Case Study of a French L2 Learner: Learning Strategies

Andy Vajirasarn

Introduction

Traditionally, when people think of learning a new language, they consider linguistic content they want to know (verbs, nouns, useful expressions, sentence structure, etc.) and practical tasks they would eventually like to do using that language (request information, give an opinion, understand a news broadcast.) Why is it that some learners seem to be more successful than others? One place to investigate would be to look at their learning processes. What happens when these learners encounter difficulties along the way? Do they use any techniques or strategies? According to Ellis' (1994) summary of the learning strategy literature, one characteristic of language learning strategies is that they are "deployed to overcome a problem" (p. 532).

This study reports on the case of one language learner in particular in order to ascertain 1) what language learning strategies, if any, are being used for overcoming a particular problem. 2) whether the learner's strategies use matches the profile of a "good language learner."

Literature Review

Defining Language Learning Strategies

Ellis (1994) has done a review of the literature and has neatly summarized the various definitions of what learning strategies are according to various researchers. This table is reproduced below:

Table 1. Definitions of learning strategies

Source	Definition
Stern 1983	'In our view strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behavior.'
Weinstein and Mayer 1986	'Learning strategies are the behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learners' encoding process.'
Chamot 1987	'Learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information.'
Rubin 1987	'Learning strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect s learning directly.'
Oxford	'Language learning strategies are behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable.'

Source: Ellis, 1994, p. 531.

As one can see, researchers have not exactly come to agree on a precise technical definition for what a learning strategy is. However, the definitions offered above do help to establish the concept. Ellis (ibid, 532–533) attempts to synthesize the main characteristics of what language learning strategies are considered to be in the following list:

1. Learning strategies are general approaches and specific actions.
2. Learning strategies are deployed to overcome a problem.
3. Language learners are generally aware of strategies.
4. Strategies have linguistic and non-linguistic behavior.
5. Strategies are used in L1 as well as L2.
6. There are behavioral and mental strategies.
7. Strategies make indirect and direct contributions to L2 learning.

8. Strategies will vary with the situation and the learner.

These are all key points that have surfaced when describing language learning strategies. In the studies of "good language leaners", most of the characteristics above are exhibited in the strategies used by learners. These instances have been, for the most part, reported to researchers in interviews and questionnaires, or have simply been observed in the classroom. Naiman, Frölich, Stern, and Tedesco (1978) warn that classroom observations may not be the best method for collecting data on learning strategies because of the difficulties they had encountered in their study.

Perhaps their recommendation is what spurred the development of questionnaires such as Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which aims to capture learning strategies in use. Oxford's taxonomy on language learning strategies divides them into two sets, direct and indirect strategies. Within the direct category we find memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. In the indirect group we find metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. In one recent study by Wharton (2000), the SILL was used as the primary source of data collection on learning strategies.

An earlier study by O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper, and Russo (1985) had paved the way for the SILL's development. From student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations a list of strategies and their definitions was produced. A framework of strategies was proposed into three different categories: Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social/Affective Strategies. Examples of metacognitive strategies are advanced preparation, self-monitoring, deciding in advance what to pay attention to. Cognitive strategies would include "traditional" behaviors like repetition, translation, note taking, inferencing, etc. Social /affective strategies would include cooperation with peers and anxiety management.

*Good Language Learner Studie*s

This section will look at various studies conducted by Rubin (1975), Naiman et al. (1978), Reiss (1983 and 1985), Lenon (1989) in order to identify any common findings. A large-scale study by Wharton (2000) will be introduced at the end.

Rubin (1975) conducted one of the pioneering studies in the area of language learning strategies. From this study, she reported that good language learners use the following seven strategies and techniques:

1. They are willing and accurate guessers.
2. They have a strong motivation to communicate.
3. They are often not inhibited.
4. They are prepared to pay attention to form.
5. They seek opportunities to practice.
6. They monitor their own speech and that of others.
7. They attend to meaning.

Her method in this study was observation, and she stresses the importance of using a video camera to capture the moment, and then review the learners "in action". Naiman et al. (1978) studied 34 graduate L2 learners, many of whom were multi-lingual to begin with. They used an interview questionnaire for this group, and they were able to identify general strategies used. They include:

1. Active task approach
2. Realization of language as a system
3. Realization of language as a means of communication and interaction
4. Management of affective demands, and
5. Monitoring L2 performance.

Some common traits can be seen, such as monitoring, which can be synonymous to attention to form. Monitoring is also present in the following study.

In Rubin's (1981) next study, she, like Naiman et al. (1978) had difficulties with classroom observations. However, Rubin was able to observe learner performance on specific language learning tasks, collect data via unstructured self-reports, in addition to data collected with a structured self-report. The following list represents strategies found in this study:

1. clarification/verification
2. monitoring
3. memorizing
4. guessing/inductive reasoning
5. deductive reasoning
6. practice

In these types of studies two general approaches have been followed. One way is to compare successful and unsuccessful language learners, as Reiss (1983) did with college learners of Spanish/German. The other type of approach is to identify successful language learners and then examine what strategies they tend to use most often. Reiss (1985) was able to do such a study, as was Lenon (1989).

In Reiss' (1983) former study, she was able to collect data on two groups of language learners, "A" students and "C/D" students. Her study examined personality variables, cognitive variables, language learning strategy variables (according to Rubin, 1975), and individual learning styles. It seems that this study was an attempt to reinforce Rubin's (1975) work in identifying the seven strategies that good language learners use. The method used was a questionnaire regarding three hypothetical learning situations, and one question openly asking about which strategies the learners find themselves using.

The results were summarized in three major observations: 1) Good language learners are specific in their learning tasks; 2) They constantly look for meaning; and 3) They seem to know themselves and to how to internalize in-

formation.

In Reiss' (1985) latter study, she had the chance to collect data from learners identified by their teachers as good language learners. They were given questionnaire listing 19 strategies and were asked to identify which ones they used most. The results of the long questionnaire given the whole group of college learners showed the rank of strategies they employed:

1. monitoring
2. attending to form
3. attending to meaning
4. guessing
5. practicing
6. accepting ambiguity
7. motivation to communicate
8. lacking inhibition
9. using mnemonics

From the short questionnaire given to the "good" language learner subset, the eight most frequently used strategies were ranked as well as the eight least frequently used strategies. The most frequently used ones are:

1. Listening closely in class and mental answering questions whether called upon or not.
2. Listening to other students in class and mentally correcting their errors.
3. Applying new material mentally while silently speaking to oneself.
4. Looking for opportunities to use the language.
5. Guessing when listening or reading the foreign language.
6. Using the appendix in textbook or another reference.
7. Practicing with a friend or native speaker.
8. Remembering new material by making mental associations in English.

An interesting development here is the inclusion of the non-verbal mental activity during class sessions such as strategies (1) to (3). A similar phenomenon is documented in Ohta's (1999) work on recasts. In this study, students were recorded via personal microphone. Some were found to be answering questions and repeating corrected forms in a low voice to themselves, when they were not being called upon. Reiss' point is that even though a learner is silent, it does not mean that they are not *active*. It is still possible to be an active learner even though they may not be speaking.

Lenon's (1989) study on the good language learner detailed 4 German college students who were living in the UK for the first time. They were considered to be advanced learners of English. Lenon used introspective methods to extract data on their strategies. The methods took two forms, a questionnaire at the beginning of the six-month stay, and a 20-minute interview near the end of their stay.

The results suggest that advanced language learners are very aware of their progress, competence and of the gaps in their knowledge. Knowing that the gaps exist brings an amount of uncertainty into their learning process. This can be overcome by encouraging linguistic experimentation.

Other main points from the interviews are:

- Although advanced, they resorted to listening strategies when they first arrived in the UK, much in the same way that beginning learners do.
- They constantly tried to use expressions and vocabulary they just learned.
- They focused on communication over correctness.
- They applied different strategies under different conditions

Another point that one of the subjects brings up is the value of living in the L2 community. Many advanced language learners may be able to discuss a variety of topics at a high level of proficiency, but until they actually live in

the target language community, seemingly simple mundane activities may actually prove to be quite challenging. For some learners, living in the L2 country is the way to round out their abilities.

Finally, we turn to the study by Wharton (2000) in Singapore. Like Naiman et al.'s (1978) study, these subjects are mostly bilingual, if not multilingual. Unlike most studies where English was either the target language or the native language, the 678 Singaporean university students were studying French or Japanese, and the mother tongue of 93% of the learners was Chinese. Only 2% claimed English as their mother tongue, and another 2% claimed two mother tongues (Chinese and English).

The instrument for this study was Oxford's (1990) SILL. The responses were then analyzed using ANOVA to compare the strategies used against each of the following variables: cultural background, language studied, stage of learning motivation FL vs SL situation, previous language experience, language learning styles, gender, and language background to Singapore.

Statistical analysis shows that there were significant results for motivation, self-rated proficiency, language studied. A chi-square analysis was used to compare gender vs. strategies used. The finding is that in this study, males used more strategies than females, which was contrary to the researcher's expectations. Another chi-square analysis reports that the higher the level of the learner, the more strategies they use. The summary of this study (Wharton, 2000, p. 235) states:

> Consistent with results from similar studies using mainly monolingual participant, this study comprising bilinguals found evidence for a linear relationship between (self-rated) proficiency and the use of many learning strategies, with a pattern of increasing strategy use at progressively higher self-rated proficiency levels. This suggests that more proficient FL learners use many strategies more frequently than less proficient FL

learners, *regardless of setting, culture, or previous language learning* (emphasis added).

The emphasized portion represents quite an interesting claim. This study is quite rich in its many dimensions. Perhaps a future study could focus more on whether or not culture, setting, and previous language learning.

The Subject

Background and Prior Schooling

Nancy (a fictional name) is a 25-year-old American female enrolled in an MBA course in graduate school. Her mother tongue is English, and she has quite a background in foreign language learning. She has studied French, German, and most recently, Chinese. She has studied French for about 10 years, including a French-immersion kindergarten and French courses in high school, college, and graduate school French courses. Regarding time spent in France, she spent five weeks there after the eighth grade and six weeks in the south of France after her first year in college. These were both home-stay situations.

In her second year of college she decided to start learning German because of her German heritage. During the summer in between her second and third year of college, she was able to spend 6 weeks in Austria, again in a home-stay situation. From her junior year until her graduation from college, she continued to take both French and German courses. After graduation, however, she did not speak either language for over a year. Then, she and her father decided to enroll in German classes together at night school.

In pursuing a business degree at her graduate school, where students are required to take a foreign language along with the coursework for their majors, she opted for French over German. Her reasoning was that French is more widely used than German in business. She was quite surprise to be

placed into the "advanced" classes even though she had not spoken French for two years. In her first semester, she felt that she was making tremendous progress. She was confident that her grammar was fine, yet admitted that her pronunciation needed more improvement. Her goal was to graduate with an MBA degree and a specialization certificate in the French language, which calls for 20 units worth of courses in French. Her second semester in graduate school was a more traumatizing experience. This will be covered in more detail later in the section on affective factors. Briefly, she developed low self-esteem mostly due to her professor's negative comments toward her.

As for Chinese, she had taken a nine-week summer intensive course that is said to be the equivalent of one and a half years of regular, non-accelerated study. From the fall, she had also started taking another Chinese language course as the continuation of her summer program.

Self-rating and Interlanguage

Turning now to examine her French language ability, from a background questionnaire (Oxford, 1990 : 282), she indicated her overall French proficiency compared to her classmates as "Good" (on a nominal scale of "excellent, good, fair, poor") and "Fair" in comparison with native speakers of French. (For Chinese she marked "fair" and "poor" respectively.) Regarding Nancy's English-French interlanguage, from the author's observations of Nancy's speaking in French and from direct one-on-one conversations with her, the most noticeable non-native-like feature is her pronunciation. There remains a rather strong American accent if she is not concentrating on pronunciation.

From these observations of her spoken French, being able to listen to and then reproduce individual sounds found in French did not seem to be her difficulty. The most likely cause of her pronunciation difficulties was the tendency to say French words using the rules of English pronunciation. In other

words, when she read French aloud, she did not change the way of saying the words, for example, the word "presentation" sounded more like the American English [prezənteiʃən] rather than the French [prezɑ̃tasjɔ̃].

Social and Psychological Factors

With regard to social factors and psychological distance, despite having a relatively high level of anxiety in her French class in the previous year, she has maintained a positive attitude about her French learning. She perceived that the cause of her anxiety in the previous year was rooted in the way the French teacher treated her. The teacher would openly criticize Nancy in class, and even privately accused her of plagiarizing her writing assignments. The author received permission to make classroom observations, and was able to witness this teacher's conduct first hand.

Positive social factors are enumerated below. She has a number of friends who are native speakers of French from France, Morocco, Tunisia, Canada, and other nations. From time to time she asks their assistance on linguistic, historical, or cultural topics. Also, as mentioned above, she has stayed with French families twice in a home-stay setting. According to Nancy, these two occasions were positive experiences for her and continue to be factors contributing to her motivation to get better at French.

The Setting

As mentioned above, Nancy was pursuing a business degree at an American graduate school with an international focus. At the time of this interview, she was in French class at the 400-level which according to the school catalog is considered to be among the higher-level courses. It was a two-hour class that met twice a week. There are eight other students in her class. Due to the relatively small size of the group, there is much more contact with the professors than at large universities, hence the negative or positive attitude of a

teacher can have a strong impact on students.

The author is affiliated with the school's French teacher-training course, and was asked by Nancy to be her tutor. We met weekly and focused on pronunciation practice. The approach we took was to look at the place and manner of articulation, as well as identifying sounds with their IPA symbols. We also practiced specific sounds with tongue twisters, and other types of listen and repeat drills. I also provided a friendly, low-anxiety learning environment. From a personal communication, she has told me that this helped her regain confidence in her French language studies.

Method

Considering Reiss' (1983) bad experience with video camera recording to observe strategies, the author decided to gather data using other methods. The decision was to collect data from informal personal communications during the tutoring sessions, one structured interview with Nancy, and a questionnaire that she completed on language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). In other words, some data that was quantifiable, results from the SILL, while other data that was in prose, Nancy's personal statements in the interview.

Just before one tutoring session, she filled out the SILL (Oxford, 1990), which included a background questionnaire as well as the learning strategy questions. It is an 80-item questionnaire, divided into six parts A-F. Each item is a statement, and the respondents are to give a rating of 1 to 5 to that statement. 1 means "Never or almost never true of me", while 5 is "always or mostly always true of me.

She was quite fast, and completed the questionnaire within 10 minutes. She mentioned that when she has questionnaires that are asking about her preferences and such, she immediately picks the first choice that comes to her

mind. A glance at her results show that her least frequently used type of strategies are "managing your emotions", and the types she uses most are "compensating for missing knowledge".

After the questionnaire, an interview was conducted regarding her language learning experience, language learning strategies in class, before going to class, and after class. Since her use of "emotional strategies" was low, according to the questionnaire results, I then asked her about what she does, or has been doing, regarding this emotional aspect of language learning. At the end of the interview, we had a short casual conversation in French.

In summary, most of the data collection for learning strategies was the SILL, while data for Nancy's background came from the interview and from my knowledge of her.

Findings and Discussion

From the findings from the interview and from the SILL, we will try to see if Nancy fits the profile of a good language learner. One trait of the good language learner, according to the Wharton (2000) study, is that good learners not only use a lot of strategies, but they use them often. Unfortunately, unlike Wharton, there aren't any data from other subjects to compare with Nancy. However, with the data from the interview and the SILL, there is an account of her own strategies.

If we recall from the discussion above, one of the common traits of good language learners is "they are often, not inhibited" (Rubin 1975). In the interview, Nancy herself said, "So I don't care if I make mistakes 'cause that's the only way how I learn." To me this indicates a risk-taking attitude, which I would venture to call "not inhibited".

Other traits are "prepared to pay attention to form", "monitor their own speech and others", and "attend to meaning" (Rubin, 1975). I think that Nan-

cy exhibits these traits as well, as her following comments will show. When asked about techniques or strategies employed for her French language studies, she says:

> The best way to really, really excel is to listen to other people; to listen to how they pronounce the word; to how they use word in a sentence...and on my own, just think about it, put it in another sentence, and to just speak at home.

When I asked her specifically about in-class techniques she basically says that she also attends to meaning:

> I like to take a lot of notes. Even when there's a lot of words that I don't know, that my peers know, I'll just write that down and later on at night I'll go back and I'll look that up.

Regarding seeking opportunities to practice and having a strong motivation to communicate, she mentioned that she sometimes likes to watch the French news, and that she has also enlisted a tutor to help her with pronunciation. I believe that these coincide with Rubin's (1975) list of traits also.

Next is a review the findings from the SILL that Nancy took. Oxford (1990) defines six major groups of strategies. Below is a table of those six groups of strategies with Nancy's averages:

STRATEGY TYPE	Nancy's average frequency of use (5 is the highest)
Remembering more effectively	3
Using your mental processes	3.16
Compensating for missing knowledge	4.75
Organizing and evaluating your learning	3.5
Managing your emotions	2.2
Learning with others	3.412

As one can see, Nancy's lower rating was in the emotional management area. Out of the seven strategies listed in that section of the SILL (Part E), she marked "5" (most frequent) on only two items, "2" on one item, and "1" on the other four. The two that she marked as "5" are:

"I actively encourage myself to take wise risks in language learning, such as guessing meaning or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes."

"I talk to someone I trust about my attitudes and feelings concerning the language learning process."

The strategies that she does not use at all are the inner–directed strategies. These include: paying attention to her own level of stress, rewarding herself when she accomplishes something, keeping a journal about her feelings on language learning, and giving herself pep-talks. This may be related to her outgoing personality style. If she were less outgoing, she might use the other intrapersonal techniques.

Keeping her history with the unpleasant French teacher from the previous semester in mind, I asked her in the interview about the kinds of things she does regarding emotional management. Her answer is consistent with the strategy of risk-taking mentioned earlier. Apparently, she was tired of feeling anxious and decided to stand her ground in the face of others' remarks:

Author(A): Is there a way you manage your anxiety?

Nancy(N): I feel like I've come a long way with my anxiety of speaking French in public...And honestly at this point, I have the attitude that it really doesn't matter what other people think. I have to do to it for myself. 'cause if I don't, and I keep quiet and I don't say anything, and I always worry what other people are gonna think, that's never... I'm never gonna get over it. So I don't care if I make mistakes 'cause that's the only way, how I learn.

A: How did you come to this decision?

N: I just got, I got frustrated with being frustrated all the time. And it just got to the point where I was like "why?" I'm here to learn this, I'm here to get better. Who cares? And that's just my attitude.

From the review of this data it can concluded that Nancy appears to be a good language learner because several of her own strategies and attitudes match those of the successful language learners identified in the studies discussed above. She attends to form *and* meaning in her own speech as well as in others' speech by listening to classmates and by taking notes in class. She seeks opportunities to practice outside the classroom by watching the news in French and by practicing with a tutor. She takes risks, and does not mind making mistakes. She has decided to take charge of her learning, "If I don't do anything, it's my own fault." Regarding taking responsibility for her learning, she comments, "Nobody else is, I have to."

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine the subject's use of language learning strategies and whether or not the subject matches the profile of a good language learner. The SILL was able to provide data that could be quantified. The results showed her averages for each group of skills. From plotting this information on a graph, one could see there were strengths and weaknesses in her language learning strategies. It is now possible to attempt some strategy training, if she is willing, increase the under-used strategies. We were able to understand that Nancy did indeed use a variety of strategies, and we were able to identify unused strategies that were related with management of emotions.

With a one-on-one situation such as in this case, the interview was a useful method for gathering data. The interview data was much "richer" than the

SILL because she was able to elaborate on topics covered in the SILL by providing clear examples of learning strategies she uses. She also revealed her thoughts about herself as a language learner and personal resolutions she would like to accomplish. One could see from the manner in which she spoke her determination and, at times, her uneasiness as a language learner. From comparing her interview data and SILL data with previous studies of good language learners, the author was able to conclude that Nancy does fit the profile of a good language learner, and thus has the potential to be a successful communicator in French, or her other foreign languages. It would be necessary to monitor Nancy's progress and do an updated study at a future point in time to determine if being a potentially "good language learner" actually leads to being a successful native-like speaker.

As far as implications for further research, Nancy has brought up an interesting point. She "got frustrated with being frustrated". It seems that anxiety which was at one point "debilitating" (Alpert & Haber, 1960), had transformed into something similar to "facilitating anxiety", an impetus to move forward. Could there be some kind of threshold that when passed, transforms debilitating anxiety into facilitating anxiety? Such a study may be an interesting angle for further research.

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