Language Learning Strategies and English Proficiency of Grade 12 Students

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Abstract: The learners' personal choice of learning strategies and their level of language proficiency are perceived to be good predictors of success in L2 learning. In fact, the use of overt or covert learning strategies in dealing with language learning task may indicate students' level of language proficiency and vice versa. This study investigates the relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency among Grade 12 students. Specifically, it determines the levels of language proficiency and the dominant learning strategies employed by the students. Following Oxford's (1990) strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) framework, the SILL survey was administered to 107 respondents. Survey responses and test scores were analyzed using frequency count, mean, and standard deviation. Results showed that the respondents' scores are distributed in the five proficiency levels, but they generally belong to "approaching proficiency." Moreover, respondents are aware of the importance of the learning strategies in their language achievement as reflected in the choice and quantity of strategy use. Of the six strategies, metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used while the memory strategies are the least used. Finally, results of the Chi-Square test revealed that there is no significant relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency.

Key Words: language learning, strategies, proficiency, assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a complex task that involves several essential processes. For decades, these processes have been investigated through observations, surveys, and experiments in the attempt to give a concrete description of the language learning phenomenon and assist the learners in achieving specific goals. Previous research that focused on the teacher, the teaching methods, and second language acquisition provided evidence that variations of learner's success in language learning exist. Such discovery led to a shift in focus and more emphasis on the concept of language learning strategies (Cabaysa & Baetiong, 2010).

Often referred to as specific behaviors, thoughts, steps, techniques, and tactics, language learning strategies are used by students to further learn about a language (Griffiths, 2003; Oxford, 1990). To provide a measure of learner's strategy use, Oxford (1990) developed the strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) that includes six categories generally classified as direct strategies (i.e., cognitive, compensatory, and memory) and indirect strategies (i.e., metacognitive, affective, and social).

Learners with different levels of proficiency tend to choose varied strategies because of their exposure to different learning materials and environment (Green & Oxford, 1995). Studies show that proficient learners mostly choose cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1985). Likewise, it has been observed that

language learning strategies can improve the learner's language proficiency (Radwan, 2011), which is an indication of a curvilinear relationship. In other words, the more language learning strategies learners' use, the more proficient learners they become (Green & Oxford, 1995).

Over the years, empirical studies along this line have been carried out. For instance, Ying-Chun Lai (2009) examined the language learning strategies used by EFL learners in Taiwan in relation to language proficiency by utilizing the students' results in The English Placement Test and the SILL survey. Results showed that the EFL learners used compensation strategies the most and the affective strategies the least. Students tend to guess intelligently when they encounter difficult learning task. In Zhao's (2009) study, Chinese students used a great deal of compensation strategies and less of memory. It provided a strong positive correlation between metacognitive strategies and English grades. Fewell (2010), however, discovered negative correlation between strategy use and language proficiency as the study revealed that Japanese college students have a high dependency on memory strategies, and in fact, it was the only strategy they used. Similar patterns of strategy use emerged among proficient and less proficient learners.

Using a multi-method approach, Vidal (2002) revealed that metacognitive strategies were commonly favored as opposed to memory and affective strategies. Further, the relationship between language learning strategy use and writing tasks was found to be complex, which was atypical in correlation studies. The complexity of the learning phenomenon may have been affected by personal and social factors. Huang (2016) employed a grounded theory approach and explained that variations were specifically associated to the changing environments as manifested in instructional goals and degree of teacher direction. Learners' strategies differed in attaining personal learning goals and solving learning difficulties. Thus, learner's ability, learning beliefs, and motivation in relation to learning contexts considerably matter in choosing learning strategies.

In the Philippines, Cabaysa and Baetiong (2010) conducted a causal-comparative study on the language learning strategies used by 70 high school students when speaking in class and found that intermediate speakers were significantly different from novice speakers in using metacognitive strategies. Achievement in school generated the most number of responses when asked about the factors contributing to strategy use. This was followed by attitude towards speaking in English and task at hand among others. The study implies that strategy use has a direct significant effect on students' speaking achievement.

To date, a concrete description of students' learning strategies as well as language proficiency in senior high school has been scarce; hence, this investigation. It is significant to provide a baseline information on this aspect to possibly enhance the curriculum, instruction, and assessment in senior high school level. Moreover, the findings of the current study are deemed beneficial to the learners themselves as they will become more aware of the types of strategies that work well for learning tasks and use them to their advantage to improve their communicative competence. In turn, by identifying what works best for the students in a given context, teachers can aid less proficient students by giving more opportunities for students to learn the varied strategies employed by the more proficient students. Accordingly, teachers can promote the types of strategies that can meaningfully attract students to become effective and successful second language learners.

1.1 Research Questions

This study specifically intends to answer the following questions:

1. What are the Grade 12 students' levels of English language proficiency?

2. What are the dominant language learning strategies that Grade 12 students use?

3. Is there a significant relationship between English language proficiency and language learning strategies?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive quantitative design. Following the research ethics procedure for human subjects, the researcher sought the approval of the school principal through a formal letter before the administration of the survey. A total of 107 Grade 12 Section A students from STEM (26), HUMSS (31), ABM (33), and TVL (17) in a public

senior high school in Batangas was asked to answer the survey. The respondents were composed of 71 or 66% females and 36 or 34% males, with ages ranging from 16 to 19 years old.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part contains the personal information that includes age and sex and the second part comprises the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The SILL presents 50 items that suggest different language learning strategies, including memory strategies reflected in statements 1-9 (e.g., I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them), cognitive strategies in statements 10-23 (e.g., I read for pleasure in English), compensation strategies in statements 24-29 (e.g., I try not to translate word-for-word), metacognitive strategies in statements 30-38 (e.g., I pay attention when someone is speaking English), affective strategies in statements 39-44 (e.g., I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English), and social strategies in statements 45-49 (e.g., I ask for help from English speakers). Item 50 allows the respondents to write the strategies they use that are not mentioned in the questionnaire. In measuring the learning strategies, a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 - never and 5 - always, was utilized. Moreover, the students' test scores obtained from the final written examination in English Oral Communication were used as a tool to evaluate students' English proficiency for the present study.

Data were analyzed using frequency count, mean, and standard deviation for the first two research questions. The count for the strategy use may have exceeded the number of respondents since it was possible that a respondent may have reported more than one strategy. The mean which had the lower standard deviation was considered for the overall computation. To determine the relationship between the variables, categorical data were utilized for the Chi-square test for independence using SPSS.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Students' Levels of English Proficiency

Table 1 presents the means of the students' test scores from the four strands, with the overall mean of 84.82. Of the four strands, HUMSS students obtained the highest mean score (M= 94.19; SD=2.33)

while the TVL students had the lowest mean score (M=78.18; SD= 3.91).

Table 1. Means of students' scores

Strand	Mean	SD
HUMSS	94.19	2.33
STEM	85.92	5.23
ABM	80.97	6.74
TVL	78.18	3.91
Total	84.82	4.55

Moreover, Table 2 shows the levels of student's proficiency based on the results of Oral Communication written test administered to students in March 2017. The total mean of test scores (84.82) of Grade 12 students is interpreted as generally "approaching proficiency," which implies that students can understand and communicate academic content using complex vocabulary. Out of 107 respondents, only 103 achieved a particular level. Most of the students fall under "developing proficiency" (39%) with the most number (18) coming from ABM. These students are presumed to find relative success in communicating their thoughts using simple sentences. Other students are classified as proficient (27%) and advanced (16%). Still, there are also students who belong to approaching proficiency (14%) and beginning (5%) levels. From the 107 respondents, four had scores lower than beginning level.

Table 2. Levels of students' proficiency

Level	HUMSS	STEM	ABM	TVL	Total	%
Advanced	14	1	1	0	16	16
Proficient	17	8	3	0	28	27
Approaching Proficiency	0	6	7	1	14	14
Developing Proficiency	0	11	18	11	40	39
Beginning	0	0	2	3	5	5
Total	31	26	31	15	103	100

HUMSS students achieved the high level of proficiency with 14 and 17 respectively, demonstrating superior performance. Other strands such as ABM and STEM had one student each in the advanced level and 3 and 8 students in the proficient level while TVL did not have any student who reached the proficient nor the advanced level. With an average score, most of the students (56%) are less proficient while the rest (44%) are proficient in the English language. This finding may be attributed to the difficulty of the test; however, the researcher was not able to find out whether item analysis was performed or not.

It can be surmised that HUMSS students had the highest mean because clearly oral communication is their superior skill since they prefer to be in the humanities and social science strand. They tend to be more proficient in English because they are more aware of the importance of English proficiency in their future career or profession. The rest may have shown a weak interest in oral communication as they are more inclined in the fields of science and technology, accountancy and business management. Learner factor in combination with other social/situational factors (Vertongen, 2014), in this instance, can be the reason for the observed discrepancy between and among groups.

3.2 The Dominant Learning Strategies Used by the Students

Table 3. Frequency of learning strategy use

Strategy	HUMSS	STEM	ABM	TVL	Total	Rank
Metacognitive	10	6	10	6	32	1
Social	7	6	8	2	23	2
Affective	5	4	7	3	19	3
Compensatory	5	6	3	0	14	4
Cognitive	3	5	3	1	12	5
Memory	5	0	1	5	11	6
Total	35	27	32	17	111	

Table 3 illustrates that metacognitive strategies emerged as the most frequently used while the memory strategies are least frequently used. Regardless of the strand, metacognitive topped the list of the six strategies although it is quite expected as previous studies have established a general trend (Cabaysa & Baetiong, 2010; Radwan, 2011).

Table 4. Overall mean ratings of learning strategy use

Strategy	Mean	SD	Rank
Metacognitive	3.30	0.20	1
Social	3.27	0.23	2
Affective	3.22	0.24	3
Compensatory	3.15	0.18	4
Cognitive	3.05	0.21	5
Memory	3.02	0.26	6
Total	3.17	0.22	

Table 4 summarizes the overall mean ratings of the six learning strategies and reveals a similar pattern among students across strands and proficiency levels, favoring the use of metacognitive strategies (M=3.30), followed by the social strategies (M=3.27) and affective strategies (M=3.22). Although popular to students, these top three categories show very low difference in mean ratings between categories and are interpreted as "sometimes used." Memory strategies, on the other hand, are the least preferred strategies (M=3.02). The means in the table are nearly identical as they differ from .03 to .10.

This metacognitive preference can be explained by the motivation a learner expresses in learning a language. According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), motivation, among the many internal and external factors, has the most powerful influence on strategy choice. It also suggests that there exists an association between the degree of motivation a learner has, and the number of strategies used. Conversely, the more motivated the learners are, the more strategies they tend to use. Nikoopour and Farsani (2010) explained that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation has shown to have an effect in strategy use. They proved that intrinsic motivation contributes highly in the increased use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies of Iranian EFL learners.

Interestingly, the number of years of language study cannot be discounted in connection with the preference to metacognitive strategies. Students studying a target language for quite some time are more exposed to the language itself and to the varied learning materials, and they become certainly more experienced than beginners. Hence, difference in strategy use is often evident between beginners and approaching proficiency. In this vein, metacognitive strategies are expected to be used more frequently by senior high school students.

It is also possible that students' strategy use is influenced by their learning styles (Green and Oxford, 1995). These individual learning styles appear to vary from one cultural and language orientation to another, and so there may not be definite learning styles that can be associated exclusively to a set of learners in a specific setting. Similarly, learners' aptitude can also be linked to the dominance of the students' use of metacognitive strategies. Since the respondents of the study are composed of students from Section A, they are perceived to be the best students, and thus their use of these strategies seems to reflect their assumed proficiency in their language performance.

The study further revealed that the students use indirect strategies more frequently than direct strategies, suggesting that they support language learning through "focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation, and empathy and other means" rather than "requiring the mental processing of language learning" (Oxford, 1990, p. 151). For individual strategies, students in general indicated the use of dictionary to enrich their vocabulary and language experience. The rest of the students stated that they read books and watch English movies. Although it may seem unexpected, the least used strategy by the students was speaking in English. Further, it is significant to mention that the learning environment may have affected the choice and the quantity of strategies learners employed. Since the senior high school students are housed at the municipality's central school, it is not unlikely that they experience difficulties. Teachers may have found problems in designing and managing the language instruction. The lack of necessary materials and resources suitable to their level might be adding to the challenge of developing their language skills.

3.2 Relationship between learning strategies and English Proficiency

Table 5 provides the results of Chi-Square test for independence, showing the p=value of 0.505, which is greater than the alpha (0.05). Since the value is greater than the alpha, Chi-Square test for independence shows that there is no significant relationship between learning strategies and language proficiency.

Table 5. Results of Chi-square test

	Value	df	Significance
Pearson Chi-square	19.255[a]	20	0.505

Both the current study and Vidal's (2002) study have atypical results and hence, differ from the previous correlation studies that consistently confirm the significant relationship between the variables (Cabaysa & Baetiong, 2010; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Radwan, 2011; Zhao, 2009 to name a few). Test items may have varying levels of difficulty, or too difficult or too easy in general. Because it was a teacher-made test, reliability and validity were not established. The lack of appropriate standardized English proficiency test that can provide accurate measure of language proficiency may have affected the results. In the studies done in the previous years, language proficiency was based on TOEFL, placement test, achievement test, and student's GPA (Radwan, 2011).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Generally, Grade 12 students were categorized under "approaching proficiency" level. A few explanations can be offered in relation to this finding, such as: difficulty of test items, students' inadequate preparation for the test, and mismatch between the level of difficulty of the test and the quality of instruction. Thus, in this case, the test score cannot be considered as reliable and valid data to be used as a sole basis for English proficiency.

There is an awareness among senior high school students of the importance of choosing the learning strategies that best meet the demands of the language task at hand. Their choice of metacognitive strategies suggests that they tend to be more intrinsically motivated to plan, direct, manage, and maximize their own learning. With high frequency of

use of metacognitive strategies followed by the social strategies and affective strategies, it implies that the students favor the use of indirect strategies rather than direct strategies. However, it is also important to stress the fact that, although the metacognitive strategies emerged as the dominant strategies, the mean ratings show that there are minor differences in the decimal points and they appear nearly or almost identical to one another; thus, this result can provide another perspective, which should be taken with great caution.

Using a teacher-made test may have influenced the absence of a relationship between the two variables since the reliability and validity of the test were not established. Hence, the lack of appropriate standardized tool to accurately assess the English proficiency of Filipino senior high school students appears to be a constraint. It may be imperative to develop a standardized language proficiency test to accurately measure the English proficiency of senior high school students. Likewise, to provide a clearer description of an effective and successful learner, SILL should be utilized along with other instruments such as think-aloud protocols, diaries, interview, observation among others.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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