

# Developing Oral Proficiency in German & Learning to Use Language Learning

## Strategies: Parallel Processes

### Abstract

*This study assesses changes in the use of language learning strategies by 18 Irish students of German over the course of their 4-year undergraduate degree. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was used to assess the use of language learning strategies by these 18 students in year 2 and again in year 4.*

*The 18 students were then classified as having “higher” or “lower” levels of proficiency based on their grades in their oral examination in year 2. This procedure was repeated on the basis of the grades attained by these 18 students in their oral examination in year 4. Strategic behaviour was compared for a) those achieving “higher” levels of proficiency in both years, b) those achieving “lower” levels of proficiency in both years, c) “improvers”, i.e. those with “lower” levels of proficiency in year 2 and “higher” levels in year 4, and d) “disimprovers”, i.e. those with “higher” levels of proficiency in year 2 and “lower” levels in year 4.*

*The findings indicate that, in general, as language learners progress, they use more cognitive, metacognitive, social and memory-related strategies. This trend is particularly noticeable among more effective learners.*

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### Introduction

This study analyses changes in the use of language learning strategies by a group of 18 Irish students of German over the course of their undergraduate degree. The extent to which these 18 students used language learning strategies was assessed in the second and final (fourth) year of their degree using the "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" (S.I.L.L.). The S.I.L.L., a strategy questionnaire developed by Rebecca Oxford, is based on her classification of language learning strategies into metacognitive, cognitive, social, affective, memory-related and compensatory strategies (below). It lists eighty strategies (16 metacognitive, 25 cognitive, 9 social, 7 affective, 15 memory-related and 8 compensatory) and requires the subjects to rate, on a scale from one to five, the frequency with which they use each strategy listed. It is one of the most widely used and comprehensive strategy questionnaires currently available.

These students were also grouped according to their results in their oral examinations in years 2 and 4 into "higher" and "lower" proficiency groupings and changes in their use of language learning strategies over time compared for:

- a) those achieving "higher" levels of proficiency in years 2 and 4,
- b) those achieving "lower" levels of proficiency in years 2 and 4,
- c) "improvers", i.e. those achieving "lower" levels of proficiency in year 2 and "higher" levels in year 4, and
- d) "disimprovers", i.e. those achieving "higher" levels of proficiency in year 2 and "lower" levels in year 4.<sup>1</sup>

The paper begins with a review of key concepts and studies in the field of language learning strategies. An empirical study is then described and the results presented and discussed. Finally, limitations of this study and implications for future research are considered.

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<sup>1</sup> The standard required to achieve a "higher" and "lower" classifications in year 4 was, of necessity, higher than that required in year 2 and took into account the fact that these were now final year students (Measurement Instruments).

## **Language Learning Strategies: some key concepts and studies**

Language learning strategies have been defined as "the often-conscious steps or behaviours that learners adopt to help them learn" (Ehrman and Oxford 1990, 311). Various investigations have produced different inventories of the learning strategies employed by "good" or "effective" language learners, with good or effective generally taken to mean those who perform well in tests or examinations or who are rated as such by their teachers. One such classification is that provided by Rebecca Oxford (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, 292; Nyikos and Oxford, 1993, 13). Accepting that it is an impossible task to classify all possible strategies, Oxford's classification is one of the more comprehensive listings. It classifies strategies into six groups depending on whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, memory-related or compensatory strategies: Cognitive strategies involve identifying, retaining, storing and retrieving words, phrases and other elements of the second language. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, allow learners to control their own cognition by co-ordinating the planning, organising and evaluation of the learning process. Social strategies include actions taken to interact with others through the target language while affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes. Memory-related strategies help to commit material to memory and finally compensatory strategies include all of those which help to make up for gaps in knowledge.

Attempts to define and classify language learning strategies have been followed by attempts to identify strategies that appear effective in promoting different aspects of language learning. One set of qualitative studies examines the strategies that "good" language learners report using, while a second, quantitative, set of studies uses statistical techniques to explore the relationships between reported strategy use and language learning outcomes for large numbers of language learners.

In general, the "good" language learner" studies agree that he/she is an "all-rounder" who concentrates on both accuracy and fluency (Ellis, 1994). In addition, several studies indicate that more effective learners use their metacognitive knowledge to monitor their learning process as well as using a wider range of approaches to learning (Chamot, Kupper et al, 1988; Naiman, Frohlich and Todesco, 1975).

Several of these findings are borne out by the quantitative studies. For example, the findings obtained in these studies also stress the importance of metacognitive strategies, particularly self-monitoring (Purpura, 1997) in the achievement of higher levels of proficiency. Indeed, a study conducted on 100 intermediate students of German at Dublin City University (Bruen, 2001) indicated that students who received higher grades in their final oral exam use more metacognitive and cognitive strategies. They also appear to use a repertoire of

ten strategies particularly frequently. Of these, four were metacognitive, the others being drawn from all of the remaining categories in Oxford's classification (above) with the exception of the compensatory strategies.

Many of these studies have been cross-sectional in nature with measurements being taken at a particular point in time. However, it is unlikely that strategy use remains static as learners progress. Therefore, interest is also growing in the findings of longitudinal studies which attempt to trace changes in strategic behaviour over time.

### **Language Learning Strategies: longitudinal studies**

Chamot (1996) conducted one of the earlier longitudinal studies. Her three-year study investigated the learning strategies used by 72 pupils in grades 1 to 4 who were learning French, Spanish or Japanese in an immersion setting. Their teachers rated their proficiency levels while think-aloud interviews and questionnaires were used to assess their use of language learning strategies. Chamot concludes that relatively more proficient pupils at all levels used more meaning-based, "top-down" strategies. Less proficient pupils used more word-based strategies. Older pupils in general also appeared to engage in more monitoring and prediction. They also engaged more in planning, especially organisation and self-management. In general, they were more concerned with planning how to communicate while the younger pupils were more preoccupied with details.

Grenfell and Harris (1998), in their study of the strategies employed by one learner towards the end of her A-level French course, conclude that their learner was moving into the latter stage of a developmental process. In doing so, they support the theory that strategies should be regarded as developmental, early ones being mainly receptive and self-contained and later ones being more interactive and allowing for more reflection and meta-reflection on the language task.

Strategy use may, of course, be dependent not only on the stage of learning or proficiency level but also on individual differences between learners. This is a point stressed by Jennifer Ridley (1997) in her analysis of the learning behaviours, styles and perceptions of four university level *ab initio*<sup>2</sup> learners of German over a 2 year period. All 4 of these students came from the same class group, were interviewed regularly about their language learning and engaged in introspective analysis concerning a range of language production tasks. Ridley concludes that the ways in which these students approach the task of learning German are closely associated with their previous language learning experience and also with their associated conceptions about themselves as

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<sup>2</sup> The term "ab initio" implies that these learners had not studied German prior to entering university.

language learners. In her words (Ridley, 1997, 17, 113), as this “tightly homogeneous learner group” progressed, there was “considerable variability not only in what seem[ed] to be the principal focus of their attention in their learning activities, but also in the extent to which they ha[d] developed the ability to reflect on and regulate their learning and performance behaviour”.

Clearly, there remains a great deal that is not yet understood about language learning strategies. The objective of this particular study is to shed some light on the question of whether general trends can be identified concerning changes in strategic behaviour over time. The potential role of proficiency levels in such changes is also considered.

## **Empirical Study**

### *Research Questions:*

The questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. How do the strategies employed in semester 4 compare with those employed in semester 7?
2. What is the role of proficiency levels in this comparison?

### *Subjects and their Instructional Background:*

18 Irish students aged between 18 and 22 (17 female, 1 male) participated in this experiment. They were all native speakers of English as well as being "intermediate" students, i.e. had studied German at secondary school for five years (2.7 instructional contact hours of German language per week over the course of the secondary school year (9/1-5/30 approx.)) prior to attending university.

They had also completed their first year at university (3 instructional contact hours of German language per week over the course of two 24-week semesters). Of these 3 hours, 1 was devoted to the study of grammar. During the remaining 2, the students engaged with a variety of aural and written material in German. Their oral activities consisted primarily of discussions on the basis of texts, role-plays, pair work and group presentations. These students also completed a language learning diary in which they were encouraged to record their favoured approaches to the study of German. They were encouraged by their lecturers to use as wide a variety of language learning strategies as possible, some of which were demonstrated in class. In their second year, these students were not exposed to explicit strategy training to the same extent. During the first semester of year 2, the emphasis was placed on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary with the semester concluding with a written

assessment. During semester 2 of year 2, the emphasis was placed on oral proficiency and research skills with the students preparing and presenting on a chosen topic in German (Measurement Instruments).

Finally, these students were reading for a BA in either “International Marketing and Languages” (13) or “International Business and Languages” (5) at a university in Dublin. These interdisciplinary degrees, offered jointly by the business and the language faculty at this university, allocate equal importance to language and business subjects. Students in these degree programs take two languages and major in one. The participants in this study all majored in German and therefore spent the third year of their degree studying at a university in a German-speaking country. During this year, they were assessed on the basis of written projects, one in German, and business and language credits, generally obtained on the basis of written exams taken through German. In their fourth and final year in Dublin, they were assessed on the basis of written summaries and commentaries, a translation from German to English and an oral examination (Measurement Instruments).

#### *Measurement Instruments:*

Levels and types of strategic activity were measured using the S.I.L.L. (Introduction, Appendix A) while the participant’s oral proficiency was measured at the end of their second year using a group oral examination and at the end of their fourth year by an individual oral examination<sup>3</sup>. The structure of the oral examinations was as follows: in year two, groups of either three or four students spoke for five minutes each on a different aspect of a topic of their choice (Topics included: "The History of the Volkswagen", "Terrorism in Germany" and "The Impact of German Unification".) They then engaged in a fifteen-minute discussion on the subject with their fellow students, the discussion being facilitated where necessary by their lecturer. In year 4, students were asked to pick a specific topic (e.g. "Der Atomaustieg der deutschen Bundesregierung") and to read as much as possible on the topic in advance. They were then required to hand up an abstract, indicating their sources, a week before the exam. During the exam, the topic in question was discussed for 10 minutes by the student and the two examiners.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important at this point to stress that, language ability cannot be cleanly divided into abilities to read, write, listen and speak. Instead many of the necessary sub-skills and much of the requisite knowledge overlaps and influences performance in all four areas. This is further demonstrated in this study by the significant correlations between the written and oral results in year 2 ( $r=.764$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and year 4 ( $r=.665$ ,  $p=.004$ ) for these 18 students. Thus, the emphasis on oral proficiency in this study is not intended to imply that it is a discrete ability. It is used rather to provide a focus for this research on one increasingly important aspect of language learning.

The criteria for the assessment of performance in the oral examinations are as follows: fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, the idiomatic nature of the language employed, communicative competence and register. In both second and fourth year, linguistic ability is the focus of the assessment. It is assumed that the students will have a good understanding of the content of the material that they have chosen to present/discuss.

In both years, students are allocated a mark from 1-100 in the following categories: 0-39: Fail, 40-54 Pass, 55-62: Second Class Honours Grade 2, 63-69: Second Class Honours Grade 1, 70-100: First Class Honours. These categories approximate to the following descriptors, “weak”, “fair”, “average”, “good”, “excellent”.

To exemplify, a weak second-year student (Fail) does not demonstrate an ability to present and discuss their chosen topic in a comprehensible and reasonably accurate manner. They make a large number of basic grammatical errors (relating, for example, to tenses, cases and word order). In general, their pronunciation is largely influenced by an English pronunciation. Their language is slow and halting and they fail to employ idiomatic language. They display an over-reliance on notes and have difficulty understanding and/or responding to questions put to them. On the other hand, a student receiving an overall pass mark (40-54) is capable of speaking relatively freely on the chosen topic. There are, however, several pauses and the student relies to quite an extent on notes and visual aids. The language is inaccurate with a relatively large number of basic grammatical errors. Generally, pronunciation is adequate to ensure comprehension but several errors occur. The student possesses only the basic vocabulary required to make themselves understood and uses very few, if any idioms. Students in this category do succeed, however, in speaking comprehensibly on their chosen topic and in understanding and responding to questions posed in the ensuing discussion, albeit somewhat inaccurately. Students receiving a 2.2 (second class honours grade 2, percentage range 55-62) demonstrate a higher level of both accuracy and fluency but continue to make errors particularly when speaking freely. Students obtaining a 2.1 (second class honours grade 1, percentage range 63-69) have mastered the ability to speak freely, use more idioms and make fewer errors. Finally, students receiving grades between 70 and 100 are capable of speaking freely on their chosen topic. There are very few hesitations, and notes and visual aids are used only to enhance the presentation and to generate discussion. These students have a wide range of vocabulary and use idiomatic language without apparent difficulty. They are capable of dealing with questions only indirectly related to their chosen topic. They make even fewer grammatical and pronunciation errors.

In order to obtain at least a pass mark of 40, a fourth year student must demonstrate a good basic command of key grammatical aspects of the German language (tenses, genders, cases, word order etc.). They must be capable of communicating fluently enough to allow a conversation to proceed without difficulty, to understand questions posed and respond in a manner that demonstrates understanding, and to have a level of phonetic ability that facilitates comprehension without difficulty. An excellent student (First Class Honours) is capable of discussing complex subjects in a clear, detailed manner, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points, basing their own opinion on well founded arguments and rounding off with appropriate conclusions. They display in particular a high level of fluency, use a more sophisticated and appropriate register, display a high level of grammatical and lexical accuracy, react suitably to questions posed and possess the linguistic ability required to develop their own answers independently.

*Procedure:*

The subjects completed the S.I.L.L. in Weeks 6 and 7 of Semester 2 (March 1998). The questionnaires were completed during class time with respondents being advised in advance that the results would be used solely for research purposes. In weeks 9 and 10 (April 1998) students sat their oral examination. When these students returned to their home university after having spent a year in a German speaking university, they once again completed the S.I.L.L. in week 4 of semester 1 (November 1999). Again, the S.I.L.L. was completed during class time taking approximately twenty minutes. Their oral examination was held at the end of semester 2 (May 2000).

*Experimental Design:*

The data obtained from the questionnaires and the oral examinations was analysed using SPSS for Windows. Descriptive summary statistics were calculated to investigate initial patterns and underlying trends in the oral results and the use of language learning strategies. Initially, this analysis was conducted by year for the group of 18 students.

The 18 students were then categorised according to the proficiency level they achieved in years 2 and 4 and a comparative analysis of their strategic behaviour conducted on the basis of this categorisation. The students were grouped as follows: At the end of year 2, they were classified as having achieved either a “higher”



or a “lower” level of proficiency<sup>4</sup>. In year 4, 4 groups were created. 1) those maintaining a “higher” classification, 2) those maintaining a “lower” classification, 3) “improvers”, i.e. those moving from a “lower” to a “higher” classification and 4) “disimprovers”, i.e. those moving from a “higher” to a “lower” classification.

*Results:*

The descriptive summary statistics for the oral results in years 2 and 4 indicate that there is a smaller range of results and a higher average in year 4 (Table 1).

Table 1. Oral Results

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Year 2	61.72	7.27	43	69
Year 4	65.61	5.01	56	73

Research Question 1:

With regard to the first research question: “How do the strategies employed in semester 4 compare with those employed in semester 7?”, the relevant results are as follows:

Firstly, in terms of the number of language learning strategies employed, students on average reported using them more frequently in the final year of their degree (Table 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Higher levels of proficiency are defined in both years as incorporating the classifications “second class honours – grade 1” and “first class honours” while lower levels of proficiency include “second class honours – grade 2” and “pass” (Measurement Instruments). None of the 18 students involved in this study failed in either years 2 or 4, therefore it was not necessary to include this category.

Table 2. Frequency of Use of Language Learning Strategies

	Mean Frequency	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Year 2	249.94*	26.58	194	290
Year 4	263.28*	30.15	212	317

\* This difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ( $t=-3.01$ ,  $df=17$ ,  $sig.=.008$ ).

Secondly, comparing the results across years, the frequency with which strategies are employed increases in all of the S.I.L.L. categories with the exception of the affective and compensatory strategies where the frequency level either remains constant (compensatory) or falls (affective) (Table 3). The largest increase in frequency can be found in the cognitive category. This is also the only statistically significant increase ( $t=-3.80$ ,  $df=17$ ,  $sig.=.001$ ) although the increase in the use of metacognitive strategies is approaching significance ( $t=-2.03$ ,  $df=17$ ,  $sig.=.058$ ).

Table 3. Average Frequency of Language Learning Strategies Employed by S.I.L.L. Category by Year

	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Memory	Social	Compensatory	Affective
	Year 2/4	Year 2/4	Year 2/4	Year 2/4	Year 2/4	Year 2/4
Average Frequency	87/95*	52/55**	36/38	28/31	28/28	18/17

\* Implies difference between means statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

\*\* Implies difference between means statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

#### Research Question 2:

Introducing proficiency scores into the analysis allows us to break down the information presented in Tables 2 and 3 by proficiency level. As we see (Table 4), in year 4, students in the higher proficiency category

used more strategies than did improvers, those in the lower proficiency category and disimprovers respectively<sup>5</sup>. They also displayed the greatest increase in the use of language learning strategies over the course of their degree (8%) followed by improvers at 6%. The only group to report using fewer strategies in their final year is the disimprovers.

Table 4. Frequency of Language Learning Strategies Employed by Year by Results Obtained in Oral Examinations

	Frequency (Total) Year 2/4	% Increase in Mean Frequency
<b>Higher Proficiency</b> (8 cases)	254/273*	+8%
<b>Improvers</b> (6 cases)	249/263	+6%
<b>Lower Proficiency</b> (1 case)	247/252	+2%
<b>Disprovers</b> (3 cases)	275/240	-12.7%

\* Indicates statistically significant difference between the two means, 254 and 273, at the 95% confidence level

Finally, looking at the strategic behaviour by S.I.L.L. category for the four proficiency groupings (Table 5) reveals several interesting tendencies. For example, the higher group was using significantly more cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies in the final year of their degree than in their second year. They also use more cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies than do any of the other 3 proficiency groupings. The improvers increased their average frequency of use of all of the strategy types with the exception of the social strategies between years 2 and 4. The disimprovers, on the other hand, used fewer metacognitive strategies as well as fewer compensatory and affective strategies in their fourth year. Furthermore, comparing their results with those

<sup>5</sup> The difference between the mean use of strategies by the higher category and the disimprovers was the only statistically significant difference *between* the groups in this table ( $t=2.63$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $sig=.033$ ). This was determined using independent samples t-tests with Levene's test for equality of variances.

of the higher category indicates that they use significantly fewer metacognitive and compensatory strategies than did this group ( $t=2.437$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $sig.=.038$  and  $t=2.514$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $sig.=.033$  respectively). Indeed, of all 4 groups, the disimprovers use the fewest strategies in all of the S.I.L.L. categories with the exception of the affective strategies. Finally, the student in the lower proficiency category also used fewer metacognitive and affective strategies in year 4.

Table 5. Average Frequency of Language Learning Strategies Employed x S.I.L.L. Category x Year x Proficiency Group

	Cognitive Year 2/4	Metacog- nitive Year 2/4	Social Year 2/4	Memory Year 2/4	Compen- satory Year 2/4	Affective Year 2/4
<b>Higher</b> Proficiency (8 cases)	88.5/97.6*	54.0/61.0*	29.0/33.9*	37.6/36.9	28.1/27.5	16.4/16.5
<b>Improvers</b> (6 cases)	87.0/94.3	48.8/50.8	31.7/28.8**	36.0/39.0*	27.8/30.0	18.2/20.5
<b>Lower</b> Proficiency (1 case)	86/93	55/51	20/25	31/39	30/30	25/14
<b>Disprovers</b> (3 cases)	81.0/89.0	51.0/49.7	27.3/28.0	34.3/36.7	29.7/22.0*	18.0/14.3

\* Implies difference between means statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

\*\* Implies difference between means statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

## Discussion

Accepting the fact that this study deals with 18 unique individuals, it does appear that a number of tentative trends emerge from the data.

Firstly, the frequency with which language learning strategies are employed increases between years 2 and 4. On the one hand, it would seem logical that a learner's ability to use language learning strategies would develop over the course of their language learning. As their proficiency develops over time, more cognitive resources may be freed up allowing them to focus on the use of such strategies. This notion is supported by the concept of a "language competence ceiling" (Clarke, 1980). This is a critical level of proficiency, which, depending on non-linguistic factors such as background knowledge, may be static or fixed (Kern, 1989) and below which learners may adopt ineffective language learning strategies. On the other hand, it might have been expected that the use of some of the strategies would have become automatic and would no longer be reported by students on a self-report questionnaire. It is of course possible that automatization has occurred and that the use of strategies is even higher than reported in year 4.

In terms of increases in the different types of strategies employed, the frequency with which strategies are employed increases in all of the S.I.L.L. categories with the exception of the affective and compensatory strategies. The biggest percentage increase in use can be found among the cognitive strategies followed by the social and then the metacognitive strategies. This finding supports the notion proposed by Grenfell and Harris (1998) that strategies should be regarded as developmental, early ones being mainly self-contained and later ones being more interactive and allowing for more reflection and meta-reflection on the language task. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the average frequency with which compensatory strategies are employed remains constant. These strategies are used to "compensate" for gaps in knowledge and it is unlikely that a learner's language knowledge will disappear over the course of their language degree. It is, of course, possible that the task types with which they are presented may become more challenging and this may explain why the frequency with which these strategies are employed does not fall.

Dividing the subjects into the 4 proficiency groupings described above and analysing their strategic behaviour over the course of their degree in the light of these classifications also provides some interesting findings. Firstly, it is clear that the trend towards the use of more language learning strategies more frequently is stronger among students achieving higher levels of proficiency in year 4. Whether the use of more strategies more frequently is a cause or a result of an increase in proficiency cannot be determined on the basis of this

study. It is, however, possible and perhaps likely that the relationship between strategy use and proficiency is a two way one. In other words, as discussed above, as learners become more proficient they become more able to focus on the use of particular strategies thus further increasing their proficiency.

In terms of the S.I.L.L. categories or strategy types another important finding is that it is those learners who maintain relatively high levels of proficiency throughout their degree, in particular, who use an increasing number of cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Similarly, those managing significant relative improvements in their proficiency increase the frequency with which they use all of the strategy types with the exception of the social strategies over the course of their degree. In contrast, the disimprovers and the learner who maintained a relatively low level of proficiency over the course of the 4 years actually reduced the frequency with which they used language learning strategies, in general, and metacognitive and affective strategies, in particular. This supports Chamot's (1996) conclusion that less proficient pupils are more word-based and concerned with detail.

However, it should be borne in mind in interpreting these results that there were several limitations with regard to the experimental design which mean that conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of this initial study. This limitations are discussed below together with suggestions for future research.

### **Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research**

Firstly, the study limited itself to the analysis of the following variables: time, strategic behaviour and levels of oral proficiency. A more complete picture of the development of strategic behaviour over time and the relationship between strategic behaviour and the development of proficiency could be obtained if other variables such as gender, motivation for language study, academic interests, personality type and the impact of exposure to authentic language during a year abroad were incorporated into the experimental design.

Secondly, the measurements were conducted only twice over a 4-year period. More frequent measurements of both strategic behaviour and oral proficiency could give a clearer picture of changes in strategic behaviour over time.

Thirdly, with regard to the measurement instruments, the use of a strategy questionnaire, while having the advantages of being non-threatening and allowing comparison over a group, may have lost some of the detail which could have been gather using more qualitative measures. Effective self-reports are also dependent on learner's willingness and ability to describe their internal behaviours. A further potential problem with the

S.I.L.L., in particular, is that accepting the a priori grouping of strategies under the given headings (cognitive, metacognitive etc.) ignores the fact that the categories are not necessarily self-evident. For example, a particular strategy (listed as a compensatory strategy in the S.I.L.L.) such as, “I ask the other person to tell me the right word...”, is not all that different from some of the social strategies. The only way to be certain that you are working with categories of strategies inherently referenced to the group in question is to conduct a factor analysis (e.g. Green and Oxford, 1995). This is a statistical procedure that identifies the learning strategies that vary in synchrony with each other and therefore appear to be used in concert with each other for a particular group. In other words, it provides an insight into the combinations of strategies used by a particular group. Such an analysis would, however, have required a larger group of participants than were used in this study.

A larger number of participants would also have facilitated the use of more elaborate statistical analyses. Indeed, all of the statistical analyses particularly the t-test results must be treated with considerable caution given the small number of participants in the study (N=18). In particular, it is not possible to draw conclusions concerning the “lower” category as there was only one student in this group.

Finally, the use of an official oral examination may not be the most effective way of creating proficiency groupings. Such an approach could perhaps in future be combined with or replaced by teacher ratings or assessments designed specifically for the research project.

Despite these limitations, there are nevertheless indications of changes in the use of language learning strategies as language learners progress. In particular, there are differences between the way in which more and less effective learners use language learning strategies over the course of their degree. For example, more effective learners use more strategies more frequently and, in particular, more cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Less effective learners use fewer strategies and in particular fewer metacognitive and affective strategies.

A final issue relates to whether or not it is possible to train students in the use of language learning strategies or whether the ability to use language learning strategies develops naturally in parallel with the acquisition process. Advocates of “strategy training” or “strategies-based instruction” would argue that strategy training can be effective and can help to facilitate language learning (Cohen, 2000). Although somewhat beyond the scope of this research, the results of this study would indicate that an emphasis in training should be placed on the cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. It is not advocated, however, that training in the use of other strategy types be abandoned. On the contrary, the results of this study indicate that weaker students may not yet have mastered such strategies and may therefore continue to focus their approach to language learning

on the individual word at the expense of more metacognitive strategies. They may need additional training in the more effective use of, for example, memory-related strategies in order to enable them to move beyond this stage. In other words, it is likely that a flexible approach to strategy training that is tailored to the current proficiency levels of individual students is to be recommended.

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Appendix A

**The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning:**

***Answer Key***

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Generally not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Generally true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

**Instructions:**

**Procedure:** Read each item. Choose a response from the answer key above and write it in the space provided.

**Note:** These questionnaires will be used solely for a research project designed to look at the learning strategies students use and will have no effect on your results. Furthermore, there are no right or wrong answers to this questionnaire. Using a very large number of strategies is not necessarily positive. Try to answer as truthfully as possible.



**Improving my ability to remember German: {memory-related strategies}**

***When learning a new German word...***

1. I create associations between new material and what I already know . \_\_\_\_
2. I put the new word in a sentence. \_\_\_\_
3. I place the new word in a group with other words that are similar in some way  
(for example words relating to young people or nouns ending in -ung). \_\_\_\_
4. I associate the sound of a new word with the sound of a familiar word. \_\_\_\_
5. I use rhyming to remember the word. \_\_\_\_
6. I remember the word by making a mental image of it or drawing a picture. \_\_\_\_
7. I visualise the spelling of the new word in my mind. \_\_\_\_
8. I use a combination of sounds and images to remember the new word. \_\_\_\_
9. I list all the other words I know that are related to the new word and draw lines to show relationships. \_\_\_\_
10. I remember where the new word is located on the page, or where I first saw or heard it. \_\_\_\_
11. I use flashcards with the new word on one side and the definition or other information on the other. \_\_\_\_

12. I physically act out the new word. \_\_\_\_\_

***When learning new German material.....***

13. I revise often. \_\_\_\_\_

14. I schedule my revision so that the revision sessions are initially close together in time and gradually become more widely spread apart. \_\_\_\_\_

15. I go back to refresh my memory of material I learned much earlier. \_\_\_\_\_

**Increasing my knowledge of German: {Cognitive Strategies}**

16. I say or write new expressions repeatedly to practise them. \_\_\_\_\_

17. I imitate the way native speakers talk. \_\_\_\_\_

18. I read a story or dialogue several times until I can understand it. \_\_\_\_\_

19. I check over what I write in German. \_\_\_\_\_

20. I practise the sound or alphabet of German. \_\_\_\_\_

21. I use idioms or other routines in the German. \_\_\_\_\_

22. I use familiar words in different combinations to make new sentences. \_\_\_\_\_

23. I initiate conversations in German. \_\_\_\_\_

24. I watch television or films or listen to the radio in German. \_\_\_\_\_

25. I try to think in German. \_\_\_\_\_

26. I participate in out-of-class events where German is spoken. \_\_\_\_\_

27. I read for pleasure in German. \_\_\_\_\_

28. I write personal notes, messages, letters or reports in German. \_\_\_\_\_

29. I skim the reading passage first to get the main idea, then I go back and read it more carefully. \_\_\_\_\_

30. I seek specific details in what I hear or read \_\_\_\_\_.

31. I use reference materials such as dictionaries to help me use German. \_\_\_\_\_

32. I take notes in class in German. \_\_\_\_\_

33. I make summaries of German material. \_\_\_\_\_

34. I apply general rules to new situations when using German. \_\_\_\_\_

35. I find the meaning of a word by dividing it into parts which I understand. \_\_\_\_\_

36. I look for similarities and contrasts between German and my own language. \_\_\_\_\_

37. I try to understand what I have heard or read without translating it word-for-word into my own language.

\_\_\_\_\_

38. I am cautious about transferring words or concepts directly from my language to German. \_\_\_\_\_

39. I look for patterns in German. \_\_\_\_\_

40. I develop my own understanding of how German works, even if I sometimes have to revise my understanding based on new information. \_\_\_\_\_

**Making up for gaps in my knowledge of German: {Compensatory Strategies}**

41. When I do not understand all the words I read or hear, I guess the general meaning by using any clue I can find, for example, clues from the context or situation. \_\_\_\_\_

42. I read without looking up every unfamiliar word. \_\_\_\_\_

43. In a conversation I anticipate what the other person is going to say based on what has been said so far. \_\_\_\_\_

44. If I am speaking and cannot think of the right expression, I use gestures or switch back to my own language momentarily. \_\_\_\_\_

45. I ask the other person to tell me the right word if I cannot think of it in a conversation. \_\_\_\_\_

46. When I cannot think of the correct expression to say or write, I find a different way to express the idea, for example, I use a synonym or describe the idea. \_\_\_\_\_

47. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones. \_\_\_\_\_

48. I direct the conversation to a topic for which I know the words. \_\_\_\_\_

**Organising and controlling my learning of German: {Metacognitive Strategies}**

49. I preview the language lesson to get a general idea of what it is about, how it is organised and how it relates to what I already know. \_\_\_\_\_

50. When someone is speaking German, I try to concentrate on what they are saying and put other unrelated topics out of my mind. \_\_\_\_\_

51. I decide in advance to pay special attention to specific language aspects, for example, I focus on the way certain sounds are pronounced. \_\_\_\_\_

52. I try to find out all I can about how to be a better language learner by reading books or articles, or by talking with others about how to learn. \_\_\_\_\_

53. I arrange my schedule to study and practice German consistently, not just when there is the pressure of a test. \_\_\_\_

54. I arrange my physical environment to promote learning, for example, I find a quiet place in which to revise. \_\_\_\_

55. I organise my language notes to record important language information. \_\_\_\_

56. I plan my goals for language learning, for instance, how proficient I want to become or how I might want to use the language in the long run. \_\_\_\_

57. I plan what I am going to accomplish in language learning each day or week. \_\_\_\_

58. I prepare for a language task (e.g. giving a German presentation) by considering the nature of the task, what I have to know and my current language skills. \_\_\_\_

59. I clearly identify the purpose of the language activity, for instance, in a listening task I might need to listen to the general idea or specific facts. \_\_\_\_

60. I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practice German. \_\_\_\_

61. I actively look for people with whom I can speak German. \_\_\_\_

62. I try to notice my language errors and find out the reason for them. \_\_\_\_

63. I learn from my mistakes in using German. \_\_\_\_

64. I evaluate the general progress I have made in learning German. \_\_\_\_

**Improving how I feel about learning German: {Affective Strategies}**

65. I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using German. \_\_\_\_

66. I make encouraging statements to myself about learning German. \_\_\_\_

67. I actively encourage myself to take risks in learning German, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak even though I might make some mistakes. \_\_\_\_

68. I give myself a tangible reward when I have done something well in my German language learning. \_\_\_\_

69. I pay attention to signs of stress that might affect my learning of German. \_\_\_\_

70. I keep a private journal where I write my feelings about learning German. \_\_\_\_

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

**Working with other people to improve my German: {Social Strategies}**

72: If I do not understand I ask the speaker to slow down, repeat or clarify what was said. \_\_\_\_

73. I ask others to clarify that I have understood or said something correctly. \_\_\_\_
74. I ask other people to correct my pronunciation. \_\_\_\_
75. I work with other language learners to practice, revise or share information. \_\_\_\_
76. I have a regular language learning partner. \_\_\_\_
77. When I am talking to a native speaker I try to let them know if I need help. \_\_\_\_.
78. In conversation with others in German, I ask questions in order to be as involved as possible and show that I am interested. \_\_\_\_
79. I try to learn about the culture of places where German is spoken. \_\_\_\_
80. I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in German. \_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Course:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_