Language Learning Strategies in Elementary School: The Effect of Age and Gender in an EFL Context

Katalin Doró (Szeged, Hungary) / Anita Habók (Szeged, Hungary)

Abstract (English)

This paper seeks to contribute to the limited research done on the language strategy use of young learners in EFL contexts. It presents the results of an investigation into the overall language learning strategy use of elementary school students. Subjects for the study were fifth and sixth graders enrolled in Hungarian public elementary schools (n=275). The Strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) was found to be a reliable and well-working data collection instrument with this young age group. Six subcategories of strategies were investigated and results showed that meta-cognitive strategies were the most frequently used category, while compensation strategies were the least often employed ones. Significant grade level differences in strategy use were not found. Gender related investigations revealed key differences in favor of girls across all six types of learning strategies. Implications of the study are presented and discussed.
Key words: language learning strategies, English, EFL, strategy inventory for language learning (SILL), age, gender, elementary school, children

Abstract (Deutsch)

Die vorliegende Studie ist ein Beitrag zu den relativ wenigen Untersuchungen zum Englisch als Fremdsprache, die sich mit der Verwendung von Sprachstrategien bei jungen Sprachlernern beschäftigen. Die Studie stellt Ergebnisse hinsichtlich der Verwendung von Sprachstrategien durch Schüler des Sekundarbereichs dar. Ungarische Fünft- und Sechstklässler (n=275) staatlicher Schulen bildeten dabei die Zielgruppe. Der verwendete SILL-Fragebogen (*The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*" erwies sich als verlässliches und intaktes Instrument für die Datenerhebung bei dieser Zielgruppe. Sechs Unterkategorien der Strategien wurden untersucht. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass metakognitive Strategien die am meisten verwendete Kategorie bildeten, während Kompensationsstrategien zu den am wenigsten verwendeten Strategien zählten. In den zwei untersuchten Jahrgängen konnten keine signifikanten Unterschiede ausgemacht werden. Die Untersuchung der geschlechtsspezifischen Ergebnisse zeitigten in allen sechs Kategorien der Lernstrategien einen erheblichen Vorteil für Mädchen. Im Artikel werden die Implikationen der Studie präsentiert und diskutiert. Zudem werden ihre Grenzen aufgezeigt.
Stichwörter: Sprachstrategien, Englisch, Englisch als Fremdsprache, SILL, Alter, Geschlecht, Grundschule, Kinder

1 Introduction

Language learning strategies are actions and techniques that facilitate the learning process. Researchers seem to agree that effective students use a greater variety of strategies and operate with them to a better degree. According to Cohen (2005) strategy research is significant for two main reasons:

a) researchers can identify the underlying cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective processes of language learning; and

b) strategies can, at least to some extent, be taught, so teachers can help less successful learners adopt better strategies and, therefore, become more effective language users.

However, Hu and Tian (2012) documented a frequent observation according to which students and teachers often have different beliefs about learner strategies.

Over the last 40 years, research on language learning strategies has gained valuable knowledge on how learners perceive their own second or foreign language learning and what strategies they adopt in or outside the classroom. What is clearly missing from the published literature is a more focused attention on the foreign language learning strategies of elementary school students. Also, as Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) and, more recently, Yilmaz (2010) and Jin-Suk & Tae-Young (2011) have rightly pointed out, research on learner beliefs and strategies is needed from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This study aims at contributing to this field by investigating a large number of Hungarian EFL learners' overall language learning strategies in grades 5 and 6 and their strategy use in relationship with background variables, such as grade level and gender.

2   Literature Review

2.1 Language Learning Strategies

The term *language learning strategy* has been defined in a variety of ways in the last decades, giving way to criticism and lack of consensus (Dörnyei 2005, White 2008). The definitions dating back to the 1980s and 1990s are still the most frequently cited ones (Zare 2012). For example, learning strategies were understood by O'Malley & Chamot as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 1). While early research treated strategies as conscious behavior, most recent definitions recognize the semi-conscious nature of certain strategy use. In line with this idea, Cohen defined language learning strategies as "the conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language" (Cohen 2003: 280). For the present study the definition of Oxford (1990) will be adopted, being the most comprehensive and inclusive one. According to Oxford (1990: 8),

language learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information…; specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (Oxford 1990: 8).

Researchers in the field have also faced the problem of classifying strategies, with the result of various taxonomies in use. One of the early categorizations distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies (Rubin 1975). According to Rubin, direct strategies, such as clarifying, monitoring, memorizing, and guessing, directly contribute to language learning, while students indirectly benefit from additional strategies like finding opportunities to practice the target language. O'Malley et al. (1985) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) identified three main types of strategies, namely meta-cognitive (e.g. planning and self-monitoring), cognitive (e.g. repetition, translation and decontextualisation) and socio-affective (e.g. cooperation and questions for clarification), dedicating most of their attention to meta-cognitive strategies. Oxford (1990, 2001) took a step further by identifying six sub-categories, the first three belonging to the direct, and the second three to the indirect group of strategies. These six sub-categories are the following: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Oxford's division of strategies provided the basis for designing the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), also used in the present study (Oxford 1990).

Learning strategies have been observed through a variety of self-reporting methods, including interviews, stimulated recall interviews, questionnaires, written diaries, and think-aloud protocols related to certain learning tasks (Chamot 2005). As the author reports,

> each of these methods has limitations, but at the present time they remain the only way to generate insights into the unobservable mental learning strategies of learners (Chamot 2005: 113).

It has been shown that language learners at all levels adopt strategies, and strategy use can be influenced by a variety of background variables. In recent years, some of the most widely researched of these variables have been gender, language proficiency, educational background, age or grade level, study goals, tasks to which strategy use is linked, language or cultural background and the degree of effectiveness in target language learning (e.g. Hong-Nam & Leavell 2007; Griffiths 2003, Lan 2005, Magogwe & Oliver 2007, Chen 2009, Dhanapala 2007, Wong & Nunan 2011, Khamkhienm 2010). Cohen rightly concluded that "no single strategy will be appropriate for all learners or for all tasks, and invariably individual learners will apply the very same strategies in different ways" (Cohen 2003: 282).

2.2 Strategy Studies on Young Learners

Research on the strategy use of children has provided some evidence that children do use strategies from preschool levels onward (Rea and Mercuri 2006), although they are usually not successful in reporting on them until their upper elementary school years (Cohen 2003; Cooper and Corpus 2009). Children's meta-cognitive development, which includes

knowledge of themselves (how they perform in certain situations), and knowledge about the strategies they use to solve tasks (how they do things), greatly varies among individuals (Fisher 1998). Pinter (2006), by reviewing literature on 10- and 11-year-olds' cognitive development, concluded that children at this stage of their life can think logically, organize their thoughts and focus on a wide range of cognitive tasks. They are also able to reflect on their thinking and learning processes, which is a prerequisite for being able to report on their strategy use. Cooper & Corpus (2009) highlighted the methodological problems of studying elementary school aged children's strategy use, as

> current approaches rely upon survey measures that are inappropriate for young children. Even the interview methods used in some studies …may be inappropriate for early elementary children who typically do not provide substantive responses to open-ended prompts (Cooper & Corpus 2009: 527).

For the present study, the SILL was adopted in light of the reviewed literature and the personal experience of the authors with Hungarian 11- and 12-year-olds, which suggested that students of this age are able to fill out self-reported questionnaires of this type.

To the best knowledge of the authors, very few studies have been published on the foreign language learning strategies of fifth and sixth graders in or outside of Hungary. They mostly focused on understanding the individuals in small groups and investigated task-related strategy use employing observations or think-aloud protocols. Due to their limited number, all of them serve us with valuable information. Raja (2009), for example, reported on the strategy training and use of third, fourth and sixth grader Tamil speaking students (n=216) in English immersion classes in the Tamil Nadu state of India. The author found that over 80 percent of the participants reported using all six of the Oxford (1990) strategy categories. The study was based on classroom observation, think-aloud protocols and teacher reports. Chamot & El-Dinary (1999) studied strategy use in immersion class environments (French, Japanese and Spanish) in the USA. They used a think-aloud protocol with students from kindergarten to sixth grade, focusing on the differences between less and more successful student groups. The implications of this study are very limited due to the methodology employed and the low number of participants. Both of these studies reported on the strategy use of English as a second rather than a foreign language.

Although even more limited in number, there have also been some recent studies that analyze EFL contexts. Coyle & Valcácel (2002) used a small number of participants (n=8, eight- and nine-year-old Spanish students), categorized by their teachers as good language learners. The major strength of this study is that interviews with the students were conducted while and after carrying out certain language tasks. Nikolov (2003 and 2006) also investigated the task-related strategy use of sixth and seventh graders. These studies explored the strategies students mentioned while solving reading and writing tasks. The author pointed out a number of methodological pitfalls of the data collection and data categorization. Cooper & Corpus (2009) reported on the strategy development for maintaining motivation of first, third and fifth graders in comparison to adults. They observed that even the youngest study group showed good understanding of concrete, behavioral strategies, while mental or abstract strategies were used only by the fifth graders and the adult participants.

A comprehensive study was carried out by Lan (2005) involving over a thousand English language elementary school learners in Taiwan. By using the Taiwanese Children's SILL, semi-structured interviews, vocabulary tasks and investigating other background variables, the author was able to provide valuable insight into this student population's strategy use. The study found that children employed all the six Oxford categories of strategies and that their strategy use correlated with background variables such as the their degree of liking English, their gender, language proficiency, study goals, and their father's education.

It can be concluded that research on language learning strategies has been carried out mainly on secondary school and adult populations who are able to provide data through large surveys. Studies investigating the foreign language learning strategies of elementary school children are rather limited and preliminary in nature, and the majority of them focus on a single strategy type or skill, or describe strategies used by bilingual children or children in immersion classes. Unfortunately, very little has been published about what strategies children use while studying and practicing a foreign language.

3   Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, this study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) a reliable and well-working instrument in an EFL context with elementary school students in grades 5 and 6?

2. What is the overall language learning strategy use of this age group?

3. Are there significant differences between the two grades in their strategy use?

4. Are there significant differences between young male and female students in their strategy use?

The purpose of this research is threefold. Firstly, it aims to explore whether the SILL is a reliable tool of investigation with fifth and sixth graders, a young age group with whom it has not been widely used so far. Secondly, it examines the overall language learning strategy use of fifth and sixth graders, about which limited published data exist. Thirdly, it investigates differences in strategy preferences by grade level and by gender and compares the results with those of earlier studies.

4   Methods

4.1 Participants

Students from three public elementary schools of southern Hungary serving grades 1 to 8 were invited to participate in the study. A total of 275 students were included in this

investigation, 146 students from grade 5 and 129 students from grade 6. The overall participant group consisted of 148 boys and 127 girls. Consent prior to administering the questionnaire was obtained from the principals and the English teachers of the schools. All students were native speakers of Hungarian learning English as a foreign language in a formal school setting. They had an average of 3.4 years of previous English studies in grade 5 and 4.1 years in grade 6. They represent average English learners, as outstanding school results were not a prerequisite for participating in this study, unlike in a number of other studies which had focused on the strategy use of 'good language learners' (e.g. Rubin 1975, Morales & Smith 2008; Edwards 2008). The fifth graders, on average, had 3.8, while the sixth graders had 3.6 English marks in a five-point grading scale system, 5 being the highest mark.

4.2 Instruments

An adapted version of the SILL for learners of English as a second or foreign language (Oxford 1990) was employed in this study. Drawing on Yang (2007), it consisted of 48 statements, each related to one to the main strategy groups: memory strategies (items 1 to 8) for storing and retrieving information, cognitive strategies (items 9 to 22) for understanding and producing target language elements, compensation strategies (items 23 to 28) for helping overcome a lack of target language knowledge, meta-cognitive strategies (items 29 to 37) for coordinating the language learning process, affective strategies (items 38 to 42) in connection with emotions, motivation and attitudes and social strategies (items 43 to 48) which involve interaction with others during language learning and as a form of language practice. A Hungarian (the native language of the participants) translation of the questionnaire was used to insure clear understanding of the statements. The 48 items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). The SILL has been translated into various languages and undergone multiple reliability and validity checks (Oxford & Burry-Stock 1995). Therefore, to date, it has been the most widely applied and reliable strategy instrument.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Reliability and applicability of the SILL (Research Question 1)

The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was satisfactorily high at .93 on Cronbach alpha for the entire study population. Cronbach alpha was .93 for fifth graders and .94 for sixth graders. This is in line with previous research conducted using the SILL. Studies have reported reliability coefficients for the SILL ranging between .85 and .98 (Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006). Children's version of the SILL has proved to work well with Taiwanese students (Lan 2005) and selected questions taken from the SILL were used in other studies involving children (e.g. Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006). In the present study, however, the adult version of the SILL (Oxford 1990) also proved to work well when translated to the participants' mother tongue. Fifth and sixth graders were able to

understand fill in the relatively long questionnaire. We find this a valuable piece of information for researchers who wish to study the strategy use of elementary school students.

5.2 Overall Language Learning Strategy Use (Research Question 2)

When considered as one main group, all students reported on being actively engaged in language leaning strategies. Descriptive statistics show that the average frequency of strategy use reported for fifth and sixth graders ranked middle (M=2.6 to 3.2) according to Oxford's (1990) scale. The least preferred strategies were compensation (M=2.6, SD=.7), while memory, cognitive, social (M=2.8, SD=.6, .7 and .9, respectively) and affective strategies (M=2.9, SD=.9) were placed slightly higher. The most preferred group of the six strategy categories was meta-cognitive strategies (M=3.2). If compared to the other large-scale study with children using SILL type questions (Lan 2005), preference to strategy use shows some similarity between the Taiwanese and the Hungarian students. In Lan (2005) meta-cognitive strategies placed only fourth with similar means (M=3.0), while memory strategies were the most frequent ones (M=3.2), .4 average lower than in the Hungarian data.

The inconsistency in the results of studies on language learning strategies and the limitations of these studies have been voiced by various authors (e.g. Gürsoy 2010, Cohen 2005, Griffiths & Parr 2001). Similarities in and differences between the various data sets may, most probably, be due to different selection criteria, data collection methodology, age, language backgrounds and strategy trainings.

5.3 Strategy Use according to Grade Level (Research question 3)

When participant data were grouped by grade level (grade 5 and grade 6), data analysis revealed no significant differences for the use of the six main strategy subscales (Table 1).

Strategy sub-scales	Grade 5 n=146		Grade 6 n=129		p
	mean	SD	mean	SD	
Memory	2.8	.6	2.8	.7	n.s
Cognitive	2.8	.7	2.8	.6	n.s
Compensation	2.7	.7	2.6	.7	n.s
Meta-cognitive	3.1	.8	3.2	.8	n.s
Affective	2.9	.9	2.9	.9	n.s
Social	2.8	1.0	2.8	.9	n.s

Table 1: Summary of language learning strategy use in the two grade levels

The average frequency of strategy use ranged between 2.6 and 3.2. Meta-cognitive strategies were placed the highest, while compensation strategies were the lowest for both groups. A more detailed item analysis was also carried out to see if grade differences existed. Statistically significant differences between the two grade levels were found for three statements only. Among the cognitive strategies sixth graders reported that they repeat new vocabulary items more frequently in order to memorize them (M_{G5}=3.4, M_{G6}=3.8, $p<0.01$) and that they would like to sound native-like more than the younger students (M_{G5}=3.2, M_{G6}=3.6, $p<0.05$). As for the affective sub-scale, fifth graders claimed to give themselves a reward or treat more often when they do well in English (M_{G5}=2.9, M_{G6}=2.5, $p<0.05$).

The small differences in the strategy use of the two grade levels are not surprising. Overall means mask individual differences, and students of both groups had had similar former language learning experiences, attended the same or similar schools, and were at a similar cognitive and literacy developmental level. Chen (2009), who studied students in grades 7, 8 and 9 in Taiwan, showed a significant shift in strategy preference across the grades. This result was explained by the author as a clear indication of the fact that students at this age undergo a shift in their learning style which brings with itself the employment of different strategies. Cooper & Corpus (2009) were also able to report on a significant increase in strategy knowledge between grades 1, 3 and 5. However, a 5-year-span in students' cognitive, literacy and foreign language skills is definitely large enough to show clear developments, while a 1-year-span in the mid-elementary school years (as in our study) is less significant on the group level, but rather involves individual differences.

5.4 Strategy Use according to Gender (Research question 4)

Table 2 shows results for the frequency of strategy use reported by the two genders.

Strategy sub-scales	Boys n=148		Girls n=127		p
	mean	SD	mean	SD	
Memory	2.6	.7	3.0	.6	<0.01
Cognitive	2.7	.7	3.0	.6	<0.01
Compensation	2.5	.7	2.8	.7	<0.05
Metacognitive	2.9	.8	3.5	.7	<0.01
Affective	2.7	.9	3.1	.9	<0.01
Social	2.6	1.0	3.1	.8	<0.01

Table 2: Summary of language learning strategy use by gender

In all aspects of the data, statistically significant differences were found in favor of girls. Mean differences revealed that, in all six sub-scales, females engaged in strategy use more frequently than males, the largest difference being found in meta-cognitive strategy use (M_{males}=2.9, $M_{females}$=3.5).

T-tests pointed to a number of conclusions suggesting a more active involvement of young female students in their foreign language learning. Girls indicated that during vocabulary learning, they use new English words in sentences more frequently, employ rhymes and repeat words to remember them. They also frequently act out situations or use mental images that help them memorize vocabulary. They are more likely to connect the phonetic forms with these mental images and translate the vocabulary items to their native language. If vocabulary access from their mental lexicon is unsuccessful, they rely on words with a similar meaning to express their thoughts. Girls take more notes, write messages, letters, reports and read in English more often than do boys. They also indicated that they prefer skim-reading a text before reading it with care. Finally, they review their class notes more often than boys.

Results also support the notion that girls have better verbal skills. They initiate conversations more frequently, and they monitor their partners' speech more closely. While they strive to sound more native-like than boys and practice English sounds, they also like to talk to their peers. When the message is unclear, they are more likely to ask their interlocutor to slow down or to provide clarification, and they also ask for correction. Girls reflect on their study progress more frequently than boys. Moreover, they seek opportunities more frequently to improve their target language skills. They are less afraid of making mistakes and try to relax, reward themselves, or reflect on their errors. What is more, they make deliberate efforts to spend more time studying English and to learn about the culture of English speaking countries. In conclusion, girls in this study showed more dedication to learning the target language and a higher frequency of strategy use than boys.

A number of recent studies on learning strategies have also addressed the gender differences in their data, either finding no significant differences in the overall strategy use between the two genders (e.g. Radwan 2011, Bonyadi et al. 2012), reporting on higher scores for females than males across all age levels (e.g. Yilmay 2010, Teh et al. 2009), or reporting mixed results for specific strategies (Radwan 2011, Hong-Nam & Leavel 2006). Hong-Nam & Leavel (2006), for example, reported on mixed gender-related results in their US study in which males indicated to use meta-cognitive, compensation and affective strategies the least frequently, while females used meta-cognitive and memory strategies the least frequently. As was discussed in the case of age related differences, non-conclusive results for gender differences across studies can be due to methods, choice of study populations or other background variables. The combination of age, language background and methodology chosen for this study has not been investigated earlier. Therefore, results provide new insight into early strategy use of young foreign language learners.

6   Implications and Limitations

As Wong & Nunan (2011) concluded, more successful learners are able to develop effective learning strategies by themselves, while less successful learners need assistance. The knowledge of strategy use gained in this study should be extended to students with the goal in mind that they could become more productive language learners

in and outside the classroom when pointed to new strategies or strategies they use less frequently. An outcome of this research could be more direct research-based EFL teaching and the results should be used in pre-service and in-service teacher training. Similar research could assist teachers in their curriculum design and in helping students to better understand the importance of strategy use.

Overgeneralization of the results should be avoided. It is important to point out that the results do not necessarily reflect the strategy use related to certain task types used in the classroom. The SILL chosen for this study is a quick inventory for possible strategy preference of elementary school EFL students; however, it is not task-based. While this may seem to be a shortcoming of this research, using the SILL indeed proved to be a major strength by showing that students as young as eleven can engage in self-reporting through this questionnaire that had mainly been considered adequate for older study populations. Interview and observation-based studies with small groups of learners should be viewed together with larger-scale investigations like the present one. As a future direction of research, it would be interesting to see how other background variables, such as school grades, language proficiency, study goals, or the amount of time spent with the target language reflect upon the strategy preference of young students. Another area of investigation suggested by these results is an examination of how strategy preferences change over time and across languages, cultures and school curricula.

All participants of the experiment were young native speakers of Hungarian learning English as a foreign language in a formal school setting. Therefore, the results of the experiment are only valid for this specific student population. Students' homogeneous educational background means another limitation, as they come from similar public elementary schools of the same region. Although the sample size was much larger than the ones used in the majority of previous strategy studies carried out with elementary school students, a larger and more diverse subject pool would have been required to generate more robust statistical evidence. Further research is needed among seventh and eighth graders to see whether grade differences become more visible as students progress through elementary school education.

7 Conclusion

The present study represents another step in the process of understanding the overall foreign language learning strategy use of elementary school students. The purpose of this research was threefold. Firstly, it set out to explore whether the SILL is a reliable tool of investigation with a young age group with whom it has not been widely used. Secondly, it examined the overall language learning strategy use of fifth and sixth graders. Thirdly, it explored differences in strategy preferences by grade level and by gender.

Results revealed a high reliability coefficient for the Hungarian SILL indicating that the instrument is reliable and works well with fifth and sixth graders if the statements are translated to the native language of the learners. Meta-cognitive strategies were found to be employed the most frequently by this age group, while compensation strategies were

the least popular ones. There were only three statements that showed grade level shift; overall, no significant differences were found in the use of the six subgroups of strategies between younger and older students. As for gender differences, young females showed a higher frequency of strategy use across all strategy types. As data were based on self-report and language learning as a whole, the study extended our understanding of the way young learners view and facilitate their foreign language learning process.

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Authors:

Katalin Doró, Ph.D.
University of Szeged
Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics
Egyetem u. 2.
6722 Szeged
Hungary
E-mail: dorokati@lit.u-szeged.hu

Anita Habók, Ph.D.
University of Szeged
Institute of Education
MTA-SZTE Research Group on the Development of Competencies
Petőfi sgt. 30-34.
6722 Szeged
Hungary
E-mail: habok@edpsy.u-szeged.hu