Strategy use by Greek university students of English

ANGELIKI PSALTOU-JOYCEY

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

1. INTRODUCTION
In recent years learning strategies have become the focus of research in second language acquisition by many scholars who are trying to find ways to improve language proficiency and promote autonomy in learning. Viewed within the cognitive information processing framework, learning strategies are considered “special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990:1). The processing, however, may be affected by a number of factors such as age, gender, personality, intelligence, language proficiency, motivation, attitudes, learning style, and so on. Consequently, it is important, on the one hand, to train learners in strategy use in order “to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990:8), and, on the other, to examine the degree of influence of the above factors in their choice of strategies.

2. THE STUDY
2.1 Purpose
To investigate whether or how much all of the above factors may relate to strategy selection and use is a task, which requires a full-scale research and lies beyond the scope of the present paper. More specifically, this study had the following two purposes: on the one hand, it aimed to investigate the kinds of learning and communication strategies advanced foreign language learners and users employ when they learn/use English, and, on the other, to examine the possible relationship between the level of use of all strategies and certain factors such as a) the students’ self-evaluation of their proficiency in English, b) their motivation for studying English and c) their enjoyment of language learning in general. The above factors were selected because it was assumed that they would probably affect the particular group of subjects being investigated with their special relation to the English language.

2.2 Subjects
Thirty five (35) Greek, female university students of the School of English at Aristotle University in their third year of studies, participated in the research
which took place at the end of the spring semester 2000 after the students had attended a 36-hour semester elective course entitled "Learning and Communication Strategies". The aim of the course was to raise the students’ awareness of language learning strategies and their effect on language learning, and furthermore to help them develop their self-direction, and improve their self-confidence. The students’ age was from 20-25 years and, therefore, they represented mature learners of English.

2.3 Procedure
For the purposes of the investigation the subjects had to answer a) a Background Questionnaire, and b) the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning – SILL – (version 7.0 for Speakers of Other Languages Learning English) both developed by Oxford (1989).

The background questionnaire consisted of 15 questions and was distributed to the students just before they answered the SILL. The answers provided information about the students’ personal characteristics, their perception of their proficiency in English compared to that of their fellow-students and native speakers respectively, their motivation for studying English, and whether they enjoyed language learning in general. No objective test intending to check their actual proficiency in English was administered, as it was assumed that all third-year university students of English are at least above the intermediate level of proficiency.

The SILL consisted of 50 statements about learning English, which the subjects had to answer in terms of how well each applied to them on a five-point scale, ranging from:

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

The statements were arranged in groups of six parts corresponding to Oxford’s (1990) classification of strategies into Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social but no such terminology was provided for the students to see.

The responses were given on a worksheet and then the averages for each part as well as the overall average were extracted. Finally the subjects could create their profile of results and evaluate their strategy use on a three-level scale from ‘Low’, to ‘Medium’, to ‘High’, which reflected frequency of use.

¹ University studies in Greece last four years. Consequently, the students who participated in the investigation had one more year of English studies to fulfil before they were awarded a degree in English Language and Literature.
3. RESULTS
3.1 Frequency of use
The results of the SILL were examined in order to find out which kinds of strategies Greek university students of English use most frequently. The statistical analysis showed that, on the whole, they make good use of all kinds of strategies and their use ranges between ‘Medium’ and ‘High’ with very few instances of ‘Low’ (see diagram and tables 1 and 2 below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.0343</td>
<td>Medium / Sometimes Used (2.5 – 3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.5143</td>
<td>High / Usually Used (3.5 – 4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3.0757</td>
<td>Medium / Sometimes Used (2.5 – 3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3.9971</td>
<td>High / Usually Used (3.5 – 4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2.0983</td>
<td>Low / Generally Not Used (1.5 – 2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.0491</td>
<td>Medium / Sometimes Used (2.5 – 3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.4686</td>
<td>Medium to High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Frequency of Strategy Use*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Part A</th>
<th>Part B</th>
<th>Part C</th>
<th>Part D</th>
<th>Part E</th>
<th>Part F</th>
<th>Overall Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1.0-1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5-2.4</td>
<td>8.58</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>8.57 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>2.5-3.4</td>
<td>77.15</td>
<td>37.15</td>
<td>31.44</td>
<td>22.85</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42.85 45.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>3.5-4.4</td>
<td>11.43</td>
<td>60.02</td>
<td>57.14</td>
<td>54.28</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>42.85 54.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.5-5.0</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11.43</td>
<td>22.86</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>5.72 0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Average of Strategy Use**

Part A refers to Memory strategies, which “help language learners store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed ...” (Oxford, 1990:39). The results showed that students use this category at a medium level. Part B refers to Cognitive strategies, which are used by the learner to manipulate or transform the target language material (Brown and Palincsar, 1982, in O'Malley et al., 1985:561). Greek university students use Cognitive strategies at a high level of frequency although less frequently than Metacognitive strategies. Compensation strategies, which constitute Part C of the SILL, according to Oxford, “enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge” (Oxford, 1990:47). The students reported that they employ them at a medium level. Metacognitive strategies “are used to oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning” (Rubin, 1987:25) and they are the ones that the students used the most which is not surprising since, as O'Malley et al. (1985:561) have stated, “students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to review their progress, accomplishments, and future learning directions”. Affective strategies constitute Part E of the SILL and they help learners gain control over affective factors such as their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values, which influence language learning (Oxford, 1990:140). Despite their importance to learning, however, the results of the investigation showed that students use them the least, at a low level. Social strategies involve interaction with other people (O’ Malley and Chamot, 1990:45; Oxford, 1990:144) and they are often used by the students but not so often as Compensation strategies. Therefore, the order of frequency in which the students, representing advanced learners of English in Greece, use the six groups of strategies is as follows: 1) Metacognitive, 2) Cognitive, 3) Compensation, 4) Social, 5) Memory, 6) Affective.
3.2 Correlation
Furthermore, the study attempted to examine the possible correlation between the students’ overall use of the above strategies and factors such as a) the students’ self-evaluation of their proficiency, b) their motivation for learning English, and c) their enjoyment of language learning.

3.2.1 Proficiency
The students were asked to self-evaluate their proficiency in English as ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘fair’, and ‘poor’ in comparison a) to other students in class and b) to native speakers. The majority of students evaluated their proficiency in English compared to either other students-in-class or native speakers as ‘good’.

The results of their self-evaluations were correlated with the overall level of strategy use which gave the following measures of significance: As regards the students’ evaluative judgment of their proficiency in English compared to that of their fellow students there was no correlation. Their judgment of their language proficiency, however, compared to that of native speakers, gave a correlation of r value (r = 0.375) significant at the level of p<.05 (p-value = 0.026) when correlated with the strategies they use.

3.2.2 Motivation
The students were also asked to express their views as to “how important it is for them to become proficient in English” by selecting ‘very important’, ‘important’, or ‘not so important’. This question is closely related to motivation.
The students rated the importance of language proficiency as ‘very important’ (80%) and ‘important’ (20%). Such a result was expected, however, as most of these students will become teachers of English as a FL when they graduate and, consequently, they must be highly motivated as proficiency in English is vital for their career. When their rating of how important proficiency in English is for them was correlated with their use of all strategies the resulting correlation coefficient was \( r = 0.376 \) significant at the level of \( p<0.05 \) (p-value = 0.026). As regards specific types of strategies, the correlation showed that motivated students had a high frequency of use of cognitive strategies and a medium use of compensation strategies.

Furthermore, both integrative and instrumental types of motivation were tested in the students’ responses through a number of statements. They could select as many statements as they thought applied to them from a list of six plus an extra open-ended option. The results showed that the students need the language primarily a) ‘for their future career’ (94.26%) b) because they ‘have an interest in the language’ (88.57%) c) because they ‘are interested in the English culture’ (80%) and d) because they ‘want to travel abroad’ (54.29%). Surprisingly, only few students answered that they needed it either for e) their ‘graduation’ (25.71%) or f) ‘for communicating with friends in English’ (25.71%), as shown below. These preferences also indicate that these subjects’ motivation for learning English ranges between what traditionally we call instrumental and integrative types without showing a clear difference between the two.
3.2.3 Enjoyment of language learning

Almost all of the students replied that they 'enjoy language learning' (97.14%) and in their majority they stated that they have learnt or have been learning other foreign languages as well.

'Do you enjoy language learning in general?'

Despite the high percentage of positive answers, however, the correlation measures in general, in this section, were inconclusive for the students' selection of strategies. Only in two parts were there noteworthy results: The statistics showed a negative correlation between enjoyment and low use of affective strategies ($r = -0.385$, p-value = 0.022 < .05) and a correlation of social strategies and enjoyment of language learning ($r = 0.364$) which was significant at the level of p<.05 (0.031).
4. DISCUSSION
Contrary to previous studies with Russian and Spanish EFL students (O’Malley & Chamot 1990:126-127) which reported that learners use more cognitive than metacognitive strategies, the students in the present study reported using metacognitive strategies more frequently than any other type. This is probably related to a) the fact that they are quite proficient, mature learners and users and b) that they had already followed a course on learning strategies which improved their knowledge of what each strategy does and raised their awareness of strategy use. It is very promising, however, that the students also use cognitive strategies at a high level as they need both types for successful management of their learning and for working with the language they are studying in a variety of specific tasks in different situations.

Among the answers that received the highest scores for metacognitive strategies were statements such as: “I pay attention when somebody is speaking English”, “I try to find out how to be a better learner of English”, “I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better”, and “I think about my progress in learning English” which correspond respectively to the strategies of paying attention, finding out about language learning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluating. As for the group of cognitive strategies, most students’ answers referred to statements such as: “I try not to translate word-for-word”, “I try to talk like native English speakers do”, “I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English”, “I read for pleasure in English”, and “I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand”. These answers correspond to the strategies of avoiding direct translation, practicing naturalistically, imitating native speakers – a form of repetition – and analysing expressions respectively.

Compensation strategies along with Social strategies, which are both used at a medium level, are the type of strategies requiring interaction with other people. Here the students showed that they can handle limitations of linguistic knowledge fairly well and that they don’t hesitate to ask questions for understanding and clarification. They seem to favour statements such as “If I can’t think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing”, “I read English without looking up every new word”, and “To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses” which correspond respectively to the strategies of using circumlocution or synonym and guessing. Also the statements “I ask questions in English” and “If I don’t understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again” received good scores. They relate to the social strategies of asking for clarification or verification and asking for correction. On the other hand,
statements like "I practise English with other students" and "I ask for help from English speakers" corresponding to the strategy of cooperation as well as the statement "I try to learn about the culture of English people" which refers to the strategy of empathising with others did not receive very high scores. Presumably, both the fact that this group shared a common L1 and that they learnt English in a foreign language environment did not favour the development of these strategies since objectively they cannot be practised very naturally.

The results on memory strategies are in line with other research which has shown that university students rarely report that they use this group of strategies (Nyikos & Oxford, 1987, Reiss, 1985 in Oxford, 1990; Mochizuki, 1999). As regards the present study, however, I think that it was the selection of statements in the SILL such as "I use rhymes to remember new English words", "I use flashcards to remember new English words", or "I physically act out new English words" that brought low scores. University students of English are beyond such an early stage of learning tricks and use more sophisticated memory strategies such as "I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English" or "I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them" which gave higher scores. Therefore, the students preferred memory strategies such as association and elaboration, and placing new words into a context.

Affective strategies brought the lowest score. Especially the statement "I write down my feelings in a language learning diary" received the lowest score. This suggests that learners must be trained to keep such a diary after it has been made clear to them that the activity will help them progress with their learning. On the whole, learners need informed training in the use of affective strategies since, they either don’t see how useful this type of strategies can be to them or they see it as a luxury compared to more direct types of learning strategies. On the other hand, if their levels of proficiency, motivation and enjoyment of language learning are sufficient for their studies, such learners may not need to make a frequent use of this type of strategies.

The positive results of the correlation in one of the two self-evaluative statements of the students on language proficiency and strategy use showed that there is a relationship \( r = 0.375 \), \( p \text{-value} = 0.026 \) which implies that learners who want to increase their language competence and approach that of the native speakers, will make medium to high overall use of strategies. The same group of students for the same question makes high use of cognitive strategies. However, having no correlation between the students’ self-evaluation of "their proficiency as compared with the proficiency of other students in class" and their strategy use may be
indicative of the wrong evaluations of the students’ own levels of proficiency, as it was not clear to them how they should judge themselves when comparing with other students. My initial assumption that third-year university students are quite competent in English and, therefore, the subjects did not need an objective evaluation of their proficiency was probably wrong and I should not have relied only on my assumption.

The students’ expressed motivation to learn English and their medium to high-level use of strategies showed a correlation of 0.376, which was significant at the level of p<.05 (0.026). Also Oxford and Nyikos (1989) had strongly pointed out that “the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies” (p. 294). I cannot claim, however, that in this study the students’ motivation was “the single most powerful influence” as the r value was only (r = 0.375) but certainly there is sufficient indication of influence, which can lead to positive statements.

The results of the correlation coefficient between enjoyment of language learning and low use of affective strategies (r = -0.385, p-value = 0.022<.05) are understandable since, if enjoyment is so high (97.14%) one does not need affective strategies to give them emotional support during the learning process. Also the correlation coefficient between medium use of social strategies and enjoyment of language learning (r = 0.364) justifies the students’ preferences in asking questions for clarification and correction as it was noticed above.

5. CONCLUSION
This study has shown that Greek university students of English use metacognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently than any other type of strategies. This indicates that their goal is directed towards learning rather than communication. Moreover, within these two groups, the individual strategies, which seem to be favoured by the students, point towards accuracy rather than fluency. This is indicative of the learning situation in Greece. Greek learners are not encouraged to be ‘constructivist’ learners and don’t view language learning holistically. Their teaching has been transmission orientated, where the language is segmented and taught as a series of exercises for practice.

The students’ choice of strategies was also found to be related to factors such as their self-evaluation of their proficiency when compared with native speakers and their motivation for learning English whereas enjoyment of language learning did not seem to relate to their overall use of strategies. The same applies to the students’ self-evaluation of their proficiency when compared with other students-in-class. Proficiency and motivation, as is reported in other studies as well, do play a role in the selection and use of
strategies. As to factors, which were not examined in the present study, probably age, gender, and proficiency when tested more objectively, might show stronger correlation with strategy use. This is a hypothesis for a future study.

Also the SILL test did not prove very appropriate for this kind of learners, namely, young, female adults who were not in their initial stages of foreign language learning since several of the SILL statements did not reflect their learning and communicating practices. Consequently, a different questionnaire, corresponding more accurately to the learners’ profile, should be written and administered in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
I am deeply grateful to Elena Bedisti, who is currently studying for a PhD at Reading, for the endless hours she spent with the statistical analysis of the data and for her tutoring me on how to interpret the statistics. I am also grateful to her for the lovely pie charts and diagrams she produced for the pictorial representation of the results of the investigation.

References