Profiling strategy use of upper elementary vs. junior secondary minority school children learning English as a second language

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Abstract

The present study, which is the first large-scale (N=1584) study with a sample of Minority Schools in Greece, reports on the descriptive statistics of the data collected within the frame of Thales project 379335 entitled “ADJUSTMENT OF S.I.L.L IN GREEK AND TURKISH AND STRATEGIC PROFILING OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS AND TEACHERS-S.I.L.L.G.T” by using the validated for school-aged children (Petrogiannis & Gavriilidou 2015) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7 (Oxford 1990), the most widely used instrument for measuring the frequency of language learning strategies (LLS). In the present study the instrument was implemented in order to identify and define individual LLS used by students of upper elementary and junior secondary Greek schools who learn English as a foreign language. It was found that both upper elementary and junior secondary students use more metacognitive strategies while they rarely employ cognitive strategies. However, the individual strategies used are different among the two age groups. The findings of this study suggest a number of implications for classroom activities promoting language learning strategy use.

Keywords: language learning strategy use, minority schools in Greece, S.I.L.L.

1. Introduction

Oxford 1989; Oxford & Nyikos 1989; Politzer & McGroarty 1985), and language teaching methods (Ehrman & Oxford 1989; Griffiths 2008; Oxford & Nyikos 1989; Politzer 1983) on LLS use have also been investigated in detail. The most frequently used instrument in LLS research is the SILL. This instrument groups LLS into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. The present study builds on previous research using the SILL (Dreyer & Oxford 1996; Ehrman & Oxford 1989, Green & Oxford 1995; Lan & Oxford 2003; Nyikos 1990; O’Mara & Lett 1990; Oxford et al. 1993; Oxford & Nyikos 1989; Phillips 1990; Watanabe 1990) and especially its adapted version for school-aged children which was created within the frame of the Thales project S.I.L.L.G.T (Agathopoulou 2016; Gavriilidou & Petrogiannis 2016; Kambakis-Vougouklis 2016; Kazamia 2016; Mitits 2014; Mitits & Gavriilidou 2014; Mitits, Psaltou-Joycey & Sougari 2016; Platsidou & Kantaridou 2014; Platsidou & Sipitanou 2014; Psaltou-Joycey et al. 2014; Sarafianou & Gavriilidou 2015). However, most previous research focused on overall strategy use or on the different strategy categories (see above) with the exception of Green and Oxford (1995) who examined individual strategies as well as overall strategy use and strategy categories. The present large-scale study reports results of the variation in the use of individual strategies of students of minority upper elementary and junior secondary schools in Greece.

It was held in the frame of Thales project entitled “ADJUSTMENT OF S.I.L.L IN GREEK AND TURKISH AND STRATEGIC PROFILING OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS AND TEACHERS-S.I.L.L.G.T”. The project involved 4 universities under the scientific supervision of Prof. Zoe Gavriilidou (Democritus University of Thrace as the coordinating university, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Macedonia of Thessaloniki, and the Hellenic Open University). Its aims were to: (a) shorten, translate, simplify and culturally adapt Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) in Greek and Turkish and administer the resulted inventory to school-aged students (the 3 upper grades of primary and the 3 grades of lower secondary schools), (b) profile the language learning strategy use of the population attending Greek state mainstream and minority primary and secondary schools in Greece when learning English as a foreign language, (c) identify the factors related to students’ choice of language learning strategies, (d) construct and validate an instrument based on the SILL for profiling EFL teachers’ language learning strategy promotion in class, (e)
profile teachers’ strategic profile, and (f) provide language teachers and education policy makers with a guide containing activities that promote strategic teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 LLS use of upper elementary and junior secondary students

A brief look at published research on LLS so far revealed that the majority of studies involved mainly university students or adult learners of SL/FL. Few studies (e.g. Chen 2009; Kaylani 1996; Magogwe & Oliver 2007; Mitits 2014; Sarafianou 2013; Vrettou 2009) investigated high-school students learning English as SL/FL, while LLS use of children under 13 years has been inadequately addressed in the past (see for example the work of Gavriilidou 2004; Gunning 1999, 2011; Magogwe & Oliver 2007; Papanis 2008; Vrettou 2011).

All these studies demonstrated that more successful students used more strategies overall and that children used, more or less, the same categories of strategies as adolescents and adults. However differences have been attested as far as individual strategies are concerned.

Comparing the preference of the types of strategies between upper elementary, secondary students and adults, it was found that upper elementary students used more affective, compensation (Gunning 1999, 2011) and social strategies (Magogwe & Oliver 2007). Gavriilidou (2004) reported on the strategies that bilingual elementary school children (aged 8-12) used when they learned Greek as an L2. She found that metacognitive and cognitive strategy use was increased with age while socio-affective strategy use decreased. Papanis (2008) found that Muslim elementary school students in Greece preferred metacognitive strategies. Mitits, Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari (2016) also found that Greek upper elementary students used metacognitive strategies more than any other category. The same result was reported in Platsidou and Sipitanou (2014). Vrettou (2011) recorded the frequency of use in upper elementary students who are learning English at school and investigated the effects of gender, proficiency and motivation. She found that her sample favoured metacognitive strategies and that females exceeded males in the use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. In addition, there was a correlation between motivation and frequency of language learning strategies reported by the participants.

Junior secondary students, on the other hand, used more compensation (Chen 2009) and metacognitive strategies (Ardasheva & Tretter 2013; Magogwe & Oliver
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(2007) compared to university students who reported greater use of cognitive strategies (Green & Oxford 1995). Mitits (2014), focused on monolingual and multilingual adolescent learners in Thrace, north-eastern Greece, aged 12 to 15 learning English as a foreign language and Greek as a second language. She found that her sample showed a strong preference for affective, followed by metacognitive strategies. She also found differences in the frequency and type of strategies preferred by monolingual and multilingual learners of English. Moreover, statistically significant effects of gender, age, language proficiency level in English and motivation to learn English were evidenced. In her study, girls outperformed boys with respect to the overall strategy use and cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social categories; junior secondary students used fewer memory and cognitive strategies as they grew up while they increased the use of compensation and affective strategies. It was also found that language proficiency level and motivation are positively correlated with the frequency of reported language learning strategies. In their study, Mitits, Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari (2016) found that junior secondary students used more affective followed by metacognitive strategies. Finally, Sarafianou (2013) assessed the effectiveness of an intervention program on a group of upper secondary school students which was based on the application of explicit and integrated strategy instruction. The findings indicated that before and after strategy training her sample used more affective followed by compensation strategies. She also found that after the intervention the students of the experimental group showed significant improvement in strategy use as a whole as well as in all strategy categories, with the exception of compensation strategies (see also Sarafianou & Gavriilidou 2015).

2.2 LLS use of students belonging to the Muslim minority in Greece

The Muslim minority of Thrace consists of a) Turkish-speaking populations who became Greek citizens in May 1920, when western Thrace became part of Greece and Turkish became the only officially recognised language of the minority population, b) Pomaks, a Muslim Slavic-speaking community who live in the area around Xanthi, Western Thrace and c) Muslim Roma who also live in Thrace and speak Turkish, and Roma who speak Romany (the language of the Rom). Muslim minority schools are situated in the northeastern part of Greece (in Thrace which is part of the Periphery of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace). Actually, according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Greek state must provide segregated primary education for the Muslim minority
living in Thrace (Greece) which is a region situated at the North-east part of Greece. The curriculum in the minority primary schools is divided in two: half of the subjects are taught in Greek (history, geography, environmental studies, Greek language) by teachers with a Greek L1 and half in Turkish (religion, physics, chemistry, Turkish language) by L1 Turkish-speaking teachers. English is taught as a foreign language. In the region of Thrace, there are also minority secondary schools in which the curriculum includes subjects taught in Greek (Greek language, literature, history, geography, civil education) and in Turkish (Turkish language, religion, physics, mathematics).

Little is known about LLS use preferences of the specific population in Greece. Papanis (2008) was the first to investigate the effect of an intervention program teaching language learning strategy use to Muslim bilingual minority children attending minority elementary schools in the region of Thrace, northern Greece. He found that students that followed the intervention program reported higher frequency of metacognitive and cognitive strategy use. Gavriilidou and Papanis (2009) investigated the effect of integrated strategy instruction by implementing a direct strategy instruction program on primary school children of the Muslim minority background in Thrace and found that students that participated in the intervention program improved to a statistically significant degree the language learning strategies required for the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing when compared to the students that followed the typical curriculum.

Finally, Gavriilidou and Petrogiannis (2016), investigated strategy use of Muslim children attending minority schools in Greece and confirmed, with a much larger sample, previous studies by Papanis (2008) as well as Gavriilidou and Papanis (2009) who reported a significantly higher use of metacognitive strategies.

2. Purpose and rationale
The purpose of this study is to investigate variation in the use of individual strategies of students of minority upper elementary and junior secondary schools in Greece as well as overall strategy use and strategy categories.

3. Methods
3.1 Participants
The sample consisted of 1584 students attending minority schools in Greece from September 2014 to June 2015. From the total sample, 1046 attended elementary schools and 538 were studying in junior secondary schools.

3.2 **Instrumentation**

The main instrument used in the study was the 29-item translated and adapted Greek version of the v.07 SILL (Oxford 1990) which was adjusted for school population during the exploratory phase of the project Thales (Petrogiannis & Gavriilidou 2015). This 5-point Likert-type scale instrument asks learners to report the frequency with which they use certain language learning strategies. The items are organised under two broader factors, i.e. direct and indirect learning strategies, depending on the extent to which each strategy item is involved in language learning (Oxford 1990). In addition, the items are further distributed under six factors: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

3.3 **Procedure**

Respondents received instructions to fill in the 29-item SILL and the background questionnaire in their classrooms following the necessary permissions by the central and local educational authorities.

4. **Results**

An analysis based on a 5-point Likert scale used in the SILL, reflecting frequency of use bands, was performed to reveal the pattern of responses (reflecting the FLL strategic profile) given by the minority schools’ student sample, i.e. to indicate the most and less frequently reported strategy items for learning English language as second language. The computation of the means was executed for the two sub-samples, elementary and junior secondary minority schools and Figure 1 presents the items with the lower and higher mean frequency responded items for the primary school group.
The most used strategies of minority primary school children were the following items (in parentheses the strategy category that each items belongs):

- I pay attention when someone is speaking in English (4,38) (Metacognitive)
- I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better (4,27) (Metacognitive)
- I review English lessons often (4,04) (Memory)
- I practice the sounds of English (4,03) (Cognitive)
- I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English (3,91) (Metacognitive)
The least used strategies of minority primary school children were the following items:

- I look for people I can talk to in English (2.99) (Metacognitive)
- I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English (2.97) (Cognitive)
- I start conversations in English (2.94) (Cognitive)
- I use flashcards to remember new English words (2.39) (Memory)
- I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English (2.27) (Cognitive)

The same procedures were repeated for the minority secondary school children and Figure 2 presents the items with the lower and higher mean frequency items.

*Figure 2: Most and less frequently used items by junior secondary education minority students*
The most used strategies of minority secondary school children were the following items (in parentheses the strategy category that each items belongs):

- I pay attention when someone is speaking in English (3.77) (Metacognitive)
- I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better (3.55) (Metacognitive)
- To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses (3.44) (Compensation)
- I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English (3.39) (Metacognitive)
- I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English (3.28) (Memory)

Whereas the least used strategies of minority secondary school children were:

- 1. I write notes messages, letters or reports in English (2.70) (Cognitive)
- 2. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English (2.59) (Cognitive)
- 3. I look for people I can talk to in English (2.52) (Metacognitive)
- 4. I start conversations in English (2.47) (Cognitive)
- 5. I use flashcards to remember new English words (2.29) (Memory)

The above presentation also indicated that there were some items that were constantly common between the two sub-samples and most specifically for the most frequently used were “I pay attention when someone is speaking in English”, “I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better”, “I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English”. The least frequently used were “I look for people I can talk to in English”, “I start conversations in English”, “I use flashcards to remember new English words”, “I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English”.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the frequency and types of strategies used by minority upper elementary and junior secondary students. It was found that students attending minority schools in Thrace reported using, in descending order, metacognitive strategies for controlling their learning process (see also Green &
Oxford 1995), affective strategies, for controlling and manipulating their feelings related to learning, compensation strategies, for overcoming deficiencies in the learning process or foreign language use, social strategies for interacting with their peers, memory strategies, to memorise new grammatical, semantic or syntactic information and finally cognitive strategies, for associating new information with existing information and for forming mental patterns.

How can we account for the fact that the sample used more metacognitive strategies? Metacognitive strategies are used by FL learners in order to exercise executive control of their learning through planning and evaluating their own progress in learning process. They are considered strategies that contribute the most to effective language learning and they are usually preferred by good language learners (Kaylani 1996). Metacognition is knowing about knowing or thinking about thinking, put another way, it is the active process of understanding the cognitive processes involved in learning and having control over those processes (Baker 2000, 2006). Metacognition is highly related with bilingualism (Baker 2000; Peal & Lambert 1962; Wharton 2000). Baker (2000) maintains that students who are literate in both first and second languages have a greater flexibility and a metacognitive advantage over monolinguals because of the rich resources they bring to the understanding of the second language from their knowledge of the first. Given that the minority sample of this study consists of bilinguals, it could be assumed that they are provided with opportunities to reflect on language and its structure and meaning in such a manner allowing them to focus on the process of their learning. In other words, their preference to deploy metacognitive strategic procedures (such as monitoring, planning, evaluating, problem solving and implementing) may indicate their effort for self-management which can be defined as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn L2 (Oxford 2011; Rubin 2001, 2005). This might explain the high use of metacognitive strategies by students attending minority schools revealed in this study.

However, metacognitive strategies are reported to be highly used not only by bilinguals attending minority schools in Greece, but also by various age groups in Greece (Gavriilidou & Petrogiannis 2016; Psaltou-Joycey & Sougari 2010; Vrettou, 2011) or elsewhere (Chamot & El-Dinary 1999). This means that bilingualism is not the unique factor to explain greater use of metacognitive strategies. To account for the greater use of metacognitive strategies found in recent research, more research is
needed to better define the complex metacognitive construct, which includes knowledge of person variables, individual knowledge of one's own learning processes, knowledge of task variables, knowledge about both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, as well as conditional knowledge about when and where it is appropriate to use such strategies.

6. Conclusions
This study provides insights about strategies frequently used in minority schools in Greece. We demonstrated that our sample used more metacognitive strategies overall. Given the importance of LLS in the language learning process these results suggest a number of implications and an extension for classroom activities in minority school classes.

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