Chapter 4

Discussion

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I expected to find the at-risk group to have a lower incidence of strategy use. Based on the results and findings from the experiment, I discussed some implications of the results and the implications for classroom use, and for further research, have compared the results with findings of other studies. Strategy use between at-risk and non at-risk subjects was compared, as was age and gender of at-risk and non at-risk. Age and gender were compared as they were the sets of data which could be compiled from the questionnaire, and all other background data were incomplete.

This study involved a look at various strategies presumed to be used by the subjects in the study. The subjects were tested for their use of the eight strategies, but the results yielded the use of three types, metacognitive, cognitive and compensatory. These results were obtained by using the think aloud or interview procedure, as described by Nunan (1992) in the following section on the interview procedure.

Strategy Use Comparison

The results indicate that the Group A students used 4 of the 8 identified strategies more than subjects in Group B (Appendix N) (strategies 3, 6, 8, and 11). I do not believe this result is significant in that the range of strategies tested does not provide a complete enough sample on which to base generalizations of which group used which type of strategy more. It may be though that the at-risk students can be compared to early learners in that they are focusing more on the metacognitive, as they have not yet made automatic the many of the strategies they are using. There is however a connection between the metacognitive and the cognitive strategy. Oxford (1990) says

that "the metacognitive category helps students regulate their own cognition by assessing how they are learning and by planning for future language tasks, but metacognitive self-assessment and planning often require reasoning, which is itself a cognitive strategy!" p. 16). The strategies the at-risk students used more were a cognitive strategy, a compensatory strategy, and two metacognitive strategies.

The students in Group B used 3 of the 8 identified strategies more than the students in Group A, and one of the comparison scores was equal. The final results averaging over the 8 strategies, shows Group A and Group B students with the same percentage for strategy use (54 %). The hypothesis of this study was that non at-risk students would report incidence of language learning strategies more than at-risk students would. The implication for the hypothesis is that students who are at-risk, are not using strategies as much as non at-risk, and could benefit from language learning strategy training. The former did not result as expected, as there was no difference between groups.

Possibly the at-risk students are more aware of what they are doing to learn new material as it is more difficult for them to learn, and they need to work harder to achieve the same results as the non at-risk students. Oxford (1990) says that the language learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed (conscious strategies), and contribute to the main goal of communicative competence. The average of use of all eight strategies shows no difference. This indicates that the total incidence of strategy use, though they may have been different strategies, was the same between the two groups.

More than one strategy were reported by the participants as being used in completing the listening task. Lawson and Hogben (1996) also show that the participants in their study used a variety of strategies at once when learning a new vocabulary word. For example, when asked to learn a given word, a student may have employed the strategies of spelling, simple rehearsal, and sound. Lawson and Hogben's study reports incidence of reported strategy use, as does mine, rather than frequency or quality of strategies being employed. As students were interviewed for overall use, and not for their answers to strategy use on specific parts of the listening task, it is plausible to assume, according to Lawson and Hogben's statement, that students put into operation more than one strategy at a time.

Though I was expecting the difference stated earlier, according to my hypothesis, and was surprised when the results were looking similar, I was very surprised indeed to find the results to be identical. I have to think that the exactness of the final results is in some part a coincidence. I will speak of the results of the strategy use comparison in terms of closeness of results, rather than sameness, as the results for the individual strategies within the matrix did differ slightly.

There are some possible reasons why the results of the strategy use comparison are as close as they are. I suspected at the time that students were answering affirmative to many of the strategies if they did not understand exactly what the question being asked of them entailed. Not one of the 68 interviewees asked for clarification on any of the questions, though I asked them to please ask me at any point during the interview. I also suspect the students felt it would be somehow valued if they answered affirmatively,

that this was somehow the desirable answer. There is no way to tell whether this was in fact true, or whether the results were biased in some way, given that I could not measure truth of answers provided. They often looked at me for approval after answering each question, but I was only helping them to interpret their answer into a categorizable response, not looking for an affirmative answer over a negative one. I did not note anywhere in the literature that cultural factors were taken into account, though previous studies examined subjects from many different ethnic backgrounds.

Age Comparison

The age group of 17 to 19 year olds (half the group) showed a strategy use of 56 %, and the age group of 19 to 43 year olds showed a strategy use of 52 % (Appendix O). I expected the opposite result. I presumed the older students would be inclined to use strategies more, based on the age difference findings of Pfaff (1987) and MacIntyre (1994). However, one aspect to take into consideration, is that a large majority of the students interviewed (70 %) were of the ages 18 to 20. Therefore, there is little difference in age overall among the students. It is difficult to generalize that over the populations of younger and older students when they are all almost the same age.

Though I found no evidence in the literature comparing age among adult learners, there exists a frequent comparison between child versus adult learners of a second language. Here it is found that younger subjects (children) are less likely to employ conscious strategies (Pfaff, 1987). Cromer (1978, as cited in Pfaff, 1987) states that a "claim could be made that adults learning another language 'have presumably passed through all the developmental states and possess all the necessary cognitive

equipment'" (p. 23). For this reason, adult learners also are more capable of participating in self-reporting techniques of strategy observation. Unfortunately, as there was little range in age among my subjects, and most of the subjects (70%) were 18 and 19 years old, in retrospect, it was not likely to be a useful comparison.

Gender Comparison

Gender was compared, with the final results being 59 % strategy use by females, and 49 % with males (Appendix P). This is no statistical difference, but I did notice a tendency on part of the females to be more forthcoming with a response, more participatory. Perhaps this is how the females arrived at a higher percentage of strategy use, or a higher incidence of affirmative answers.

Green and Oxford (1995) state that they "found greater use of learning strategies among more successful learners and higher levels of strategy use by women than by men" (p. 361). Successful learners would be more or less equivalent to non at-risk learners. This statement supports both the hypothesis that at-risk learners would report a higher incidence of strategy use than non at-risk learners, and that women would report a higher incidence than men. In their findings Green and Oxford found that in "15 of the 50 SILL items, almost one third of the total, [strategies were] used differently by women and men" (p. 282). Women showed a higher incidence of strategy use.

The overall findings are summarized in Appendix R. The *p* values of the T-tests are given for the three comparisons.

Types of Strategies Used

The students were asked questions about their strategy use in the testing procedure. In particular, 8 strategies were identified. These strategies can be categorized into types of strategies. These types are as follows:

Metacognitive strategies:

3. -tried to compare the unknown word with a word in Spanish, used cognates metacognitive strategy

10. -paid special attention to parts which were particularly difficult metacognitive strategy

11. -repeated the cassette a number of times to gain meaning of the text metacognitive strategy

Cognitive strategies:

8. -tried to identify the grammatical category of the unknown word cognitive strategy

Compensatory strategies:

4. -tried to listen to the words in the sentence surrounding the unknown word in order to get the meaning of the unknown word through context compensatory strategy

5. -tried to listen to the words in the sentences surrounding the unknown word in order to get the meaning of the unknown word through context compensatory strategy

using mime or gesture to get meaning across, or asking for help if the student does not understand (Oxford, 1990).

On cognitive strategies, also direct strategies, question 8, Oxford (1990) says that they include practising, receiving and sending messages, trying to get the idea quickly, analyzing and reasoning, translating and transferring, and creating structure for input and output, such as taking notes and summarizing.

For metacognitive strategies, (questions 3, 10, and 11) which are indirect strategies, Oxford (1990) says that:

> "'metacognitive' means beyond, beside, or with the cognitive. Therefore, metacognitive strategies are actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to co-ordinate their own learning process. Metacognitive strategies include three strategy sets: centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, and evaluating your learning" (p. 136).

Oxford and Cohen (1992) outline a distinction between direct and indirect language learning strategies. They state that direct strategies "contribute directly to language learning" and indirect strategies "contribute indirectly to language learning" (p. 15).

Oxford and Cohen (1992) have analyzed strategy use (as discussed in the Review of Literature, Chapter 1). Oxford (1990) (as cited in Oxford and Cohen, 1992) states that "learning strategies are also equated with thinking skills, thinking frames, reasoning skills, tactics, and learning-to-learn skills" (p. 6). They also mention that "strategy use involves some degree of conscious awareness on the part of the learner.

When a behaviour is used unconsciously...it is not a strategy because conscious awareness is not present" (p. 9).

MacIntyre (1994, as cited in Green and Oxford, 1995) highlights the "importance of affective factors and links the use of a given language learning strategy with task demands, proficiency, aptitude, situation, attitude, motivation, previous success, anxiety, self-confidence, sanctions against strategy use, goals, and criteria for success" (p. 263). This statement justifies a look at various factors contributing to strategy use, including the comparisons made in this study of at-risk versus non at-risk students (successful and unsuccessful learners), gender and age.

Retrospective Look at Study

The study was performed over two school days. It would perhaps have been more effective to perform each listening session individually as the interviews were done, so that each student could maximize their proximity to the tape recorder. Also perhaps a better quality cassette and recorder should have been used. This would have helped the students to hear the recorded listening task easier, and it also would have helped in coding the students' responses.

It was very difficult to hear some of the responses because of the quality of the machine the responses were recorded onto, and also because the maximum possible volume was very low. The coders had to sit as close as possible to the playback machine (a more powerful machine than the one the answers were recorded into). The tape seemed very faint.

If the study were to be repeated, certainly more strategies could have been tested for, and a broader spectrum of strategies could have been included. It is easier to see now, that any number of strategies could have been tested for, the only limitation being time constraints.

One aspect of the interviews which caused some difficulties for the students was that questions 4 and 5 seemed very similar to them. When I was making up the questions I meant one to refer to the sentence specifically, and one to refer the text as a whole. When I tested the questions out on others, no-one seemed to notice the ambiguity, but several students during the interviews answered "yes" to both, saying they were the same question, and I had to explain the difference.

I determined the subset of questions asked based on those questions used during the pilot interviews which revealed the most concrete answers, or the most easily categorizable answers. Therefore, if a question was discarded from the original list of questions, it was due to the fact that the answers to the questions could not be categorized. In the future, I would try to gather a list of questions which more evenly represented different types of strategies, such as metacognitive, cognitive and compensatory. Now being more familiar with the interview procedure, I would most likely find it easier to word questions in a way that the answers were more easily categorizable.

Cohen provides some criticisms of or limitations to this type of technique (introspective interview), which include: "much cognitive processing is inaccessible because it is unconscious,...[and that] verbal report probes may force students to

produce a verbal response that is not closely related to their natural thought processes" (p. 680). Taking these and other limitations into consideration, the introspective interview technique was still the best choice for my research technique.

I believe that having given the students as much information as possible in Spanish was a help to the student. It would be difficult however to administer the same kind of interview procedure to students from a mixed language background. Also, it helped that I and the other coders are bilingual, in terms of being able to interpret the responses easier. Students mentioned that they felt comfortable being able to read the instructions and questions, and answer the questions in Spanish. It was not necessary to test them in English, as I was only testing their strategy use, not their English level.

Students came to the interviews during class time, so were not as likely to want to rush through the interviews as they would had they come on their own time. As well, I think they understood that the results would not affect their class grade in any way. Considering these comments, I believe these two factors contributed to more accurate results than they would have had the circumstances been the opposite.

All the literature examines strategy use, and the differences between individuals based on strategy choice and individual learner differences. The literature assumes differences among individuals, and also supports strategy training for the weaker (at-risk) student. This is how I arrived at my alternative hypotheses of differences between populations. Therefore the results are contrary to the projections given in the Review of Literature.

Implications for Further Research

As mentioned earlier, I would like to see a study which investigated the use of many more strategies or types of strategies than those included in my study. A group of questions referring to more strategies, and a good cross-section of different strategies would possibly yield more differences simply owing to the fact that there would be more incidence opportunities to report strategy use, and also would have provided a broader spectrum on which to base generalizations and discussion of tendencies.

Where the study could have gone more in depth would be in the testing of frequency and quality (accuracy) of strategy use. This study reported only incidence of strategy use, but a more extended and thorough version could perhaps take into account the comparison of how often and how well subjects are using the strategies.

It would be interesting to be able to do a case study on some of the at-risk students over the long term (several semesters or years), over the course of their studies, to see if they increase in strategy use over time, without being formally taught strategy training. Many of the students did express interest in receiving strategy training, confusing my study with the Learning Strategies Training Project. Many students also showed a lot of interest in my study. As an aside, many students made comment on the fact that they felt it was important to have a native speaker as their teacher, and that they felt that listening to the cassettes in class was difficult, but that they felt it was really important to be able to understand different native speaker accents. Perhaps there could be further study into the strategies used by students to comprehend different accents and different types of speech, slang versus formal, or male versus female for example.

Conclusion

The study of language learning strategies, at-risk and non at-risk groups, and in particular listening strategies is a field which has not been exhaustively explored. In fact, I did not encounter even one study which bore a resemblance to mine. While the comparisons yielded no difference, the study has greater importance in that it brings together literature on strategies and listening strategies in particular, and shows where there are gaps in the field of study. The significance of no difference possibly indicates that there is in fact little or no difference between incidence of strategies used by at-risk and non at-risk learners, but that the frequency and quality of strategy use, if analyzed, would reveal significant differences, assuming that effective strategy use is employed by the more successful learners.

In addition, the finding of no difference also leads me to believe that there is a field here that could afford to be explored in much greater depth, and that the study is worth expanding in breadth and depth. Though I learned much about strategies and strategy use, at-risk and non at-risk learners, I learned much more about what is yet to be studied and learned in the field, what questions remain unanswered.