

Strategies for Successful Learning in an English-speaking Environment: Insights from a Case Study

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This paper firstly defines language learning strategies and briefly reviews the literature on the relationship between strategies and success in language learning. It then describes a study involving two language learners studying at the same language school in Auckland, New Zealand and living in the same homestay, an accommodation arrangement involving placing international students with local families. The two students in this study were both females from East Asia who had come to New Zealand to study in an English-speaking environment. Meg, who was 26 years old, wanted to learn English to prepare herself for her new job, and Kay, who was 19, wanted to learn English to go on to university. They arrived in New Zealand to start their courses at the same time, and were initially placed at the same level (Elementary). It soon became clear, however, that Meg was making much faster progress with her language learning than Kay. This paper looks at a range of variables which might have affected the progress of these two students. A number of strategies are identified which Meg was observed to use frequently and effectively, and suggestions are made regarding the implications of these findings for successful language teaching and learning.

As English has continued to expand its influence as an international medium of communication, the demand for English, especially in order to achieve access to education and to conduct business, has become steadily

more urgent. One potential means of expediting the learning process is to spend time in an English-speaking environment. Students and their families often invest large sums of money in a study-abroad experience, as a result of which, expectations are often high. If they are to maximize the return on such an investment, students may need to adapt familiar strategies and be willing to adopt strategies more appropriate for the new learning situation, which is a “key determinant of frequency and type of strategy use” (Zhenhui, 2005, p. 115). This study looked at the language learning strategies of two students studying English in New Zealand, one of whom was considerably more successful than the other in terms of progress through the levels of their school.

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DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Since Rubin (1975) first brought the language learning strategy concept to a wide audience, controversy has raged, and a definition has proven “elusive” (Wenden, 1987, p. 7). An examination of the literature over the last 30 years suggests that there are several essential components. Firstly, language learning strategies are what students do (Rubin, 1975), suggesting an active dimension which distinguishes strategies from styles (which are the ways students prefer to learn). However, as Dornyei and Skehan (2003) point out, Oxford’s (1990, p. 8) use of the term “actions” in her strategy definition does not take account of the reality that many strategies are mental processes. Although strategies such as thinking, visualising or noticing, are what students do, they are not exactly actions in the same way as strategies such as reading, writing or asking questions. The term ‘activities,’ however, can be used to include both physical and mental activity.

Bialystok (1978), Oxford (1990, 2001), Cohen (1998) and Macaro (2004), among others, argue for the inclusion of the dimension of consciousness in a definition of language learning strategies. Although Wenden (1991) believes that strategies may be deployed automatically, this is not precisely the same

thing as saying that deployment is not conscious, in the same way as much of our driving behaviour, although automatic (in that, due to practice, we do not need to deliberately decide each action), is neither sub-conscious nor unconscious. Cohen (1998, p. 4) suggests that “the element of consciousness is what distinguishes *strategies* from those processes that are not strategic” (author’s italics), and he argues that learners who use learning strategies must be at least partially conscious of them even if they are not attending to them fully.

In her model of second language learning, Bialystok (1978, p. 71) described language learning strategies as “optional means for exploiting available information to improve competence in a second language”. It would seem self-evident that strategies are chosen by learners, since it would, in any practical sense, be impossible to force them to employ strategies against their will. Strategy choice will depend on a variety of factors, both contextual (such as learning situation or task requirements) and individual (such as motivation, style, age, gender, nationality/ethnicity/culture, personality, beliefs, anxiety, proficiency and so on).

According to a number of writers and researchers (for instance Chamot, 2001; Cohen, 2003; Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2001; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986) strategic behaviour implies goal-oriented, purposeful activity on the part of the learner, and the specification of a goal or intention is listed by Macaro (2004) among his 14 identifying features of strategies. In the case of language learning strategies, the purpose is to learn language.

Learners use strategies to regulate or control their learning. According to Dornyei and Skehan (2003), self-regulation refers to the degree to which individuals participate actively in their own learning. Wenden (1991) defines language learning strategies as operations used to regulate language learning efforts, and Winne (1995) also includes strategies as one of the means used by learners to regulate their own learning.

Language learning strategies are for learning, a goal which distinguishes learning strategies from skills, a concept with which they are often confused. Skills, according to Richards, Platt and Platt (1992), relate to the manner in

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which language is used; in other words, strategies are used to learn, while skills are employed to use what has been learnt. The learning goal also distinguishes language learning strategies from other types of strategies, especially communication strategies, whose basic purpose is to maintain communication. Although the distinction between learning strategies and other types of strategies is not always so clear in practice (Tarone, 1981), on a theoretical level, communication strategies are intended to maintain communication, whereas language learning strategies are for learning.

If the six elements identified above are combined, a definition of language learning strategies emerges as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTO EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Rubin (1975) emphasised the need for ongoing research into the strategies used by successful language learners, and over the years there has been a great deal of investigation into a variety of aspects of language learning strategy use. Filmore (1982), for instance, discovered that good language learners were very interactive and that they “spent more time than they should have during class time socialising and minding everyone else’s business.....they were constantly involved in the affairs of their classmates” (p. 163). O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) discovered that, although students at all levels reported the use of an extensive variety of learning strategies, higher level students reported greater use of metacognitive strategies (that is strategies used by students to manage their own learning), leading the researchers to conclude that the more successful students are probably able to exercise greater metacognitive control over their learning. Bialystok (1981) and Huang and Van Naerssen (1987), however, concluded that it was strategies related to functional practice that were associated with proficiency, while Ehrman and Oxford

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(1995) found that cognitive strategies such as looking for patterns and reading for pleasure in the target language were the ones used by successful students in their study.

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies which identified one or other type of strategy as being more responsible than others for success in language learning, Green and Oxford (1995) discovered that higher level students reported using language learning strategies of all kinds more frequently than lower level students. Likewise Griffiths (2003b), using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (Oxford, 1990), also found that, on average, higher level students reported more frequent use of a larger number of language learning strategies than lower level learners. Although the importance of quantity has been questioned as a factor in effective language learning strategy use (for instance Vann & Abraham, 1990), the results obtained by Green and Oxford (1995) and by Griffiths (2003b) suggest that, overall, more is generally better when it comes to language learning strategy use, although strategy type may also be a factor when considering the relationship between language learning strategies and success in language learning (for further discussion of this issue see Griffiths, 2003a).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Rubin (1975) emphasized the need for ongoing research to “enhance our insights” (p. 48). Although there has been a considerable amount of research in the years since this was written, there are still many unanswered questions. Many of the studies have surveyed relatively large numbers of students in an academic environment (for instance Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003b; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993), which has produced interesting data on overall language learning strategy use in these kinds of situations. Fewer studies, however, have focused on language learning strategy use by individuals, and even fewer have looked at language learning strategy use by individuals in a

homestay situation, as in the study reported in this article.

Setting

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The current study reports on an investigation into the language learning strategy use and the progress in language learning of two international students of English in a homestay situation in Auckland, New Zealand. The term “homestay” refers to an arrangement according to which students from overseas board with local families during their studies. This kind of living arrangement is often recommended because it is believed that it maximizes students’ exposure to the target language, thereby optimizing the chances of language learning success. Although there is relatively little published research on homestay issues and the effect on language learning, Tanaka (1997) found that the students in his study reported finding their homestay experience the most useful influence on their language learning. Wilkinson (1998), however, reported that by no means all homestay experiences are so positive.

Participants

The participants in the current study were two female students from Eastern Asia, studying at the same English language school in New Zealand, and living in the same homestay. Meg (not her real name), aged 26, and Kay (also not her real name), aged 19 started their English course at the same time. Meg had studied English for six years at school before working for several years and then attending lessons for ten months with a private tutor before coming to New Zealand. She wanted to improve her English so that she could function more effectively in her chosen line of work. Kay had studied English for three years at school and then came to New Zealand to learn English in order to study at University in an area which had not yet been decided.

On the first day at their language school they were tested and both were

put into the Elementary class. However, although they arrived at the same time and started at the same level, it soon became evident that Meg was the better learner. After the monthly test, Meg was promoted to Pre-intermediate while Kay remained in the Elementary class. Meg and Kay were at the homestay for ten weeks, by the end of which time Meg was ready to progress to Intermediate level, but Kay was still struggling in Elementary.

Research Question

There are several possible factors which might help to explain Meg's faster progress through the levels of the school compared with Kay. Even though both Meg and Kay tested at Elementary level on arrival, it is possible that Meg's longer period of studying English might have prepared her better to progress in an English speaking environment, at which point she might have been expected to be able to re-activate a larger pool of stored knowledge. It is also possible that, being older, Meg had the extra maturity to cope with the demands of language learning in an alien environment, although, on the other hand, since younger students are generally believed to be better language learners than older students (for instance, Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003), Kay might have been expected to have the advantage here. Perhaps, also, clear motivation might have provided Meg with an impetus to succeed which was missing from Kay's amorphous goals.

Another possible explanation of the unequal progress made by these two students might lie in the language learning strategies they used. It is this possibility which the current study aimed to explore, by addressing the question:

- Were there any differences in language learning strategy use by the two participants which might help to explain the differences in their rates of progress through the class levels of their school?

Data Collection

삭제됨: -----페이지 나누기-----

The importance of using methodological triangulation in order to obtain reliable research results has been stressed by a number of writers, such as Chaudron (1986), Gu, Wen and Wu (1995) and Vann and Abraham (1990). For this reason, the study reported in this article used observation, a questionnaire and informal interviews in order to collect data on a seldom researched source of insights into language learning strategy use: the homestay situation.

The homestay mother (the author, an English teacher at another school) became interested in the differences between the two learners and decided to attempt to document some of the factors which might help to explain their unequal progress. Enlightening incidents were noted as they occurred, although this was done inconspicuously so as not to compromise the “mothering” relationship which the homestay relationship assumed. For this reason, none of the encounters was tape recorded, since this would be most unnatural in a home environment and might risk altering natural behaviour, an effect which Vann and Abraham (1990) acknowledge in their study.

Towards the end of the 10-week period, the students were given a strategy questionnaire. When they returned it, an informal interview was conducted, using the responses on the questionnaire as prompts and seeking further details especially regarding strategy items reportedly used either very frequently (rating=5) or very infrequently (rating=1). Since questionnaires and interviews, however informal, are not entirely a normal part of a homestay relationship, this stage of data collection was left until towards the end of the students’ stay in order to minimize the effects of any possible awkwardness or reluctance by the students. In fact, Meg and Kay were quite happy to complete the questionnaire and be interviewed.

Instrument

The questionnaire used for this study was the English Language Learning

Strategy Inventory (ELLSI) created by Griffiths (2003b) for Part 3 of her study. The ELLSI consists of 32 strategy items, and was chosen for the present study mainly because of its relative brevity: by comparison, the shortest version of the SILL (Oxford, 1990) has 50 items. The ELLSI was constructed using student input regarding the language learning strategies they reported using, such as “Writing letters in English” (Item 10) or “Pre-planning language learning encounters” (Item 21). Respondents are asked to rate these items from 5 (always or almost always) to 1 (never or almost never) in terms of how frequently they use the particular item. The ELLSI was used to add a quantitative dimension to the qualitative data obtained from the observations, and to provide a starting point for further probing by means of interviews. The ELLSI strategy statements can be seen in Table 1.

Data Analysis

At the end of the ten weeks, the observation notes were reviewed in order to identify the strategies the two students had used, and to look for patterns which might help to suggest reasons why one had progressed through the levels of the school so much more quickly than the other. Frequencies of use reported by the two students in their responses to the questionnaire were compared, and comments made during the interviews were related to the observation and questionnaire data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Observations

As is typical of this type of qualitative research, the notes which resulted from the observations were bulky and jumbled. Nevertheless, a review of the notes taken over the ten weeks that Meg and Kay spent in their homestay environment suggested that the strategies used (or not) by these two learners

fell into two main groups:

- (a) Strategies specifically for learning language
- (b) General learning and self management strategies (not necessarily only language but affecting the learning of language as much as the learning of anything else).

If we look first at the strategies aimed specifically at language learning, it is immediately obvious that Meg and Kay used many of the same strategies, a phenomenon noted also by Abraham and Vann (1987) and Vann and Abraham (1990). They both did homework regularly, for instance, and they both watched movies on TV. They both also made frequent use of a dictionary, kept a language learning notebook, and repeated language items to themselves in order to assist memorisation.

This study, however, is primarily concerned with the differences between these two learners, one of whom made noticeably faster progress than the other. From the mass of notes, behaviours which seemed to relate to particular types of language learning strategies were grouped. From this procedure, seven broad language learning strategy types emerged which Meg was observed to use conspicuously more frequently and consistently than Kay:

1. Meg listened carefully. Krashen (1985) was among the first to emphasise the importance of language input for language acquisition, and Meg used her listening skills as a strategy to obtain language input. She listened consciously to as much English as she could: radio, tapes of English songs, TV and she went to movies with her friends. She went on outings so that she was exposed to English, and, when she encountered language she did not understand, deployed strategies such as checking a dictionary or asking questions to make sense of the incomprehensible input (like the occasion when she asked what the bus driver meant when he yelled “Bloody great weather, eh, mate?” from his window to the driver of another bus. Since it was actually “raining cats and dogs” at the time of the driver’s comment - a phrase she had learnt at school - the triple elements of taboo language, sarcasm and idiom made for an

interesting “mini lesson”). Meg would often practise pronunciation by repeating language she had heard to herself, and she often wrote down what she had heard so that she could revise it later.

Compared with Meg (who used listening consciously as a strategy to improve her English), Kay was difficult to communicate with because she did not listen. Although she would watch movies on TV because she enjoyed them, she avoided all other forms of aural input, including conversation. Instead of listening and working at a message the way Meg would do, and learning from the exchange, Kay’s standard response was “I no understand. My English very poor”. This unwillingness to work at semantic negotiation and to use strategies to learn from what she heard often led to rather strained exchanges in the home and resulted in communication being reduced to an essential minimum in order to avoid awkwardness, thereby limiting potentially valuable language input.

2. Meg read widely. Reading is another source of language input, and the use of reading skills as a strategy for learning language was discovered by Griffiths (2003a, 2003b) to be typical of higher level learners. Meg would spend as much time as she could spare from homework reading newspapers and magazines. She would also invest time deciphering written material such as travel brochures, and ask questions or check her dictionary when she could not work out the meaning from context or be certain of pronunciation. Even the labels on household products were often treated as a source of useful vocabulary. She brought home graded readers from the library at her language school and would at times get quite excited about the stories she read (such as “Romeo and Juliet”), which developed her cultural as well as her linguistic knowledge.

By contrast, Kay would, perhaps, read the gossip about the movie stars in the magazines (consisting mainly of pictures) and she might, possibly, check the newspaper for the night’s movies on TV, but otherwise, she rarely bothered to even attempt to utilize these readily available sources of language input. Although she, also, often took books out of the school library (it was school policy for the students to do so), they were as often as not returned unread.

3. Meg attended to form. Although for some time the importance of language form (or grammar) was somewhat downplayed in favour of

communicative quality, more recently there has been a rediscovery of the importance of grammar and of the need for speakers of other languages to understand the systems of the new language (Gass, 1991). Rubin (1975) includes a willingness to attend to form in addition to focusing on communication among the strategies used by good language learners, and Naiman, Frolich, Stern and Todesco (1978) also stress the importance of attention to language systems.

Meg was very conscious of the need to be grammatically correct. "Should I say 'My friend and I' or 'My friend and me'?" she asked on one occasion. And, when that question was answered: "Should I say 'I or me and my friend' or 'My friend and I or me'?" By comparison, Kay paid scant attention to correct language use and frequently repeated the same errors time after time (for instance, repeatedly referring to Meg as "he" with little or no apparent attention to appropriate form).

4. Meg attended to and learned from error correction. Although the usefulness of correcting student's errors has been questioned (for instance Truscott, 1996), Meg was always quick to notice correction and to amend her language output accordingly. She also monitored her own language output and frequently self-corrected if she found herself producing incorrect language. Two somewhat similar incidents might serve as examples of the differences in Meg's and Kay's treatment of errors and correction.

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One evening as they were preparing to have dinner, Meg mentioned a class activity where she was required to clap her hands. Only the "I" in "clap" sounded like an "r." When informed that the word thus formed is very impolite in English, Meg checked it in a dictionary of slang. She was horrified to discover what she had inadvertently been saying, and practised the correct pronunciation at intervals during the meal, seeking confirmation that she was now saying it in a manner appropriate for a polite family dinner!!

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A similar error occurred when Kay wanted a clean sheet for her bed, though she did not know the appropriate vocabulary. When supplied with the word in addition to the item, Kay repeated it. Only, she replaced the long "ee" sound with a short "i" sound as in "ship," again producing a word not universally considered suitable for polite company in English. However, even after several attempts to get Kay to listen to and to repeat the word correctly, she failed to amend her pronunciation,

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or even, apparently, to notice that an attempt was being made to correct her. She finally went off downstairs to her room repeating the offending word to herself, presumably a strategy aimed at remembering it!!

5. Meg worked consciously to expand her vocabulary. For some years, emphasis on vocabulary was somewhat unfashionable, although there has more recently been a renewed interest in the contribution made by vocabulary to academic success (Nation, 1990). Meg was very aware of the need to extend her vocabulary, and frequently asked for words she did not know, as in the following exchange:

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MEG: "I want to buy some bread" (holding her hands in the size of a loaf)

HOMESTAY MOTHER: "Loaf"

MEG: "Ah, thank you: Loaf" (repeating several times). "How do you spell it?"

HOMESTAY MOTHER: "L-O-A-F"

MEG: "L-O-A-F" (writing it several times on her forearm with her finger in order to remember it).

Kay rarely used these strategies, except when she needed vocabulary for basic communicative purposes, as in the "sheet" incident mentioned previously. Even then she often spoilt what might otherwise have been a useful strategy (such as repetition to aid memorization) by failing to apply appropriate complementary strategies (such as listening carefully to pronunciation and attending to correction).

6. Meg asked perceptive questions in order to expand her linguistic knowledge. On one occasion, prior to catching a bus Downtown:

MEG: "I will meet my friend at 30 past 1"

HOMESTAY MOTHER: "At 1:30?"

MEG: "Yes, 1:30" (picking up the correction). "How about half past one? Is that correct?"

HOMESTAY MOTHER: "That is also correct. You can say either."

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By comparison, Kay almost never asked anything but the most routine

questions unrelated to language. Even these often contained errors: “When is Meg he come to home?” and more often than not she failed to recognize or understand attempts to correct her.

7. Meg manipulated her situation to maximize her exposure to the target language. Meg deliberately chose homestay accommodation during her ten week English course so that she would be able to practise what she learnt in class. While she was studying she avoided others of her own nationality as much as possible and chose to go on outings and trips with friends who did not speak her own language. During the week she would go to a movie at least once to provide extra language input. During the weekends, she would go out at least once a day, perhaps taking a bus downtown or to the local shopping centre to gain exposure to the language she was trying to learn. At the end of her language course, she moved on to a work experience situation in another city.

Kay, although she spent ten weeks in a homestay situation, socialized with others who spoke her own language at school. In the evenings, she would spend a lot of time speaking to her friends on the phone in her own language. On the weekends, she would insist that “I must to study” and turn down invitations for outings. At the end of her ten week homestay period, although she was continuing at the language school, she left the homestay and went flatting with friends of her own nationality.

In addition to differences in strategies aimed specifically at learning language, there were other noticeable differences between Meg and Kay which related to them more as learners in general rather than as language learners in particular. Analysis of the observation data suggested the following generalizations:

1. Meg organized herself so that she was able to concentrate on her learning. For instance, Meg would get up in the morning in sufficient time to organize herself to leave the house and catch the bus to school in a composed and orderly manner, minimizing anxiety and enabling her to focus her attention on her studies. Kay, on the other hand, would get out of bed at the last moment, rush up the stairs and dash off for the bus for which she was often late, and, therefore, late for school, resulting in her

having to join lessons after they had started and try to catch up. In the rush, things like her homework would be left behind, creating extra problems for a student already struggling.

Part of Kay's problems as noted above was that she did not organize her sleep routines. The light would often still be on in her room until the early hours of the morning, because "I must to study". But then, of course, she would be unable to wake up on time in the morning. By the time she got home after school she would often be so tired she would immediately fall asleep in her room, waking up in time to eat a cold dinner and repeat the whole self-defeating cycle. Meg, on the other hand, was almost always in bed before midnight so that she avoided getting too tired to be able to study effectively.

2. Meg consciously employed strategies to maintain her own interest and motivation. Meg worked hard at her studies, but, like most students, sometimes found it hard to cope with the tedium involved. She therefore deliberately went to movies with her friends to break the boredom and sometimes she went to restaurants or on trips with them. Sometimes, even, when coping in an alien language got too stressful, she would break her own usual rules and join friends with whom she could speak in her own language.

Kay, however, as discussed previously, did not appear to have a particularly specific motivation for studying in the first place. She showed no sign of using strategies such as outings or trips to lift her interest and she spoke her own language to friends routinely instead of just occasionally to relieve stress as Meg did.

The Questionnaire

When the average ratings given by Meg and Kay to the items in the questionnaire were calculated, the results proved to accord with what might have been predicted from Griffiths's (2003b) results: the more successful learner (Meg) reported using language learning strategies considerably more frequently (average=3.6, defined by Oxford, 1990, as high frequency) than the less successful learner (Kay, average=2.9, or medium frequency).

TABLE 1
Responses by Meg and Kay to the Strategy Items of
the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory or ELLSI (Griffiths, 2003b)
on a Scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always)

ELLSI	Meg	Kay	Statement
1	5	5	Doing homework
2	4	3	Learning from the teacher
3	4	4	Learning in an environment where the language is spoken
4	3	3	Reading books in English
5	3	4	Using a computer
6	5	5	Watching TV in English
7	3	3	Revising regularly
8	5	3	Listening to songs in English
9	2	4	Using language learning games
10	3	1	Writing letters in English
11	3	2	Listening to music while studying
12	5	3	Talking to other students in English
13	5	4	Using a dictionary
14	3	2	Reading newspapers in English
15	4	2	Studying English grammar
16	4	2	Consciously learning new vocabulary
17	4	4	Keeping a language learning notebook
18	4	2	Talking to native speakers of English
19	3	2	Noting language used in the environment
20	2	2	Controlling schedules so that English study is done
21	3	2	Pre-planning language-learning encounters
22	4	3	Not worrying about mistakes
23	3	4	Using a self-study centre
24	4	4	Trying to think in English
25	4	3	Listening to native speakers of English
26	4	3	Learning from mistakes
27	4	4	Spending a lot of time studying English
28	1	2	Making friends with native speakers
29	4	4	Watching movies in English
30	3	3	Learning about the culture of English speakers
31	3	1	Listening to the radio in English
32	4	2	Writing a diary in English
	3.6	2.9	Average reported frequency over all items

Whereas Kay gave only two items a rating of 5 (Items 1 and 6), Meg gave the maximum rating to five items (Items 1, 6, 8, 12, 13). Conversely, whereas Kay gave a rating of 1 to two items (Items 10 and 31), Meg gave this low rating to only one item (Item 28). Although with only two participants, numbers are not sufficient to obtain any statistically significant results, these findings add further weight to the “more is better” argument discussed previously. The questionnaire results can be seen in Table 1 along with the strategy statements.

The Interviews

Although the interviews with Meg and Kay did not add greatly to the insights already obtained from the observation and the questionnaires, a few points were made which are, perhaps, worthy of note.

Meg gave a rating of 5 to Item 12 (“Talking to other students in English”), explaining that she believed she needed to practise communicating in English so that she could become confident and fluent. She also gave a rating of 5 to Item 1 (“Doing homework”), since she found she needed to balance communicative activities with formal study in order to remember what she had learnt, especially vocabulary and grammar. She used available resources, especially TV and songs, since she enjoyed them, and enjoyment, she explained, was necessary to maintain motivation. The dictionary which she reported using “always or almost always” was an English/English dictionary, although, she said, she would use her electronic dictionary at times because it was quicker. Meg explained that she gave a rating of 1 to Item 28 because, although a good idea in theory, making friends with native speakers was, in fact, very difficult, since students like herself had little contact with native speakers beyond fairly superficial encounters (for instance with the bus driver or the shop keeper).

Although, like Meg, Kay gave a rating of 5 to Item 1 (“Doing homework”), she did not balance this traditional learning strategy with frequently talking to other students in English, as Meg did. And although she frequently watched

TV (especially movies) because she enjoyed them, other sources of input (such as radio) were “too difficult.” Also too difficult was writing letters in English, which Kay reported using “never or almost never.”

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LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Perhaps the main limitation of the current study relates to the manner of data collection. The nature of the homestay relationship made it difficult to establish a rigorous research methodology in this environment. Given the nature of the homestay situation, where students pay to be cared for rather than to be used as research opportunities, it is probably not possible to eliminate this difficulty altogether. The unpredictable nature of the homestay experience also makes for difficulties with planning. Hosts rarely know what level their incoming students will be at, what kind of progress they will make, or how long they will stay. Opportunities such as the one in the present study, where, except for their progress, there were two students who were in so many ways so similar (time of arrival, length of course, starting level) do not occur often, and need to be seized and exploited when available. Nevertheless, hindsight suggests several possibilities for strengthening the methodology.

Firstly, it would be preferable to have more than one observer, perhaps another member of the family, so that some kind of inter-observer reliability might be established. In addition to strengthening reliability, a second observer might also be able to contribute extra insights which a sole observer might miss. The availability of dual observers, however, obviously depends on household structure, and may not always be possible.

The second main suggestion for methodological reinforcement relates to the possibility of involving the students themselves more in the research process, especially towards the end when the bulk of the observations have been carried out, rendering the potential for behavioural distortion as a result of the research procedures less problematic. As has already been explained, it

was feared that asking Meg and Kay to complete questionnaires and be interviewed might create awkwardness and embarrassment. In the event, however, this was not a problem at all: they were, in fact, keen to co-operate. Comments from them on some of the observation data, especially if these comments had been taped, could have provided useful supporting evidence, a potential which was not recognised until too late in the case of the present study. Although it is possible that not all homestay students may be as obliging as these two, I would like to recommend that future studies seriously consider using researchee input as a means of augmenting reliability

CONCLUSION

When Rubin (1975) published her article on the strategies used by good language learners, she probably did not expect that she would start a controversy which would still be unresolved more than 30 years later. The current article has attempted to draw the threads of consensus together to suggest a long overdue definition of language learning strategies as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning. According to this definition, language learning strategies are active: they are what learners DO. They are selected consciously (though this selection may be quite automatic and not requiring deliberate effort, especially by expert learners) in order to manage the achievement of a language learning goal.

A considerable amount of research into language learning strategies has been carried out over the years, but few studies have used the homestay situation to explore language learning strategy use. Using observation, questionnaires and interviews to seek insights which might contribute to an explanation of why some learners are more successful than others, it was discovered that the more successful learner (Meg) used language learning strategies (as defined above) more frequently than the less successful learner (Kay). In particular, Meg was observed to use strategies relating to listening,

reading, attending to form, attending to error correction, expanding vocabulary, questioning, and maximizing language exposure, as well as more general strategies aimed at organizing herself and maintaining motivation much more frequently than Kay. Although with only two participants, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from these results, the findings of this study accord with the findings of previous studies (for instance Green and Oxford, 1995; Griffiths 2003a, 2003b): that more successful students frequently use a wide range of language learning strategies. Further research to see if these results are replicated with more participants in a range of situations would be very useful.

The strategy groups identified above are all very broad and able to be broken down into much more precise units of behaviour, some of which are identified under the appropriate headings in this article. For instance, radio, tapes, TV, movies, conversation are included under listening strategies, and each of these could in turn be further sub-divided and described in more detail. Although space does not permit further analysis of these strategy items within the current article, more precise description of the activities which emerge from this study as typical of a good language learner would be a useful direction for future research.

For teachers, the results of this study suggest that it may be useful to raise students' awareness of language learning strategy use and of the options which may be available to them. This might be done explicitly (by, for instance, setting up group discussions on topics related to strategies in class) or implicitly (for instance by modelling useful strategies or by taking an interest in students' reading and out-of-class activities). Teachers might like to pay special attention to the types of strategies used by the more successful learner in this study as a basis for suggestions to their own students. Although, realistically, it would probably be unreasonable to suggest that teaching techniques such as discussion, modelling and encouragement of key strategies will turn every Kay into a Meg, such techniques may have the potential to provide benefits for students by suggesting and reinforcing language learning strategies with which they may not be familiar and which

they might not otherwise have thought of using.

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