. The native speakers in question include fellow students, television presenters and lecturers.

• I have a regular language learning partner.

This strategy is used almost exclusively, albeit infrequently, by members of the 'higher' category. Some students work in pairs on projects and assignments. Others interpret the strategy more broadly and describe meeting informally in groups to speak German.

• I associate new material with what I already know.

Interpretations of what the use of the above strategy implies vary according to proficiency levels. For example, the orally more
proficient students describe it as consisting of several steps and they use it at both a lexical and grammatical level. Less proficient students perceive this strategy as being useful only at a lexical level. They describe how they break down compound nouns into their component parts in order to decipher their meaning. A number of these students also group nouns according to meaning in order to assist in memorization.

- When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence.

This strategy is used by orally more proficient students to help them place a new word in a particular context.

- I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German.

Orally more proficient students associate this strategy with speaking under time pressure, for example in a classroom situation where they are required to react spontaneously and feel that both the fluency and accuracy as well as the content of what they say is being evaluated. Less proficient students who use this strategy, do so only when required to speak under examination conditions.

Discussion

The findings obtained by this study confirm some of the tentative conclusions that are beginning to emerge in this field, while rejecting others. For example, unlike a number of studies (Van and Abraham 1989, Pratts 1995), they support arguments that a high level of strategy use is associated with higher levels of proficiency. They also support the claim (Ellis 1994, Park 1997, Purpura 1997, Bruen 2002) that orally more proficient learners use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies than do orally less proficient students.

Furthermore, in this study, ten strategies correlated at a statistically significant level with higher levels of proficiency (Table 1). Of these, four are metacognitive, two cognitive, two memory-related, one social, and one affective. In other words, the list contains representatives of all strategy types with the exception of the compensatory strategies. This finding supports some of the work done on identifying the learning approaches of the 'good language learner', in that many of these studies emphasize the metacognitive
awareness displayed by these students, as well as describing them as applying a greater range of strategy types to their language learning.

The findings also indicate that orally more proficient students are more aware of how and why they use language learning strategies and use them in a more structured manner than do less proficient learners.

Finally, the pattern of relationships between the ten strategies associated with higher levels of oral proficiency and the individual components of oral proficiency suggests that several of the strategies, the 'focused' strategies, are related to improvements in particular aspects of proficiency. A smaller number of strategies, the 'broad spectrum' strategies, are associated with improvements in all or almost all of the constituents of oral proficiency measured in this study. For example, the strategies, 'I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German', and, 'When learning a new German word, I put the word in a sentence', fall into the latter category.

**Implications for the language classroom**

The use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies in particular appears to support the language learning process. However, students achieving high levels of oral proficiency seem to have a repertoire of different strategy types at their disposal, to implement these in a structured, step-by-step manner, and to apply them to a wide range of situations and tasks.

Unfortunately, many learners do not develop sufficient mastery of learning strategies on their own to enable them to make impressive gains in their language learning. Therefore, an element of awareness raising and strategy training may be a useful element of many language courses. Although further research into the effects of strategy training at all levels has been repeatedly called for (Brett 2001, Reichelt 2001), the most successful approach to strategy training to date appears to be the 'completely informed' model of strategies-based instruction. This is a learner-centred approach that extends classroom strategy training to include both explicit and implicit integration of strategies into the course content (Oxford, Crookall, Cohen, Lavine, Nyikos and Sutter 1990; Cohen 2000). It involves, in particular, assessment of student needs, preparation for training, selection of the strategies to be trained, presentation of the
new strategies and their integration with various classroom materials, repeated practice of the strategy on a range of different tasks, evaluation of the success of the strategy training and possible revision of the process in the light of the evaluation.

The decision concerning which strategies to train has been a difficult one. However, despite the limitations of this study, which include a reliance on self-report data and the use of an official oral examination to assess levels of oral proficiency, the results provide an initial indication of the strategic behaviour of a particular group of Irish students achieving higher levels of oral proficiency in German. Such a profile may provide an improved basis for more successful strategy training, at least in language learning contexts similar to that in which this study was conducted.

Appendix

Table 3: Variables in the multiple regression equation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alphabet</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preview</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-3.27</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise</td>
<td>-2.46</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-3.41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>-1.39</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-2.74</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>-1.71</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-3.36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>50.58</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1. This article was written based on data first published in Jennifer Bruen, Strategies for success: profiling the effective learner of German, Foreign Language Annals 34(3), 216-225, © 2001 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
2. It is important to emphasize at this point that it is impossible to divide language ability cleanly into four skills, with much of the necessary knowledge and many of the necessary sub-skills overlapping and influencing performance in all of the skills. The emphasis on speaking in this study is not intended to imply that it is a discrete skill. It is used, rather, to provide a particular focus for this research on one increasingly important aspect of language learning.

3. Orally more proficient students were defined for the purpose of this study as those achieving a 2.1 grade or better in the oral examination described above.

4. Scores on the components of oral proficiency were only available for 69 of the 100 students as it proved impossible for the researcher to be present at all of the oral examinations and the collection of this data was solely for research purposes.

5. The correlational coefficients were as follows: relax: r = .38; goals: r = .34; sentence: r = .27; partner: r = .24; associate: r = .19; alphabet: r = .20, p < .05.

6. The B scores in Table 3 are the coefficients and constants for the regression equation that measures predicted values for the oral result; the SE B, or standard error of B, is a measure of the stability of sampling error of the B values; the Beta scores represent the standardized regression coefficients; T is B divided by the standard error of B; and, finally, Sig T, or the significance of T, represents the probability that these T values could occur by chance.

References


