

# Correlations of L2 strategy selection with L2 experience and anxiety

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## Abstract

*The significance of language learning for a small country, such as Hungary, is indispensable. Yet, although situated in the middle of the multilingual European business and cultural environment, an incredible 58% of the Hungarian population still only speaks its mother tongue (Eurobarométer, 2006). The present article discusses the potential causes of low L2 performance through discussion of a survey of a student population of 18-23 year-olds at the Agricultural Sciences Faculty of Debrecen University, Hungary's second largest higher educational institution. The survey was used in an investigation of the correlation between learner strategies and 1) problems of L2 acquisition, 2) gender differences in learning strategy selection and 3) the problem of anxiety (state and trait). I explore the development of personalized L2 learning strategies which allow students to correct their selection and use, while learning to recognize more successful methods of learning languages.*

The significance of language learning in the globalizing world is unquestionable. The acceleration of market competition and the phenomena attributed to the processes of globalization influence education and learning. Therefore, universities and colleges must assume the task and responsibility of preparing their students not only to study and work abroad, but also with the primary goal in mind: preparing their graduates to succeed in the face of the competition in the globalized job market. **Our students' possession of working knowledge, i.e. L2/LSP competencies is a cornerstone of this responsibility.** Wiwczarowski (2006:178) emphasizes the "social aspect of acquiring and using linguistic tools" in the process of "becoming one's professional self ...where [students and graduates] can see themselves and their role in a given language environment clearly."

Language learning can be grouped into two basic categories: factual knowledge and human factors. Factual knowledge includes the system and the phenomenon of the given second language, and also its logic, which differs sharply from that of Hungarian. A second language can be taught or conveyed to students through didactic methods, which comprise various models of language teaching and learning. **Language strategies** are ways of behaviour by which language learners strive to process the received L2 information. Thus, the analysis of language teaching and language learning strategies is of primary importance in revealing the keys to successful language learning. Human factors include the psychological features of

students applying **successful and unsuccessful language learning strategies** and also the wide range of factors comprising the language learning environment, from which the present article points out merely the importance of the language teacher's role. Language teachers always identify with one or another language teaching methods or models on the grounds of their own psychic dispositions, but the focal point is that they should act congruently, in the atmosphere of mutual respect and trust with their students. Such classroom atmosphere encourages students for creative behaviour and for wording their own independent ideas, opinions.

Putting to good use the knowledge of student learning problems I had amassed during my 17 years of experience as a teacher of ESP courses at Debrecen University, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, I developed and conducted an investigation of my students' attitudes to L2 study. Unless my students have spent time learning abroad or with a good private tutor, they invariably enter university L2 courses with inadequate language skills. In Hungary, students are unfortunate in that they predominately emerge from their secondary school studies with critically underdeveloped L2 knowledge and skills. Indeed, this problem appears to be worsening, as the disastrous results from entrance examinations used in my department to gauge the L2 skills levels of incoming freshmen show. As I examine the current situation in the L2 classroom here, several questions emerge in relation to 1) student attitudes to language learning, to language teachers and to peers) and 2) to failures and successes in language learning. Student feedback on previous L2 learning experiences proves to be so negative that, seen on the basis of my studies in psychology and learning, the students' high level of anxiety to foreign language learning cannot be addressed without offering them professional guidance and assistance. To overcome their inhibitions, I have long applied a mixture of instinctive and conscious methods, but I have always guessed deeper interactions in the background of language learning. By disclosing the correlations between effective language studies, successful language learning strategies and students' anxiety to L2 learning in the classroom, my goal is to facilitate successful L2/ESP learning in my students through psychological methods as well.

I planned to carry out my investigations with the L2 (English, German, French and Russian) students of the Faculties of Agricultural Sciences and Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Centre of Agricultural Sciences, University of Debrecen. I primarily assigned my areas of research to personal-psychological

factors as promoters of (un)successful L2 learning. My decision is based on my view that the effect of the students' goals of, combined with the unique situation involved in, L2 learning create personal interactions in which the learner's personality is deeply involved in a specific duality. On one the hand, due to factors arising from each individual's own cultural and native language, the student strives to establish an own identity in their foreign language interactions as well. Yet, on the other hand, through the code and expression systems of a foreign language, this same individual also must make an effort to create the same effect in the other person as they can achieve through their mother tongue. Naturally, there is a certain difference between the two effects. The greater this difference is, the lower the opportunities are that we can create the same effects in our communication partners.

This difference is the basis of failures in L2 communication. The processing of failures and language anxiety is personality-dependent, but it can be stated that the distinct deficit of the two pictures of the self (in mother tongue and in L2) can be processed by the individual if he/she receives effective and appropriate language education and thus he/she can cope with the situations triggered by native and L2 interactions and their alternations.

Oxford, R. (1990), one of the well-renowned researchers of L2 strategies, states that L2 strategies are "specific, self-directed steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning." Later, Oxford (1992/1993:18) argues that language learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalisation, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability."

O'Malley et al. (1985a:557-584) denote: "Language learning strategies are different from teaching strategies (the techniques used by teachers to help learners learn) in that, the learner and not the teacher, is the one who exercises control over the operations of the designated activity".

Tarone (1983:67) defined LS as the attempts to develop "linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language -- to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence." Weinstein and Mayer (1986:315) defined learning strategies broadly as "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning" which are "intended to influence the learner's encoding process".

Language learning strategies can usually be divided into 7 larger categories: cognitive, metacognitive, mnemotechnical or memory-related, compensational, affective and self-motivating strategies. Oxford (1990) mentions the first six categories in his model of L2 strategies, while other researchers, such as Chamot, O'Malley, 1990; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Cohen, 1996; Weaver & Cohen mention fewer ones. Dörnyei (2001) describes his own motivational strategies in his books on L2 teaching and learning.

Currently, from recent findings, 6 language-learning strategies can be delineated: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensational, affective and social strategies. These six categories correspond to Oxford's model of strategies and to her questionnaire entitled SILL. Oxford distinguishes direct and indirect strategies, and she lists affective strategies for the **reduction of language anxiety** and for self-encouragement in the group of indirect strategies. The present study examines the issue of language anxiety, its reduction, the applied methods (questionnaire survey, evaluation and conclusions) and findings, referring to their potential practical application.

The first questionnaire used in this study was the *SILL, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*, developed by Oxford (1990). This questionnaire includes items evaluating only the memory, cognitive and compensation strategies used by the learners, including 15 items: five items related to memory strategy; five items concerned with cognitive strategies, and five with compensation strategies. SILL is a reliable and valid questionnaire and appears to be the only language learning strategy questionnaire that has been extensively checked for reliability in multiple ways (Oxford, 1996). The Hungarian version of SILL was translated by Mónos, K. (2004) from Oxford's version of 1990.

The second questionnaire in our study was the SQ2, used in the Hungarian system of education for the assessment of typical learning strategies (Mónos, 2004). The goal of this questionnaire is to disclose the typical activities of language learners in the course of performing their L2 specific tasks; therefore, it encompasses all the major aspects of **languages**: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and the four basic skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing, questions 1-9); all the essential aspects of **learning**: anxiety, punishment-reward, problem-solving, questions 15-18) and cognitive and metacognitive areas (questions 13-14) as well.

The questionnaire also includes open questions to explore how students solve their various L2 learning tasks and how they express the solutions in their own words. The answers to the questions allow a classification in accordance to Oxford's taxonomy; therefore questions explicitly on the use of compensation strategies are also listed (questions 10-12). The questionnaire is suitable to unveil the extent of students' conscious L2 strategy use as compared to the use of other strategies, with the presupposition in the background that L2 learners, who have a good understanding of a language and language learning itself, develop more affective strategies (Mónos, 2004).

Gardner & MacIntyre (1993a:5) see Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of second language with which the individual is not fully proficient", characterised by "derogatory self-related cognitions ..., feelings or apprehension, and psychological responses such as increased heart rate." For the measurement of language anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz és Cope (1991) developed the FLCA self-reporting scale with the intention of finding out the extent of anxiety respondents feel in L2 classes. The 33 items include questions about test anxiety, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation in the language classroom. Respondents' answers are ranked according to Likert's scale. The Hungarian version of FLCA was translated and validated by Tóth, Zs. in 2003.

We used the *FLCA questionnaire* to detect the students' with emotional relationship (mostly) English classes and their general psychic conditions. The questionnaire included subjective statements which some students agreed with, while others refused. The answers highlighted the respondents' thoughts about these statements. By measuring the level of anxiety, we sought to find correlations among anxiety, strategy use and the efficiency of L2 learning.

On the basis of studies by several international authors, such as Ehrman & Oxford, 1995, Ehrmann 1999, Turula, 2002 we used Spielberger's *State-Trait Anxiety Inventory* (STAI). The STAI distinguishes between a general proneness to anxious behavior rooted in the personality and anxiety as a fleeting emotional state. The instrument comprises two separate self-rating scales and provides measures of anxiety for adolescents and adults (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970). The

answers are self-reporting; the two scales differ in wording and focus (intensity vs. frequency).

## Results

Our study pre-assumed five hypotheses. The following section briefly discusses the hypotheses and our related research findings.

**1. Learners' selection of L2 learning strategies show a close correlation with their failures in L2 learning, i.e. differences can be detected in learners' strategy selection, and their strategies are related to their L2 failures.** Our results have demonstrated that learners' self-confidence and their self-image play a significant role in L2 efficiency or failure; therefore, we can state that the selection of successful and unsuccessful L2 **strategies** is in close correlation with L2 students' failures.

**2. Gender differences can be detected in the selection of L2 learning strategies** Our findings have confirmed earlier literary data on L2 learning differences between sexes; namely that females are more hard-working and active than males in typical L2 activities, such as improving their listening skills, taking efforts to practice the studied language, writing their home assignments and classroom activity. This finding reflects actual general L2 classroom experience, i.e. girls generally overshadow boys in classroom performance; moreover, males' cognitive skills show a more radical reduction with each progressing year than that of females (Maylor, E.A., Reimers, S., Choi, J., Collaer, M.L., Perets, M.&Silverman, 2006). The selection of males' and females' L2 strategies in our survey has demonstrated this difference.

**3. The level of learners' L2 proficiency distinguishes learners' selection of L2 strategies, i.e. with the improvement of their language skills their L2 strategies change.**

Our findings have justified the above mentioned hypothesis, as they have shown that in contrast with beginners, advanced students prove to be more skilled in the **recognition** of L2 morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics; therefore, they can **correct their own mistakes** more precisely. Our data have also suggested that advanced students play a much more active role in their L2 learning process than

beginners: advanced L2 students watch more native-speaking films, TV programs; they are more creative if they cannot recall the word they need (compensation strategies), they pay more conscious attention to native speakers' speech and look for opportunities to practice their L2 skills.

**4. The selection of L2 strategies shows a correlation with language anxiety, i.e. anxious and not anxious L2 learners select different L2 strategies (unsuccessful /anxious learners use “unsuccessful” L2 strategies while successful (mostly not anxious) learners use “successful strategies”.** Our findings have justified the above mentioned correlation as they have shown that trait and state anxiety are manifested most intensely when L2 students are confronted with real-life L2 tasks, such as conversation with native speakers, watching films, TV programs, going abroad, i.e. native language environment. Successful L2 learners showed a lower level of anxiety in different L2 situations; therefore, they were more active and daring in their native language environment as well. However, unsuccessful L2 learners demonstrated the physical and/or psychological symptoms of stress specifically in native language situations. The successful performance of these activities requires a positive self-image and strong self confidence from L2 learners. In conclusion, if we want to improve the efficiency of L2 teaching, we have to cope with L2 anxiety in the classroom and help unsuccessful L2 learners fight their poor self image and develop a positive one.

**5. Trait and state anxiety distinguish the selection of learners' L2 strategies**

This hypothesis has been justified only partially, since our findings have shown actual differences in L2 strategy use merely in the case of the selection of auditive strategies. Our data have disclosed that L2 learners with low-level trait anxiety demonstrated strong willingness to imitate native speakers' L2 use, i.e. to pronounce and select words properly and connect them into correct sentences. However, those L2 learners who suffer from a high level of trait anxiety (as a characteristic feature) are highly unwilling to get involved in L2 language situations where their self-image can get hurt or they can become (or feel) ridiculous.

Our main component analysis has shown that typical L2 strategies do not show any correlation with state and trait anxiety; therefore we can draw the conclusion that L2

students' state and trait anxiety exerts insignificant, if any influence on the selection of learners' L2 strategies.

Our findings raise the question of what kinds of didactic methods should be used to make L2 learning even more effective for L2 learners with various L2 strategies and methods, given the correlation of L2 strategy use and language anxiety. This may be the subject of further examination; however, our present results can lay the foundation for a questionnaire to be used to distinguishing specific types of L2 learning: accordingly, L2 learners can be included into various groups of typical L2 learning methods. Based on these methods, language teachers can identify characteristic L2 strategies for the groups and select their didactic methods matching the given group of L2 learners. By filling in this questionnaire, L2 learners may get information on (perhaps unknown) L2 strategies, and the discussion of these strategies in the language classroom can provide further opportunities for language teachers to give information on successful-unsuccessful L2 strategies related to certain language learner types. The last step is the development of personalized L2 learning strategies for learners, thus allowing our students to reverse their perhaps unsuccessful strategy use and confirm those which proved to be successful. This way, language teachers may have an effective instrument in their hands to fill the gaps in their academic education about L2 learner types and learning strategies. This instrument can also enrich the methodology of language teaching and raise its efficiency.

Wenden & Rubin (1987) state that "LS are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly". It clearly claims that the knowledge and use of language learning strategies can enhance successful language learning in itself, but if strategies are applied to learner personality types, this can not only satisfy L2 learners' affective needs in the language learning process, but reduces the level of **language anxiety** as well. All these can promote shifts in the language teacher's role: becoming more intensively a facilitator in the language learning process, which increasingly becomes a partnership based on mutual respect between teacher and learner. As Cohen (1998: 51-84) defined such a shift, when he states that "one potentially beneficial shift in teacher roles is from that of being exclusively the manager, controller and instructor to that of being a change agent – a facilitator of learning, whose role is to help their

students to become more independent and more responsible for their own learning. In this role, the teachers become partners in the learning process”.

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