Language learning strategy use and proficiency:

The relationship between patterns of reported language learning strategy (LLS) use by speakers of other languages (SOL) and proficiency with implications for the teaching/learning situation

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with the premise that strategies are important if students are to learn effectively, and that this applies no less to language than to any other field of learning. After issues of terminology and definition are addressed, there is a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the language learning strategy concept. Since the concept of proficiency is also central to the thesis, issues relating to the definition and assessment of proficiency are considered before previous research in the language learning strategy field is reviewed.

This research was carried out in three stages in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand. Part A, Section 1 used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) as the basic instrument to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency and to examine the strategy patterns used by more proficient students. Part A, Section 2 used the same data to investigate language learning strategy use according to learner variables (nationality, gender, age). Part B used interviews to investigate language learning strategy use by individuals and Part C used a classroom based programme to explore means of instructing students in language learning strategy use and also to construct an original questionnaire using student input (the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory or ELLSI). This questionnaire was used to further investigate the relationship between language learning strategy use and proficiency and also changes in strategy use over time as well as teachers' perspectives on language learning strategy use.

The results of the SILL phase of the study revealed a significant relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency (a finding supported by the results of the ELLSI study) and also significant differences in strategy use according to nationality, while the interviews revealed some useful insights regarding the use of language learning strategies by individuals. From the longitudinal section of the study it was found that those students who made the most progress were the ones who most increased the frequency of their language learning strategy use. The results of the teachers' survey indicated that teachers regarded language learning strategies as highly important, an encouraging result in terms of positive implications for a good accord between teachers and students in the teaching/learning situation. The classroom programme, however, aimed at exploring ways to promote language learning strategy use among students, was only a lukewarm success and much work remains to be done to find ways of making insights regarding language learning strategies available to students.

The thesis concludes by bringing together the key findings and suggesting areas for further research.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Professor Rebecca Oxford, whose article co-authored with John Green (1995) provided the initial impetus for this research, and for whose advice and support over the time involved in this project I have been most grateful.

Also to my father, who encouraged me in everything I ever did, but who is not here to see the end of this project

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS

CAE Cambridge Advanced English

CC	Communicative competence
CPE	Cambridge Proficiency in English
ELLSI	English Language Learning Strategy Inventory
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
FCE	First Certificate in English
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IL	Interlanguage
LLS	Language learning strategy
OPT	Oxford Placement Test
QPT	Quick Placement Test
SILL	Strategy Inventory for Language Learning
SOL	Speakers of other languages
TOEFL	Testing of English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

Overall aims of the study

As Wenden (1985) reminds us, there is an old proverb which states: "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime". Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this proverb might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. But if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they may be empowered to manage their own learning.

Over the years, a great deal of effort has gone into developing theories, methods and approaches for *teaching* language (such as the Grammar Translation Method, audiolingualism and the communicative approach to mention but three of the best known and most widely used). However, issues relating to the learner have been treated with “relative neglect” (Dansereau, 1978, p.78) and much less attention has been paid to the language development process from the *learning* point of view (Tarone and Yule, 1989). Although valuable work has been and continues to be done on questions of how language is learnt, when it is considered that the learner forms one half of the teaching/learning partnership, it might be considered surprising that, in

general, we have “underestimated the significance of the learner’s role” (Larsen-Freeman 2001: 12)

More than a quarter of a century ago researchers such as Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) explored the possibility that success in language learning might be related to *how* students go about the task. More recently, writers such as O’Malley (1987), Oxford (1990), Wenden (1991), Cohen (1998) and Chamot (2001) have suggested that learners might be able to learn language more effectively by the use of language learning strategies.

The general concept of using strategies to enhance learning is not new. Generations of us must have used the first-letter mnemonic strategy to remember information such as the colours of the rainbow (Roy G. Biv = red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet) and the order of the elements in chemistry. Gage and Berliner (1992) discuss a number of general learning strategies, such as highlighting important ideas and summarising. These strategies are often so simple that it is easy for experienced students to take them for granted, but it must be remembered that the strategies themselves had to be learnt initially before they could be used to enhance other learning, and some students never manage to acquire this kind of procedural knowledge.

More specifically in the area of language learning strategies for speakers of other languages, as a teacher I often show my students how to break down words they do not know into recognisable units. The word “insubordinate” which we met recently, for instance, can be divided into in=not, sub=lower, ordinate=order/rank, therefore an

adjective for one who does not behave according to his/her lower rank. Many students have never been shown how to carry out this simple exercise and are not aware that it is even possible. Yet such a simple strategy can unlock the mysteries of some quite intimidating vocabulary. Another well-known vocabulary-related strategy is the *linkword* method developed by Gruneberg (1987), which involves linking words in the first and second language to construct a picture in the mind. Oxford (1990) suggests many other language learning strategies such as using flashcards or semantic mapping (creating a diagram with the key concept connected by lines or arrows to related concepts).

Talking of learning strategies in general (rather than language learning strategies specifically), Gage and Berliner (1992, p.302) suggest that a possible reason for the effectiveness of such strategies is that they require the learner to be "more active cognitively" than a learner who is less strategically engaged in the task. The contribution of theories of cognitive psychology to the development of language learning strategy theory will be discussed further in **CHAPTER 2**. According to a cognitive view, the language learner is seen as "an active participant in the learning process, using various mental strategies in order to sort out the system of the language to be learned" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p.13). This conception, according to which the student must actively process linguistic information, "places great responsibility on the learner" (Bialystok, 1991, p.77) since learners become no longer passive receptacles for knowledge, but thinking participants who can influence their own learning and who must share responsibility for the development of language.

According to O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985, p.43) language learning strategies have the potential to be “an extremely powerful learning tool”. However, as a result of their study they concluded that many students used language learning strategies “inefficiently” (p.43). Although this was written nearly 20 years ago, according to Larsen-Freeman (2001), the contribution of the learner to the learning process is still underestimated. She goes on to argue that the learner is not “merely a passive recipient” and that language learning is not merely a “unilateral process…..dependent on some benevolent, skilful, more proficient interlocutor” (p.12). Larsen-Freeman suggests that, in order to effect change in perceptions of the learner’s role in the learning process, we need to discover more about what learners do to learn successfully. The desire to contribute to further knowledge and understanding in this area has been the motivation for the current study.

First of all, this study aimed to investigate whether there was, in fact, a relationship between proficiency and reported frequency of language learning strategy use by students in the current research situation (for details of the research setting see **CHAPTER 3**). An existing instrument (the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL – see **CHAPTER 3** for details) was used in the initial stages of the study in order to situate the study within the existing research tradition and to facilitate comparison with other studies in the field.

The study then sought to answer questions relating to patterns of reported language learning strategy use by students of varying levels of proficiency; to how these patterns relate to learner variables such as nationality, sex and age; to how applicable

the overall reported language learning strategy patterns are to individuals; to changes in reported frequency of language learning strategy use over time and how these changes might relate to progress in learning language; to teachers' perspectives on language learning strategy use by their students; and to how insights regarding frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency might be made available to students. It was anticipated that new insights emerging as a result of the above series of questions would contribute usefully to the body of knowledge already existing in the field of language learning strategies.

Key terms

The language learning strategy field is characterised by lack of consensus; indeed there is a great deal of uncertainty over the very term *strategy* itself, as noted by O'Malley *et al* (1985, p.22) who comment on the "considerable confusion" surrounding the term. Since this concept is central to this thesis, before proceeding further it is important to establish an understanding of this key term as it is used in the context of the present study, along with an understanding of the term used for those doing the learning, namely *speakers of other languages*.

Strategies

Although used by many prominent writers in the field (such as O'Malley *et al*, 1985; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975) the term *strategy* is not uncontroversial. Consensus is not

assisted by some writers' use of conflicting terminology such as *learning behaviours* (Politzer and McGroarty, 1985; Wesche, 1977), *tactics* (Seliger, 1984) and *techniques* (Stern, 1992). These rival terms are used more or less (but not always exactly) synonymously with the term *strategy* as used elsewhere in the literature. This point will be discussed further in the following chapter.

In the face of this controversy, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p.199) opt for the term *strategy* since, as they point out, Rubin used it "in perhaps the earliest study in this area and it enjoys the widest currency today". For this reason, *strategy* is the term which will be used for the purposes of the present work, although it is acknowledged that it is not the only term which has been, or which might be, used to cover the behaviours involved.

Having decided on terminology, defining what language learning strategies are is not uncomplicated. For the purposes of this study, the term language learning strategy will be used to include specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language. Issues related to definition will be discussed under **Definition of language learning strategies** in **CHAPTER 2**.

Speakers of other languages

No less controversial is the term for those who use language learning strategies. Many writers (for instance Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Sharwood Smith, 1994) opt for the term *second language learners*, even though it

may be used "somewhat confusingly" (Ellis, 1994, p.12). The term is confusing because it does not allow for the many students who may already be multilingual and who may be in the process of learning a third, fourth or subsequent language. There is also frequently confusion between the terms *second language* (studied in the environment where the language is spoken, for instance Somalis studying English in New Zealand and intending to stay in New Zealand) and *foreign language* (studied in an environment other than where it is spoken, for instance French as it is taught in England or New Zealand).

The term *ESOL* (English for speakers of other languages), as favoured by publications such as *TESOL Quarterly, TESOL Matters* and *TESOLANZ Journal*, has arisen partly to avoid this confusion. However, even this attempt at rationalisation is not without its problems, since, in addition to being rather long and clumsy, it would, by implication, seem to want to divide the languages of the world into English and "others". It also restricts the field of study to learners of English when, in fact, a lot of interesting and valuable work has been done using speakers of English learning other languages.

Other terms such as *non-native, non-primary, non-English-speaking background* have been used, but the intrinsically negative perspective of these terms makes them less than universally acceptable. Still others such as *additional language* or *additive language* tend either to make the language sound marginalised or like a brand of food or petrol!

Unfortunately, the universally acceptable term for the field of teaching language to students who already speak other languages has yet to be coined, but for the purposes

of the present work, the term *speakers of other languages* (SOL) will be used since it at least avoids the confusion between second language and foreign language. It also allows for the possibility that the student may speak any number of other languages and avoids the negative aspects of terms like *non-native*, *non-primary*, and *non-English-speaking background*, while not limiting the study to learners of English (although learners of English are the main focus of this study).

Design of the Study

Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford, 1990) as the initial instrument for investigating reported frequency of language learning strategy use, the direction of the current study evolved over time as results from one section suggested further potentially useful lines of research

Part A, Sections 1 and 2 used the SILL as a base for exploring the possibility of a correlation between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency, for examining patterns of reported language learning strategy use by students who are speakers of other languages, and for investigating reported language learning strategy use according to learner variables. (For further details regarding the SILL, see Materials, **CHAPTER 3**). The SILL was initially given to all the students studying at a private English language school in New Zealand at a particular point in time and collected after the opportunity had been given for discussion and an exchange of ideas about how to learn effectively. Subsequently, the SILL was given to, and data gathered from, new students as they entered the school during their first

week. This was done as part of the programme of a special Study Skills class designed to initiate them to the school, to give them an opportunity to reflect on their language learning strategy use and, perhaps, to gather useful ideas for effective learning by input from the teacher and by exchanging ideas with other students. (For more details about this class, see **CHAPTER 6**)

Since learners are individuals, and infinitely variable (Skehan, 1988), individual students were interviewed in Part B in order to investigate how the overall picture emerging from the SILL results in Part A related to students on an individual basis. Student interviewees were of varying levels of proficiency, came from a variety of nationalities, and also varied in sex and age. It was hoped that the wide variety of individual characteristics exemplified by the student interviewees would provide a comprehensive picture of how individual students report going about learning language. Following the interviews, the data were examined for patterns of reported language learning strategy use from which student profiles were constructed and a list of key strategies reportedly used by the students who had made the most progress or who had been successful in their examinations was composed. (For further details, see **Method**, **CHAPTER 5**)

This list of key strategies was found to include many items not listed in the SILL. It was therefore decided to attempt to obtain a more representative list of the strategies reportedly used by students at the private English language school by constructing an original language learning strategy survey using student input during the weekly Study Skills class. The resultant ELLSI (English Language Learning Strategy Inventory) was administered to provide statistical data for Part C of the study. (For

further details of the ELLSI, see Materials, **CHAPTER 6**). In addition to being examined for a statistical relationship between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency and for patterns of reported language learning strategy use (as was the SILL), the ELLSI was used in a longitudinal study which aimed to explore reported changes in language learning strategy use over time. Teachers were also included in Part C of the research, and the Study Skills class was assessed in terms of its effectiveness as a means of making insights regarding language learning strategies available to students. (For further details, see Data collection procedures, **CHAPTER 6**).

It was anticipated that the use of a variety of data collection methods and instruments (the value of which is argued by Chaudron (1986), Gu, Wen and Wu (1995) and White (1993), among others) would enable a relatively thorough examination of the reported use of language learning strategies by speakers of other languages to be effected. Ultimately, insights from all of these phases of the study, hopefully contributing to and extending our previous knowledge in the field of language learning strategy use by speakers of other languages, were brought together in the concluding discussion.

How this study differs from previous studies

Previous studies have done much valuable work in the field of language learning strategies. Building on this previous work, the present study differed from, and aimed to add to, earlier research in several important ways.

Firstly, this study concentrated on what learners report *doing* to achieve success in language learning. Previous studies often did not distinguish between what learners do (actions) and what they *are* (characteristics), such as "not inhibited" (Rubin, 1975, p.47), "tolerant" (Stern, 1975, p.312) or "active" (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978, p.225). Although learner characteristics may influence what learners do (an issue which is further explored in **CHAPTER 4**) and may be reflected in learning style (further discussed in **Definition of language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2**), these characteristics and styles are qualitatively different from the actual strategies, and care should be taken to keep the two concepts separate.

Most previous studies have aimed to identify (for instance Naiman *et al*, 1978; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) or classify (for instance O'Malley *et al*, 1985; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1981) strategy items. After the initial exploration of a statistical correlation between reported language learning strategy use and proficiency, this study looked for **patterns** of reported strategy use which vary according to proficiency, in order that knowledge of the patterns reportedly used by more proficient students might be made available to less proficient students.

I am not aware of any other studies which have looked, as this one did, at how reported strategy use changes over time and how such changes relate to proficiency. As Ellis (1994) comments, nearly all the studies in this field have been cross-sectional in nature. As a result we know very little about how language learning strategy use develops. Ellis (1994, p.559) describes longitudinal studies as "sorely needed".

By setting up a classroom programme, this study explored ways of promoting strategy awareness and use among students. As Nunan (1995, p.1) comments, such research is still "relatively uncommon". This is, perhaps, surprising, given that the potential for language learning strategies to enhance learning has long been recognised (for instance O'Malley *et al*, 1985), and more interest in researching how to promote their use in a teaching/learning situation might have been expected.

Included in this study was an investigation of language learning strategies from teachers' points of view. Other studies (such as that by O'Malley *et al*, 1985) have abandoned this approach as unproductive. It was decided to persist with this aspect of the study in the context of the present research, however, since teachers' perspectives are an important component of the teaching/learning partnership.

This study used a multi-method approach, whereas most other studies have generally used a single method (such as interviews or questionnaires) or, where more than one approach has been attempted, often only one has been successful (such as the study by O'Malley *et al*, 1985). The question of language learning strategy use, however, is a complex one, and in order to obtain a useful and thorough picture, this study approached the subject using both questionnaires and interviews, involving both groups and individuals, canvassing both students and teachers and taking both cross-sectional and longitudinal views.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND RESEARCH REVIEW

Before proceeding with details of the current study, it is essential to consider several central issues which underpin the concepts of language learning strategies and of proficiency, and to review the existing research which forms the background against which the present thesis is undertaken.

Language learning strategies have been notoriously difficult to define (for instance Cohen, 1998; Ellis, 1994; O'Malley *et al*, 1985; Wenden and Rubin, 1987). Before proceeding with the research, however, it is necessary first of all to achieve a working definition of what a language learning strategy is in order that a clear understanding is established of the subject of the study. Secondly, if language learning strategies are to be recognised for their potential to contribute to the process of learning language, it is important to reach an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of language learning strategies and of where they are situated in the pedagogical literature and in the theoretical accounts of how language is learnt. Thirdly, since the study concerns the dual concepts of language learning strategies and proficiency, the questions of how proficiency is defined and assessed must be addressed in order to explain the standard used when relating proficiency to language learning strategy use. And finally, as with any investigation, it is vital that the current study is placed within the framework of existing research results in order to avoid duplication and in order that

this previous work may be built on and extended in a way which provides a useful contribution to our understanding of how language is learnt.

These four components which are pivotal to the current study (definition of language learning strategies, language learning strategy theory, definition and assessment of proficiency, and previous research into language learning strategies) will be addressed in turn in this chapter.

Definition of language learning strategies

Although difficulties remain even at the basic level of terminology (see **Key terms**, **CHAPTER 1**), awareness has been slowly growing of the importance of the strategies used by learners in the language learning process. By recognising that "learning begins with the learner", Nyikos and Oxford (1993, p.11) acknowledge the basic reality that, like the proverbial horse led to water but which must do the drinking itself, even with the best teachers and methods, students are the only ones who can actually do the learning. This growing awareness has resulted in more recent years in what Skehan (1989, p.285) calls an "explosion of activity" in the field of language learning strategy research. In spite of this activity, however, defining and classifying language learning strategies remains no easy task. Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.7) talk of "the elusive nature of the term", Ellis (1994, p.529) describes the concept as "fuzzy", Cohen (1998, p.3) talks of "conflicting views", while O'Malley *et al* (1985, p.22) put it this way:

> There is no consensus on what constitutes a learning strategy in second language learning or how these differ from other types of learner activities. Learning, teaching and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and are often applied to the same behaviour. Further, even within the group of activities most often referred to as learning strategies, there is considerable confusion about definitions of specific strategies and about the hierarchic relationship among strategies.

One of the earliest researchers in this field, Rubin (1975, p.43) provided a very broad definition of learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". In 1981 she identified two kinds of learning strategies: those which contribute directly to learning, and those which contribute indirectly to learning. The direct learning strategies she divided into six types (clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning and practice), and the indirect learning strategies she divided into two types (creating opportunities for practice and production tricks).

The inclusion of strategies related to communication under “production tricks” (Rubin, 1981, p.12) is controversial since learning strategies and communication strategies are seen by some as two quite separate manifestations of language learner behaviour. Brown (1980, p.87), for instance, draws a clear distinction between learning strategies and communication strategies on the grounds that "communication is the output modality and learning is the input modality". Brown suggests that, while a learner generally applies the same fundamental strategies (such as rule transference) used in learning a language to communicating in that language, there are other communication

strategies, such as avoidance or message abandonment, which do not result in learning. Brown (1994, p.118) concedes, however, that "in the arena of linguistic interaction, it is sometimes difficult.....to distinguish between the two".

Strategies for learning and strategies for using (including communication strategies or "devices for compensating for inadequate resources") are regarded by Ellis (1986, p.165) as quite different manifestations of a more general phenomenon which he calls "learner strategies". He argues that it is even possible that successful use of communication strategies may actually prevent language learning, since skilful compensation for lack of linguistic knowledge may obviate the need for learning.

Tarone (1980) takes a different point of view, suggesting that by helping students to say what they want or need to say, communication strategies can help to expand language. Even if the communication is not perfect in grammatical or lexical terms, the process of using the language for communication will expose the learner to language input which may result in learning and which, therefore, may be considered a learning strategy. The key point in this argument would seem to be that in order to be considered a learning strategy rather than a communication strategy the "basic motivation is not to communicate but to learn" (Tarone, 1980, p.419). The problems with differentiating between communication strategies and learning strategies on the grounds of motivation or intention, however, as Tarone (1981) acknowledges, are that we have, in practice, no way of determining what motivates a learner, that learners may have a dual motivation to both learn and communicate, or that learners may learn language even when the basic motivation was to communicate.

These difficulties are recognised also by Faerch and Kasper (1983, p.xvii) who concede: “one particular act of verbal behaviour can have both learning and communication functions”. Dornyei (1995, p.60) also acknowledges that the difference between communication and learning strategies “is not so clear at a closer glance”. As Tarone (1981, p.290) aptly comments, "the relationship of learning strategies to communication strategies is somewhat problematic". This inability to differentiate clearly between communication and learning strategies does nothing to simplify the decision regarding what should or should not be included in learning strategy taxonomies such as Rubin’s (1981) and others’, and leads to what Stern (1992, p.264) acknowledges is “a certain arbitrariness in the classification of learning strategies”. However, even if motivation is difficult (if not, at times, impossible) to determine with certainty, Tarone’s (1980) distinction between language learning strategies and communication strategies in terms of result (that is, language learning strategies result in learning) would seem reasonable.

Working at much the same time as Rubin in the mid-seventies, Stern (1975) produced a list of ten language learning strategies which he believed to be characteristic of good language learners. At the top of the list he put “personal learning style” (p.311). Confusion between the concepts of learning style and learning strategy is another factor which has contributed to difficulties with definition and classification which remain to this day. Stern later defined “strategies” as “broadly conceived intentional directions” (1992, p.261), which is more similar to the definition of the term “styles” as used by other writers such as Willing (1988) and Nunan (1991). The “behavioural manifestations of the strategies” (Stern, 1992, p.261) he called “techniques” - a definition which would fit better with what Rubin (1975) calls “strategies”.

The key distinction drawn by Wenden (1991) between styles and strategies is that styles are “the learner’s characteristic, and consistent way of perceiving, interacting with and responding to the learning environment” (p.36) which are relatively enduring, whereas strategies are “*amenable to change*” (p.18, author’s italics). According to Reid 1998, p.ix), learning styles are “internally based characteristics”, whereas learning strategies are external skills which students use to improve their learning. Learning styles, or “general approaches to learning” (Cohen, 1998, p.15) are therefore related to, but distinct from, language learning strategies, although strategy choice may be influenced by learning style (Wenden, 1991).

When O'Malley *et al* (1985) came to conduct their research, they based their definition on Rigney’s (1978) definition of learning strategies as procedures which facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval and performance. In an attempt to produce a classification scheme with mutually exclusive categories, O’Malley and his colleagues developed a taxonomy of their own, identifying 26 strategies which they divided into three categories: metacognitive (knowing about learning), cognitive (specific to distinct learning activities) and social. The metacognitive and cognitive categories correspond approximately to Rubin’s indirect and direct strategies. However, the addition of the social mediation category was an important step in the direction of acknowledging the importance of interactional strategies in language learning.

Oxford (1990) took this process a step further. She expanded Rigney's original definition and defined language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more

effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). From an extensive review of the literature, Oxford gathered a large number of language learning strategies and, on the basis of factor analyses, divided them into six groups:

memory strategies (which relate to how students remember language)
cognitive strategies (which relate to how students acquire knowledge about language)
compensation strategies (which enable students to make up for limited knowledge)
metacognitive strategies (relating to how students manage the learning process)
affective strategies (relating to students' feelings)
social strategies (which involve learning by interaction with others).

These six categories underlie the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) used by Oxford and others for a great deal of research in the learning strategy field. Issues relating to the items and categories of the SILL will be dealt with in **CHAPTER 3** and at various points later in the thesis.

Cohen (1998) argues for the addition of a further dimension to the definition of language learning strategies: that of consciousness. He believes that the element of conscious choice is important to the language learning strategy concept because "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes *strategies* from those processes that are not strategic" (p.4, author's italics). Cohen argues that learners who select learning strategies must be at least partially aware of them even if they are not attending to them fully.

Amid this welter of overlapping material and conflicting opinion, the process of defining and classifying language learning strategies, and of achieving a satisfactory working definition for the purposes of research, is far from straightforward. However, in the light of the previously discussed issues and opinions, for the purposes of the present research language learning strategies have been defined as specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language. This definition includes Oxford's (1990) concept of language learning strategies as specific actions taken in order to learn language, and also takes into account Cohen's (1998) dimension of conscious selection. Defined this way, language learning strategies are concerned with actions, or what learners *do*, which distinguishes them from learning style (or learners' characteristic ways of going about learning). These actions may involve communicating with others, but go beyond the point where the immediate communicative goal has been achieved to the point where learning, which may be used on later occasions, results.

Language learning strategy theory

As noted by Rubin (1975), although most individuals learn their first language with a fair degree of success, by no means everyone is successful in learning other languages. There is a variety of explanations for this differential rate of success, among which is the theory that some of the success in learning other languages can be attributed to the strategies used by the learners themselves (Wenden, 1987). Since language learning strategy theory has evolved alongside other theories, methods and approaches in language teaching and learning, an understanding of how these

different theories, methods and approaches inter-relate is important to a thorough understanding of language learning strategy theory.

For long regarded as “the standard way” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.2) for students to learn a language other than their first, the basic assumption underlying the Grammar Translation Method tended to be that if learners simply learned grammar and vocabulary and translated from one language into another, they would, as a matter of course, learn the language. Grammar Translation gave minimal recognition to the possibility that students might use language learning strategies to promote their own learning, and the concept is rarely, if ever, mentioned in any literature on the subject, as Tarone and Yule (1989, p.133) point out when they comment "relatively little attention seems to have been paid, in any consistent way, to considerations of the whole process from the learner's point of view". Although the seeds of an awareness of the importance of the learner's own operations for acquiring, retaining, retrieving or performing may have been present, for instance, in suggestions for how to remember vocabulary lists (mnemonics, grouping, repetition and so on) which were quite common in Grammar Translation classrooms, such suggestions tended to be teacher-initiated rather than a product of Grammar Translation theory *per se.*

In the 1960s, Grammar Translation gave way to the audiolingual method, commonly seen at the time as a major breakthrough which would revolutionise the teaching and learning of languages (Stern 1980). Audiolingual teaching techniques depended heavily on drills and repetition, which were justified according to behaviourist theories of language as a system of habits which could be taught and learnt on the stimulus, response and reinforcement basis that behaviourists believed controlled all human learning, including language learning. There was little or no recognition given to any

conscious contribution to the process which the individual learner might make. Indeed, learners were discouraged from taking initiative in the learning situation because they might make mistakes (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). If anything, there was even less acceptance of the importance of individual language learning strategies in audiolingual theory than there had been in Grammar Translation theory, except, perhaps, in a very limited form in the exercising of memory and cognitive strategies by means of repetition and substitution exercises. The effect of audiolingual techniques of rote learning, repetition, imitation, memorisation and pattern practice was to minimise the importance of explicit learning strategies in the language learning process (Stern, 1992).

By the end of the 1960s, however, the limitations of the audiolingual method were beginning to make themselves obvious. It became increasingly clear that learners did not want to be passive receptacles for behaviourist patterning. They wanted to take an active role in their own learning and to be allowed to think through the process for themselves. It was at this time that the ideas of the highly influential linguist, Noam Chomsky (for instance Chomsky, 1965; 1968), with his view of the learner as a generator of rules, began to have a major impact on linguistic theory. This concept of the learner as actively and cognitively engaged in the process of learning language was taken up by Corder (1967) who argued that language errors made by students who are speakers of other languages indicate the development of underlying linguistic competence and reflect the learners' attempts to organise linguistic input. The intermediate system created while the learner is trying to come to terms with the target language was later called *interlanguage* (IL) by Selinker (1972), who viewed learner errors as evidence of positive efforts by the student to learn the new language.

In the same year as Selinker (1972) published his article which resulted in his term *interlanguage* becoming widely circulated, Hymes (1972) also published an article promoting an important theoretical principle which he called communicative competence (to be further discussed in **Definition and assessment of proficiency**, **CHAPTER 2**). Building on the concept of communicative competence, Krashen (for instance Krashen 1976; 1977) proposed his five hypotheses. In these (especially the Acquisition-Learning and Monitor Hypotheses) he postulated that conscious learning has limited usefulness in the process of the development of language which is best acquired by means of natural communication. By implication, therefore, since in Krashen's view conscious learning had so little value, there was very little room for conscious language learning strategies to play a role in the process of language development.

McLaughlin (1978), however, approaching the issue from a cognitive psychologist's point of view, challenged Krashen's hypotheses regarding the way language is learnt. He proposed an information-processing approach to language development whereby students can obtain knowledge of a language by thinking through the rules until they become automatic. From this perspective, the learning of language involves more than simply learning structure and vocabulary and engaging in translation as per the Grammar Translation Method and it is more than merely a process of acquiring a set of mechanical habits by stimulus, response and reinforcement as the behaviourists believed. Inadequate also is the approach that language can only be acquired through natural communication as hypothesised by Krashen (for instance 1976; 1977).

While it is possible that Grammar Translation, audiolingualism and Krashen's Hypotheses may all be able to make a useful contribution to explanations of the development of language, cognitive psychologists are concerned with the way the human mind thinks and learns, and view the learner as an individual actively involved in constructing meaning. According to a cognitive view, learning language, like any other kind of learning, involves taking in information which is then processed and acted upon (Bialystok, 1978, 1881, 1991; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Williams and Burden, 1997). From this perspective, the learner is seen as playing "an active role in the process" (Rubin, 1987, p.17) by using various mental strategies to deal with the systems of the target language.

This cognitive view of language learning allowed for the possibility of learners making deliberate attempts to control their own learning and led to the development of the concept of learning strategies which might be used by students in order to promote the learning process. From this perspective, instead of being viewed as mechanical translators, as passive receptacles for behaviourist patterning, or as communicative beings capable of only limited monitoring of their own interlanguage, learners were viewed as capable of making positive and useful contributions to the learning endeavour. These views of the active learner using cognitive processes to think about, gain knowledge of and understand the new language contributed to a research thrust in the mid-to-late seventies aimed at discovering how learners employ strategies to learn more effectively (for instance Naiman *et al*, 1978; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975).

It was anticipated by these pioneering researchers that discoveries regarding how successful students learn could be used by other students to learn more successfully.

As O'Malley and Chamot (1990) explain, viewing language learning as a cognitive skill allows for the possibility that language learning ability can be improved and that language learning strategies can themselves be learnt. This focus on learning how to learn was seen by Bruner (1960) as essential for the transfer of learning from one situation to another, while Nisbet and Shucksmith (1984, p.4) describe the skill of learning as "the most important skill of all". The possibility that knowledge gained about learning strategies might be made available to other students to help them to learn more effectively has been a major underlying tenet of much of the research and writing on language learning strategies. The idea that teachers should be concerned not only with "finding the best method or with getting the correct answer" but also with assisting students in order to "enable [them] to learn on [their] own" (Rubin, 1975, p.45) was, at the time it was written, quite revolutionary.

According to this view, the teacher's role expanded from being mainly concerned with imparting knowledge to including the facilitation of learning by raising awareness of strategy options and providing encouragement and opportunities for practice so that students might be assisted towards the goal of autonomy. Although learner autonomy is sometimes seen as a threat by teachers (Grundy, 1999), the new role of facilitator, counsellor and resource person can be an empowering one for both teacher and student. (Cotterall and Crabbe, 1999; Pemberton, 1996; Voller, 1997).

Although a cognitive view of language learning suggests that language learning strategies are teachable (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990), and although there are those who argue that strategy instruction is an important part of the teacher's role (for instance, Oxford and Nyikos, 1989), the principle of the teachability of language

learning strategies is by no means universally accepted. According to Rees-Miller (1993: 679), for instance, attempts to train learners to use learning strategies more effectively have produced "only qualified success". As evidence of this claim, she gives details of less than totally successful attempts at learner training, including studies by O'Malley *et al* (1985) and by Wenden (1987) (see Studies of the effects of strategy instruction later in this chapter). Possible reasons suggested by Rees-Miller for this lack of success in teaching strategies include the student's age, educational background, life experience, curriculum demands, varying cognitive styles, and incompatibility of student and teacher beliefs regarding how to learn language. She also suggests that "the behaviours defined as exemplary of successful learning strategies practised by good language learners may be based on cultural models that are not universal" (p.684). Given the level of unresolved debate which surrounds the issue of the teachability of language learning strategies, Rees-Miller questions whether the time spent raising awareness of strategy use might not be better spend directly teaching language, at least until further research (especially in the form of longitudinal studies) has been carried out.

In spite of critical appraisals of learner training in language learning strategies such as in the article by Rees-Miller, there are many others (for instance Chamot and Rubin 1994; Cohen 1998; Nunan 1995; Wenden 1991) who can point to successful efforts to teach strategies, although, as Brown (2001) points out, there is still a great deal of uncertainty regarding the most effective ways of going about such instruction. Rubin (1987) suggests that an important element of strategy instruction is the raising of students' awareness of language learning strategy options in order to help them make informed choices, while, according to Oxford (1989a), practice is an important

ingredient of strategy training so that the new strategies of which students have been made aware become automatic. Wenden (1991) suggests that strategy training needs to be explicit, as otherwise students will not continue to use the new strategies beyond the immediate task. In addition to explicit instruction, Cohen (1998) argues that strategy awareness should also be embedded into regular classroom activities, and students should be encouraged to try new strategy options. Various studies relating to strategy instruction are described later in this chapter.

Since learners can vary greatly from each other in their approach to learning, and a multitude of factors may affect the way an individual processes information, issues of individual variability assume considerable importance. Selinker (1972, p.213) is emphatic when he states: “a theory of second language learning that does not provide a central place for individual differences among learners *cannot* be considered acceptable” (author’s italics). Far from behaving according to some aggregated statistical model, individuals are uniquely engaged in their own infinitely variable world of human activity within the social context to which they belong, and are much more than "a quantified collective" of statistics (Roebuck, 2000, p.82).

From a strategic point of view, individual learners are seen as capable of making deliberate efforts to use learning strategies in order to promote their own learning (Rubin, 1987). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) proposed a model of language learning whereby language learning strategies interact in a complicated way with other individual factors such as intelligence, aptitude, attitudes, motivation and anxiety. Other possible learner variables which have the potential to affect the choice of language learning strategies might include personality, learning style, beliefs and

personal circumstances. Three factors which are often thought to have a strong influence on the way individual learners go about their learning, and which will be examined further in the course of the present study, are the variables of nationality, sex and age.

Nationality is essentially a political concept which may or may not be identified with a typical culture, ethnicity or language, as discussed in depth by Aoki and Smith (1999), Bell (1997), Hofstede (1980) and Swan and Smith (1987). It is a common observation that students from different national backgrounds do not always learn in the same ways (for instance Griffiths and Parr, 2000; Pennycook, 1997; Pierson, 1996; White, 1989). This may be at least partly because "Different cultural backgrounds and different educational systems foster different strengths and weaknesses in learners" (Surtridge, 1997, p.72).

Some students, for instance, come from very "talkative" backgrounds where they are brought up from an early age to express ideas freely; others come from backgrounds where they are taught to think carefully before speaking and where imposing one's ideas on others is considered extremely impolite (Corbett, 1999). Some students are brought up in an environment where people communicate naturally without worrying too much about correctness; others are brought up to feel keenly the loss of face which comes from being seen to make mistakes (Ching, 1992; Clarke, 1996). Some students are encouraged to be active in their approach to their learning; others are traditionally passive (Usuki, 2000). These kinds of national characteristics may well affect the different ways students of varying nationalities behave and interact in a teaching/learning situation and the kinds of learning strategies they typically employ.

A number of studies into the relationship between language learning strategy use and nationality are described under **Previous research into language learning strategies** later in this chapter.

Sex is another learner variable sometimes thought to affect success in language learning. The concept of sex (a biologically determined attribute) has been used for the purposes of the present study rather than the concept of gender (a cultural attribute), since the research used the biographical information regarding whether the participant was male or female gathered from the questionnaire forms when analysing the data. Although drawing distinctions along sex lines is rather less than “politically correct” these days, and care needs to be taken to avoid "oversimplification and unproductive generalizations" (Sunderland, 2000, p.149), women are often believed to be better language learners than men (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

Ellis (1994, p.202) suggests as possible reasons for women's superior language learning ability that they might be more "open to new linguistic forms" and "more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target language norms”. When it comes to the more specific area of language learning strategies, Oxford (1990, p.238) suggests that typically “women use significantly more learning strategies than men and use them more often”. Studies investigating differential strategy use according to sex are described under **Previous research into language learning strategies** later in this chapter.

Issues associated with the age of students who are speakers of other languages learning a new language have been long and sometimes hotly debated. Popular

wisdom generally has it that children are better at learning languages than adults (for instance Bellingham, 2000; Littlewood, 1984). Cook (1991, p.83) comments: “My new postgraduate overseas students.....start the year by worrying whether their children will cope with English and they end it by complaining how much better the children speak than themselves”.

A variety of possible theories has been put forward to explain apparent age related differences in language learning, including the Critical Period Hypothesis (for instance Birdsong, 1999; Lenneberg, 1967), affective factors (for instance Schuman, 1975), social constraints (for instance Burling, 1981) and cognitive variables (for instance Bialystok, 1999). As for considering language learning strategy use according to age, Oxford, (1989a, p.238) comments only that there are “very few studies”, but that older learners appear to use more “sophisticated” language learning strategies than younger learners. Studies exploring the use of language learning strategies by different age groups are described under **Previous research into language learning strategies** later in this chapter.

A key ingredient of cognitive theories of learning is the view of the learner as an individual, actively involved in learning by processing incoming information (Williams and Burden, 1997). These individuals, however, are born into a social world, and learning occurs through interaction with other people, creating a “powerful relationship between social interaction, social context, and language” (Donato, 2000, p.47). As Brown (1994, p.165) puts it: “A language is part of a culture and a culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. In a sociocultural

view of language development, the focus is on the social processes in which the learner participates

From this sociocultural perspective, the learning of a new language does not merely involve the development of new grammar, new vocabulary and new sound systems: learning a new language becomes a “struggle for participation” (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p.155) by social beings in a new culture. This involves both inter-personal interaction (between the learner and the environment) as well as the intra-personal processes (belonging to each individual learner) acting in an integrated manner, since, according to Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2002, p.11) “it is only through social interaction with others that humans develop their language and cognition”.

This sociocultural view of language development helps to provide a theoretical underpinning for the widely used communicative approach to language teaching and learning, according to which language is learnt in the process of using it to interact with others (Williams and Burden, 1997). Communication of one kind or another is the basic purpose of language and, according to Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac (2002, p.87) “is a collaborative process in which both speakers or writers and listeners or readers construct meaning”. From a sociocultural perspective, then, learning is first social and then individual, so that through communication, “learners jointly construct knowledge and this knowledge is later internalised by the individual” (Spada and Lightbown, 2002, p.122). By negotiating meaning through interaction, language which was previously incomprehensible becomes understood and can therefore be integrated into the learner’s target-language repertoire (van Lier, 2000).

By using a communicative approach, Widdowson (1978) argues, language can be developed incidentally, as a by-product of using it, and that “knowing will emerge from doing” (1990, p.160). According to Littlewood (1981), learners need extensive opportunities to use the target language for real communicative purposes if language is to be learned effectively. Nunan (1994) stresses the importance of learners developing the ability not only to form grammatically correct sentences but also to use language to communicate and get things done. The view of language as communication promoted by these three well-known authors would seem to be quite compatible with the view that strategies can be involved in the performance of these communicative tasks.

Although, as discussed by Sullivan (2000), cultural factors must be considered when attempting a communicative approach, Swain (2000) argues that it is possible to use a communicative approach to facilitate the learning of both strategic processes and linguistic knowledge. Since "the communicative approach implicitly encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning” (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, 1989, p.33), language learning strategies would seem to have the potential to be a useful component of a communicative approach to language development.

In addition to being compatible with communicative curricula, language learning strategy theory operates comfortably alongside most other contemporary language teaching and learning theories. With the exception of the Monitor and Acquisition/Learning Hypotheses, language learning strategy theory fits easily with a wide variety of different methods and approaches including some of the less widely known and adopted such as Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, The Natural

Approach and Suggestopaedia. As such, language learning strategies have the potential to form a useful ingredient of modern eclectic syllabuses, which have tended in recent years to move away from dogmatic positions of right and wrong and to be more willing to recognise the potential merits of a wide variety of possible methods and approaches, as noted by writers such as Larsen-Freeman (1987).

As Tarone and Yule (1987, p.10) comment, eclecticism has been criticised as "resulting in a hodge podge of conflicting classroom activities assembled on whim rather than upon any principled basis". They argue, however, that effective eclecticism requires effort and places a great deal of responsibility on the teacher. The increased interest in eclecticism is reflected in comments such as that by McLaughlin *et al* (1983, p.156) who remind us of the story of the blind men and the elephant and then conclude: "Second language learning is a complex phenomenon and there are many legitimate points of view. The trouble begins when one starts to claim that a particular point of view is the total one".

To summarise, I would like to suggest four central premises which are associated with language learning strategy theory. Firstly, language learning is a cognitive process involving conscious mental effort and includes a social dimension whereby learning occurs through interaction. This implies that learners are capable of taking a conscious and active role in their own learning by the use of language learning strategies. Secondly, language learning strategies are, themselves, able to be learnt, which allows for the possibility that individual students may be able to improve their language learning effectiveness by choosing appropriate strategies. It is possible that

teachers might be able to facilitate the development of language learning strategies by raising

awareness of strategy possibilities, by making strategy instruction both implicit and explicit and by providing encouragement and practice opportunities. Thirdly, since learners vary according to factors such as nationality, sex and age, learner variables need to be taken into account when considering language learning strategy use, because strategies which are appropriate for some may or may not be suitable for others. Finally, language learning strategies can be used eclectically to complement a wide variety of other theories, methods and approaches.

Definition and assessment of proficiency

Although increased proficiency might reasonably be assumed to be the major aim of all study, defining and determining proficiency in language learning for speakers of other languages is no easy endeavour. The traditional view, as Harley, Allen, Cummins and Swain (1990, p.7) point out, "has entailed viewing proficiency as little more than grammar and lexis". In more recent years, however, this very narrow view of proficiency has been recognised as quite inadequate.

The concept of proficiency has been linked to the degree of skill with which a language can be used (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1985). It is, however, difficult to achieve consensus on what constitutes "skill" in language, on issues such as whether fluency is more important than accuracy (Brumfit 1984), or on whether skills such as

reading, writing, listening and speaking should be distinguished from elements of knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and cultural awareness (Lado, 1961).

Oller (1979) suggested that all of these elements of language derived from a single underlying skill which could not be divided into discrete components. This view suggests that performance in, for instance, reading and listening relies on the same underlying language skills, and that other aspects of linguistic competence such as pronunciation and vocabulary are all part of the same general proficiency (Nunan, 1988).

However, the unitary general language proficiency factor proposed by Oller (1979) was far from universally accepted. Cummins (1980), for instance, proposed a model whereby proficiency could be assessed by means of testing a variety of language abilities related to general cognitive skills and academic achievement (called cognitive/academic language proficiency or CALP) as well as to basic interpersonal communication skills (or BICS). Faced with arguments (for instance, Farhady, 1983), with theorising (for instance, Carroll, 1983) and with research (for instance Bachman and Palmer, 1983), Oller (1983) conceded that "*the strongest form of the unitary hypothesis was wrong*…..[and] multiple factors underlie language proficiency" (author's italics, p.352). Other research has supported the concept that proficiency consists of a complex amalgamation of a number of inter-related factors (Bachman, 1990), and Farhady (1982, p.46) argues that: "language proficiency is not a unidimensional phenomenon and learners are not homogenous in their proficiency in various language skills".

A highly influential and enduring model of language proficiency which he called *communicative competence* (the ability to use language to convey and interpret meaning) was introduced by Hymes (1972). Building on this concept, Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) divided communicative competence into three and later four separate components: *grammatical competence* (which relates to the learner's knowledge of the vocabulary, phonology and rules of the language), *discourse competence* (which relates to the learner's ability to connect utterances into a meaningful whole), *sociolinguistic competence* (which relates to a learner's ability to use language appropriately) and *strategic competence* (which relates to a learner's ability to employ strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge).

The communicative competence concept has remained an important guiding principle underpinning the communicative language teaching movement which is in vogue to the present day. The communicative competence view of proficiency as a multi-dimensional phenomenon implies that it is valid to test for discrete language abilities (such as listening or grammar) when assessing proficiency. Since, however, individual learners are not homogenous in their proficiency (Farhady, 1982), results relating to discrete elements of language may or may not relate to other areas of competence. It is, therefore, not reasonable to assume that a high score for grammar, for example, will indicate that a student can necessarily engage in fluent conversation.

This lack of consistency across different areas of language competence greatly complicates the assessment of proficiency and the ranking of students into levels as is usually expected in a language school situation. How, for instance, should we assess

the relative proficiency levels of Student A (who manages to speak extremely fluently but who "bombs out" in grammar tests), of Student B (who has a wide knowledge of English vocabulary but who is unable to "get it together" when writing or speaking) or of Student C (who can write at near native speaker level but finds it difficult to express ideas orally in English)? It is quite possible that these three hypothetical students would be ranked quite differently according to the relative importance placed by the rater on the various skills involved, or on the nature of the test which was used.

Over the years a variety of tests has been developed to assess language proficiency, including the extensively used Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Neither of these tests, however, is universally accepted as a reliable or valid measure of proficiency. The construct validity of TOEFL, for instance, is regarded as suspect because of its multi-choice nature ("real" language is not multi-choice, and, therefore, it is difficult to be sure that multi-choice questions are really measuring what they are supposed to be measuring).

On the other hand, although it avoids the discrete-point type questions typical of the TOEFL in favour of an integrative model of testing involving all four skills, argued by some to increase validity (Davies, 1990), IELTS is often criticised because of the subjective nature of the marking of some of its components (the writing and speaking sections are graded by trained examiners). This makes it difficult to ensure reliability, since, however carefully they are trained and monitored, as Hughes (1989, p.36) comments: "when a degree of judgement is called for on the part of the scorer…..perfect consistency is not to be expected". Both of these tests, furthermore,

are expensive and time consuming, with a considerable delay between time of sitting the test and time of receiving the results. These considerations render using tests such as or similar to TOEFL and IELTS impractical for placement in a language school situation where economy must be considered and where speed is essential.

Whatever the difficulties of defining and assessing proficiency, in order to be able to devise some kind of workable curriculum for language classes, it is necessary, in practical terms, to have some means of assessing where individual students are on a general scale of proficiency so that they can be placed into appropriate classes (Spolsky, 1989). In a language school situation, a placement test is commonly used to determine students' initial levels. According to Brown (1994, p.259) such a test needs to be able to provide "an indication of the point at which the student will find a level or class to be neither too easy nor too difficult but to be appropriately challenging". The Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1995) is frequently used by language schools for this purpose.

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) is a commercially available test consisting of a grammar section and a listening section which is designed to guide initial placement of students. Although there is not complete agreement about the validity of using grammar to test for proficiency, as Hughes (1989, p.142) points out, "it has to be accepted that grammatical ability…..sets limits to what can be achieved by way of skills performance". According to this argument, knowledge of grammar is likely to reflect general proficiency level in a language. In addition, the ability to read questions and answer them appropriately pre-supposes a certain level of skill in reading. Allan (1995) justifies using minimal pairs (such as soap/soup, wine/vine,

shirts/shorts) as a means of testing listening ability on the grounds that failure to be able to discriminate between such similar sounds can lead to a breakdown in communication.

The 1995 version of the Oxford Placement Test, then, tests for grammatical knowledge, listening ability (in terms of phoneme discrimination), and involves some level of reading skill. These three components of language skill, however, although important, clearly do not encompass all areas of language proficiency. The handbook which goes with The Quick Placement Test (2001) advises that the results of such a test should be used in conjunction with other forms of assessment (such as speaking or writing) rather than considered as an absolute indicator of language ability. The handbook is also careful to warn of the limitations of such a test, in particular that it "is not appropriate for repeated use as a progress test, as it is not based on a particular course or syllabus" (p.3).

Although the Oxford Placement Test does not pretend to produce an in-depth or rounded assessment of proficiency, the sampling of language ability which it provides, perhaps in conjunction with a writing task or an interview, is considered by many language schools to be sufficiently reliable as an indicator of level for the relatively low-stakes decisions which are based upon it. Unlike the TOEFL or IELTS, (which are often used to gain entry to university or to qualify for immigration and where passing or failing can have serious economic and academic consequences) where classroom experience in a language school indicates students are misplaced as a result of the placement procedures employed, it is usually reasonably easy to move

them up or down a level as required with relatively little inconvenience to either the individual or the system.

It is important to remember, however, that placement in a language school context is a very imprecise science, and the concept of “level” in such an environment is far from absolute. As Hughes (1989, p.2) puts it: “Language abilities are not easy to measure; we cannot expect a level of accuracy comparable to those of measurements in the physical sciences”. This needs to be borne in mind when interpreting the results of the current research, as will be further discussed at various points later in the thesis. For further details on placement procedures in the institution involved in this research, see Assessing proficiency levels, **CHAPTER 3**, and for further details on the Oxford Placement Test, see Materials, **CHAPTER 3.**

Previous research into language learning strategies

One of the difficulties with researching language learning strategies is that only a few (such as using a dictionary) can be observed directly: most can only be inferred from language learner behaviour. As Ellis (1986, p.14) rather colourfully puts it: "It is a bit like trying to work out the classification system of a library when the only evidence to go on consists of the few books you have been allowed to take out".

Given the difficulties of such a task, the challenge has been to devise a means first of all to record and subsequently to interpret the phenomena involved, a process which Ellis (1986, p.188) likens to “stumbling blindfold round a room to find a hidden object”. Over the years, different researchers have employed a variety of approaches

to this rather daunting task, one of the most frequently used of which has been the gathering of data about good language learners and about what it is that they do that makes them more successful than slower language learners. Interesting insights have also been gained by looking at the strategies used by less successful learners.

Studies involving successful and unsuccessful language learners

An important piece of early research, which has had a considerable influence on the field of language learning strategies in the years since, was the "good language learner" study by Rubin (1975) By means of observing students in classrooms, observing herself, talking to good language learners and eliciting observations from teachers, Rubin isolated seven characteristics of good language learners, namely, they have a strong desire to communicate, they are not inhibited, they attend to form, they practise, they monitor their own and the speech of others and they attend to meaning. In a later article, Rubin (1981) translated these characteristics into what good language learners do, which falls more precisely into Rigney's (1978) definition of learning strategies, as already discussed under **Definition of language learning strategies** earlier in this chapter. The stated aim for Rubin's (1975) research was to enhance the success record of the less successful students by teaching them the strategies of the more successful learners. Rubin noted that the employment of these strategies depended on a number of variables such as target language proficiency, age, situation, cultural differences and learning style.

At around the same time as Rubin published her "good learner" study, Stern (1975) produced a list of ten language learning strategies used by good language learners. He believed that the good language learner is characterised by positive learning strategies, among which he included experimentation, planning, developing the new language into an ordered system, revising progressively, searching for meaning, practising, using the language in real communication, self-monitoring, developing the target language into a separate reference system and learning to think in the target language. Although these strategies were listed in a rather confused mixture with "characteristics", such as "active", "tolerant", "outgoing" (p.316), Stern's work was an important addition to the developing body of research on what can be learnt from the good language learner.

In another pioneering piece of research, Naiman and his colleagues (1978) also tried to find out what people known to be good at languages had in common. Identified as "essential for successful language learning" (p.225) were strategies for coming to grips with the language as a system, for using the language in real communication, for monitoring the interlanguage, for coming to terms with the affective demands of language learning and for coping with ambiguity. In spite of identifying these behaviours as typical of good language learners, Naiman *et al* (1978, p.224) caution: "The study as a whole suggests that *the* successful or good language learner, with predetermined overall characteristics does not exist. There are many individual ways of learning a language successfully". This important issue of individual variation in language learning strategy use will be taken up at various points later in the thesis.

Various other studies which have attempted to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and success in language development by speakers of

other languages have produced mixed results. Wong Filmore (1982) discovered the importance of social strategies (although she did not use this term) employed by good language learners. She reported that the good language learners "spent more time than they should have during class time socialising and minding everyone else's business.....they were constantly involved in the affairs of their classmates" (p.163).

O'Malley *et al* (1985) discovered that, although students at all levels reported the use of an extensive variety of learning strategies, higher level students reported greater use of metacognitive strategies (that is strategies used by students to manage their own learning), leading the researchers to conclude that the more successful students are probably able to exercise greater metacognitive control over their learning. This conclusion, however, is somewhat at variance with the results of research by Bialystok (1981) and by Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) which indicated that strategies related to functional practice were associated with proficiency, while Ehrman and Oxford (1995) discovered that cognitive strategies such as looking for patterns and reading for pleasure in the target language were the strategies used by successful students in their study. In contrast to the above-mentioned studies which identified one or other type of strategy as being more responsible than others for success in language learning, Green and Oxford (1995) discovered that higher level students report using language learning strategies of all kinds more frequently than do lower level students.

Researchers have also been aware that there is a lot to be learnt by observation of what unsuccessful language learners do and, perhaps therefore, by implication, what learners should try to avoid. In their study of two unsuccessful learners, Vann and

Abraham (1990, p.191) concluded that, although their students appeared to be active strategy users, they "failed to apply strategies appropriately to the task at hand". Writing about her own less than totally successful efforts to become literate in Chinese, Sinclair Bell (1995) reported that she found the experience immensely stressful. One of the reasons for her difficulties, she believed, was that she used the same strategies to approach literacy in Chinese as she had used in her first language. A similar observation was made by Porte (1988), who interviewed 15 under-achieving learners in private language schools in London. He commented that the majority of the unsuccessful learners in his study, while reporting frequent use of language learning strategies, reported using strategies which were the same as, or very similar to, those they had used at schools in their native countries.

Although the research into language learning strategies used by successful and unsuccessful language learners and the context of their use has produced some interesting insights, the picture which emerges is far from unified. Possible reasons for this lack of unity might include the different contexts of the studies, the differing research methods used, or the varying nature of the language learners themselves.

Although it may be convenient to assume that all learners are similar, the reality is of course not so simple (Skehan, 1998). Another approach, therefore, used by researchers in their search for the elusive answers to the many unanswered questions which characterise the language learning strategy field has been to study some of the learner variables which might influence students in their choice of learning strategies.

Studies investigating factors affecting strategy choice

There are many different factors which might potentially influence a student's choice of language learning strategies (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). The present study will look more closely at three factors which are often thought to have a bearing on the way learners go about their learning: nationality, sex and age. Care, of course needs to be exercised when interpreting the results of studies according to such variables, since it is possible that the variables themselves may influence the reporting patterns of students from different national backgrounds, of men and women, and of students of differing ages.

Some nationalities, for instance, are often considered more reserved than others, women are often thought to be more cautious than men, and older people are often believed to be more conservative than younger people. It these preconceptions are true (or if other characteristics of nationality, sex or age not mentioned here apply), these factors could well influence responses to the research situation. Caution also needs to be exercised regarding the possibility of a national/sex/age bias in the research instrument or situation. These issues will receive further consideration when the findings regarding these variables from this study are discussed in **CHAPTER 4**.

Although, obviously, learner variables such as those under investigation in this study are fixed and not amenable to change, it is possible that if, for instance, younger learners prove to be more proficient than older learners (as is commonly believed), perhaps older learners might benefit from information regarding the strategies used by younger learners. The same rationale might apply to students grouped according to

other variables, and it is also possible that information regarding the strategies typically employed by the more successful groups of students might be used to inform practices in the teaching/learning situation.

The purpose of investigating these variables is not, of course, to show that one nationality, sex or age group is either better or worse than another. Such comparisons will be undertaken in the spirit which underlay the research by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975): that is that if we can discover how more successful students go about their learning, this knowledge may be made available to less successful students.

Nationality

Studies of language learning strategy use according to nationality are not easy to find. This may, possibly, reflect the perception that it is often considered not "politically correct to generalize" about such issues (Pierson, 1996, p.51). Two studies, however, which produced findings on nationality-related differences in language learning strategies incidental to the main research thrust were those reported by Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and by O'Malley (1987). Politzer and McGroarty discovered that Asian students exhibited fewer of the strategies expected of "good" language learners than did Hispanic students while O'Malley ascribed the lack of success of Asian students to the persistence of familiar strategies.

In a study involving a questionnaire and group interviews in Taiwan, Yang (1998) made some interesting discoveries about her students' language learning strategy use,

including strategies for using dictionaries. In a later study, Yang (1999) discovered that, although her students were aware of various language learning strategies, few of them actually reported using them. As a result of her research, Yang produced recommendations aimed at helping teachers adapt programmes to students' needs more effectively.

Acknowledging that "Japanese students are typically viewed as passive learners", Usuki (1999) undertook a study in a Japanese university using open-ended questionnaires. A number of strategies used by the students were elicited relating to behaviour both inside and outside the classroom (such as "I look at the teacher's lips and mimic his way of pronouncing", "In various situations I think of how to say something in English", pp.8-9). Using a journal writing method in a later study, Usuki (2000) discussed the psychological barriers to the adoption of effective language learning strategies by Japanese students and recommended more co-operation between students and teachers.

Sex

Although there are quite a few studies which investigate the relationship between language learning and sex (for instance Bacon 1992; Boyle, 1987; Burstall, 1975; Eisenstein, 1982; Farhady, 1982; Nyikos, 1990; Sunderland, 1998)), studies which explore language learning strategy use according to sex are not common. Although Tran (1988) discovered that Vietnamese women use fewer language learning

strategies than men, most studies in this area seem to have reported a greater use of language learning strategies by women.

After studying the language learning strategies used by more than 1,200 undergraduate university students, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) concluded that sex differences had a "profound influence" (p.296), these differences indicating that females used strategies more frequently than males. Reporting on an exploratory study undertaken as part of a larger study at the Foreign Service Institute, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) concluded that women reported definitely more use of strategies than men while the same authors in a later article (1995) again reported that females tended to use conscious language learning strategies more often than males. Reporting on a study of 374 students at the University of Puerto Rico, Green and Oxford (1995) also concluded that females used strategies significantly more often than males.

Age

Although the evidence regarding the effects of age on language learning is "far from clear or conclusive" (Spolsky, 1989, p.92), it is a common belief that children are superior to adults as language learners (Bellingham, 2000). Studies by, for instance, Burt and Krashen (1982), Oyama (1976) and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) supported this belief. Several well-known case studies (for instance Burling, 1981; Schmidt, 1983; Schumann, 1978) also seem to support the idea that adults find it difficult to develop new language. Other studies (for instance Burstall, Jamieson,

Cohen and Hargreaves, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Harley, 1986; Neufeld, 1978; Swain, 1981) seem to leave the superiority of the younger learner less certain.

A well-known case study which seems to support the notion that older students can learn language effectively is that by Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi and Moselle (1994) which documents the case of Julie who, at the age of 21, married an Egyptian and moved from England to Cairo. Nine days after her arrival, her husband was called away for military service and Julie was left with non-English speaking relatives in a situation of total immersion until her husband returned 45 days later. After her husband's return, Julie used Arabic outside the home and at family gatherings until she started a job as an English teacher where she conversed with the other teachers in Arabic. She received no formal instruction, but, according to Ioup *et al*, after six months, Julie was communicating well, and after two and a half years she could pass as a native speaker. Although the issue of the strategies Julie used to achieve this success is not dealt with explicitly, it is mentioned that she used strategies such as writing in a notebook, repetition, learning from correction and noting the language in the environment in the process of learning her new language.

Another study which indicates there may be "optimism for older learners" (p.317) is that by Ehrman and Oxford (1990). Although they discovered that performance ratings corresponded roughly inversely to age, they found that the oldest student was not the weakest, nor was the youngest the best. Unfortunately, this study does not analyse language learning strategy use according to age. Indeed, none of the studies investigating age-related differences in language development for speakers of other languages mentioned in this review deals with this issue overtly.

Studies of the effects of strategy instruction

An important component of language learning strategy theory is the belief that language learning strategies are *"teachable"* (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, p.291. Authors' italics) and that learners can benefit from coaching in learning strategies (for instance, Cook 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Research in this area is still, however, "relatively uncommmon, and results are rather mixed" (Nunan, 1995, p.1). Nevertheless, Nunan goes on to say that, although the effectiveness of strategy training remains uncertain, there is enough evidence of a positive relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency to suggest that further research is warranted

In an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of language learning strategy instruction on language learning, O'Malley (1987) and his colleagues randomly assigned 75 students to one of three instructional groups where they received training in (1) metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective strategies, (2) cognitive and socioaffective strategies or (3) no special instruction in language learning strategies (control group) for listening, speaking and vocabulary acquisition skills. They discovered a significant difference in favour of the treatment groups for speaking, but not for listening, while the control group for vocabulary actually scored slightly higher than the treatment groups. O'Malley explains this unexpected finding as being due to the persistence of familiar strategies among certain students, who continued to

use rote repetitive strategies and were unwilling to adopt the strategies presented in training, especially when they knew they would be tested within only a few minutes.

Wenden (1987) describes an intensive English programme which included a language learning strategy component at an American university. The students were described as “very advanced” (p.164), of various cultural backgrounds and with varied reasons for learning. A questionnaire revealed that less than fifty percent of the students thought that the strategy training had been useful. Wenden concluded that “learner training was not considered relevant in its own right” (p.164). In fact, some of the students were so resistant that one of the classes was discontinued after only three weeks. This result supports Naiman *et al*’s (1978) belief that “long lectures on strategies, or even lengthy discussions on the subject, would [not] be particularly profitable” (p.225).

Three adults recently immigrated to New Zealand were included by Tang and Moore (1992) in a study of the effects of the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on reading comprehension in the classroom. They concluded that, while cognitive strategy instruction (title discussion, pre-teaching vocabulary) improved comprehension scores, the gains were not maintained upon the withdrawal of the treatment. Metacognitive strategy instruction, on the other hand, involving the teaching of self-monitoring strategies, appeared to lead to improvements in comprehension ability which were maintained beyond the end of the treatment. Carrell, Pharis and Liberto (1989) also discovered that, in the context of their study, metacognitive strategy training was effective in enhancing reading ability by speakers

of other languages. These results accord with O'Malley *et al* 's (1985) conclusions regarding the importance of metacognitive strategies.

In a classroom-based study in Hong Kong which aimed to research whether learner strategy training makes a difference in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, Nunan (1995) involved 60 students in a 12 week programme "designed to help them reflect on their own learning, to develop their knowledge of, and ability to apply learning strategies, to assess their own progress, and to apply their language skills beyond the classroom"(p.3). The programme was based on a bank of tasks which belonged to four categories: general aspects of learning, different modes of learning, developing macroskills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and language systems (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse). Students also kept journals, from which Nunan (1995, p.8) concluded that "strategy training, plus systematic provision of opportunities for learners to reflect on the learning process, did seem to lead to greater sensitivity to the learning process over time". Nunan recommended that language classrooms should have a dual focus, teaching both content and an awareness of language learning processes.

A study of strategy use by four independent learners, carried out by Simmons (1996) over a period of six weeks at an Australian university, consisted of a series of intensive individual training sessions aimed at raising awareness of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. At the end of the period, Simmons concluded that students had increased the number and variety of their strategy use and were more aware of the strategies which suited themselves as individuals. Simmons suggests that "making the

learning process more transparent" (p.75) is important in the interests of empowering students to direct their own learning.

After studying a group of language students who were participants in a strategies-based instructional programme at the University of Minnesota, Cohen (1998; 1999) concluded that the programme had made a positive difference in speaking performance. Cohen summed up the pedagogical implications of his findings as indicating that language learning strategies should be both explicitly taught in the classroom and embedded in daily tasks.

Such a mixed bag of results relating to the effectiveness of language learning strategy instruction and how best to go about it is difficult even to summarise. These results seem to indicate successful instruction for some types of strategies (for instance metacognitive strategies) but not for others; success for strategies relating to some skills (for instance speaking, reading) but not for others; success for some students but not for others; and success for some situations (for instance individual training sessions) but not for others. There is obviously still a considerable amount of work to be done in the area of research into how best to go about instruction in language learning strategy use, an area which will be included in the current study in the hope of finding some of the answers to the vexed question of strategy training.

Concluding comment

In spite of attempts to clarify definitions, to achieve satisfactory classification systems, to rationalise theoretical underpinnings, and to provide answers by means of research initiatives, the "hidden object" to which Ellis (1986, p.188) refers remains "elusive" (Wenden and Rubin 1987, p.7), leaving the researcher to continue to "stumble blindfold" (Ellis 1986, p.188) in the search for the missing pieces of the puzzle which are needed before a meaningful and useful picture of language learning strategy use can be constructed. Although so much of the research in the area of language learning strategies is inconclusive or even contradictory, initiatives such as the present study continue in order to seek clarification of some of the many remaining unanswered questions. The next chapter reports on the investigation into the relationship between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency, and tries to identify patterns of language learning strategy use by students of varying levels of proficiency.

CHAPTER 3

THE STUDY - PART A, SECTION 1: FREQUENCY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY USE AND PROFICIENCY (SILL)

Rationale (Part A, Section 1)

It is now around a quarter of a century since early researchers such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman *et al* (1978) published their pioneering "good learner" studies which investigated the use of language learning strategies and attempted to identify the strategies used by successful learners. Since then the general principle that the learner needs to play an active role in the learning process (Horwitz, 1999) has become widely accepted. This being the case, language learning strategies (or specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language) become vitally important, given that they have the potential to be an "extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley *et al*, 1985, p.43). Before this potential can be utilised, however, it is necessary first of all to find out which strategies students report using most frequently, how reported frequency of strategy use relates to proficiency, and whether there are any patterns of reported language learning strategy use which are reportedly used more or less frequently by students of varying levels of proficiency. (The term *proficiency* as it is used in the present study has been discussed in **CHAPTER 2**).

Research questions (Part A, Section 1)

1. How frequently are language learning strategies (as listed in the SILL) reportedly used by students who are speakers of other languages?
2. Does the reported frequency of language learning strategy use vary according to proficiency?
3. Are there patterns in variations in reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to level of proficiency?

Method (Part A, Section 1)

Overview

The basic instrument for Part A of the study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). A self-report questionnaire was chosen as the basic instrument because it is possible to use this kind of questionnaire to survey a large number of participants in a manner which would be practically almost impossible using any other method, thereby providing a relatively wide overview of language learning strategy use. Furthermore, since the data are "amenable to quantification" (Nunan, 1992, p.143), and less dependent on the researcher's interpretation than may be the case with other research methods, questionnaires provide a relatively objective platform for launching further probes. In summarising the attributes of questionnaires in relation to investigating language learning strategies, Oxford (1996, p. 33) concludes:

> Strategy questionnaires have certain advantages. They are quick and easy to administer, may be the most cost-effective mode of strategy assessment, and are almost completely nonthreatening when administered using paper and pencil (or computer) under conditions of confidentiality. Moreover, many students discover a great deal about themselves from taking a strategy questionnaire, especially one like the *SILL* that is self-scoring and that provides immediate learner feedback.

Despite the advantages listed by Oxford (1996), issues of validity and reliability for the kind of self-report data generated by questionnaires have received considerable attention in the literature. Ellis (1994), for instance, expresses the concern that learners may not be sufficiently self-aware to report accurately on their own learning (a problem of validity), and may be more inclined to report what they believe is expected rather than the actual behaviour (a problem of reliability). Cohen (1998) points out that learners may be unable to report accurately on their own cognitive processes because much of this processing is unconscious, too complex, or too difficult to remember. Among the potential disadvantages of using self report questionnaires as research instruments, Dornyei (2003) includes low respondent motivation, low respondent literacy level, inability to double-check the accuracy of information, biased responses, self-deception, a tendency to overgeneralise, the effects of fatigue, and superficiality of responses. Such superficiality may possibly relate to the decontextualised nature of questionnaire items, which, as discrete representations of behaviour, may not be adequate to elicit in-depth or appropriate responses. Furthermore, as Gu, Wen and Wu (1995) point out, the terms used to describe various aspects of behaviour may be interpreted differently by different students (what is “often” for one student may be

rated as less frequent by another) and limitations in language ability and the effects of cultural background may also affect responses (Turner, 1993).

These reservations notwithstanding, Ellis (1994) concludes that self-report data have proved “invaluable” (p.674) as a means of gaining insight into aspects of the development of language by speakers of other languages which are not readily observable. According to Dornyei (2003), in spite of the potential disadvantages, self-report questionnaires have the advantages of versatility, cost effectiveness and efficiency in terms of staff and student time and effort. Cohen (1998, p.39) also acknowledges the value of such data when “elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they were obtained”.

A questionnaire, then, was chosen as the initial instrument for the current study since it could be used in its own right as a means of gathering interesting insights. In addition, it was possible to use it to give useful feedback to students regarding their strategy use, thereby increasing student motivation to be involved in what might otherwise have been seen as (from their point of view) a time wasting research exercise. Furthermore, the questionnaire provided a base for launching further probes in the form of the interviews and the classroom programme. Approval was granted for this research by the University of Auckland Human Subject Ethics Committee.

Research setting

Speakers of other languages study in a wide variety of different settings, each of which is likely to cater for a different type of student. A school for refugees in Australia, for instance, is likely to have a very different type of student from an institution such as an English Language School in New Zealand. The students in two such different schools may differ from each other in a number of ways: nationality (obviously), motivation (almost certainly), sex and age (perhaps), and many other factors such as previous learning experience, personality and learning style may also be involved. Because these differences may relate to the way such students go about their learning (that is, to the language learning strategies they use), the research setting is an important consideration when attempting to draw inferences, as the current study does, from research into language learning strategy use.

Research into language learning strategies has been carried out in many different learning environments. O'Malley *et al* (1985) for instance, conducted their research among speakers of other languages learning English in an American high school, while Ehrman and Oxford (1989) surveyed language learning strategy use among personnel on language programmes at an American military institution. Green and Oxford (1995) studied learners of English at a Puerto Rican university while Nunan's (1995) research was carried out at the University of Hong Kong. Both Willing (1998) and Lund (2001) conducted their research among Australian immigrants. Students from such widely different settings might be expected to differ from each other in a number of ways. Because of the potential for variation in strategy use from one

setting to another, it is important that the setting for the current study and the types of students involved be understood.

A private English language school for international students in Auckland, New Zealand was the setting for all three parts of the current study. Being a private institution, fees at the school were quite expensive and, as a consequence, value for money was always an issue with students. This sometimes affected their willingness to become involved in activities which they did not see as directly relevant to their purpose for being there (that is, to improve their English). Activities such as research or language learning strategy programmes, for instance, had to be carefully "sold" as language learning opportunities in their own right before the reluctance to "waste my time and money" could be overcome. For this reason, care was taken to integrate the questionnaire into normal classroom routines and to use it in such a way as to maximise its potential to stimulate discussion (thereby practising speaking skills), to provide a language learning opportunity in its own right (for instance of vocabulary) as well as to raise language learning strategy awareness. (For further details, see Data collection procedures, **CHAPTERS 3, 4, 5, 6**)

Students were sometimes at the school for quite short periods of time, the minimum period of enrolment being only two weeks. Very few of these students stayed for longer than 12 weeks, and almost never did we have students who stayed longer than a year. This was an important consideration when trying to set up the longitudinal study. (For further details, see Data collection procedures, **CHAPTER 6**)

Although characteristics of the student population varied at different times, over the period of Part A of the study 91% of the participants were Asian, females constituted 66% of the group and 74% were aged in their twenties. Over the period of Part C of the study, 87% of the participants were Asian, 58% were female and 70% were in their twenties. Although the exact percentages differ, the participants in both Part A and Part C of the study were predominantly Asian females in their twenties wanting to study over a relatively short period of time. It is possible that the predominant characteristics of the groups of students in this particular research setting may have influenced the findings of the study in ways which will be discussed later in the thesis.

The participants

A large number of students (N=348) studying English at a private language school in New Zealand completed the student questionnaire known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). There were both males and females, ranging in ages from 14 to 64 and they came from 21 different nationalities. Students varied in proficiency over seven levels from elementary to advanced (elementary, mid-elementary, upper elementary, pre-intermediate, mid-intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced).

Assessing proficiency levels

In the private language school where this study took place, arriving students were given the Oxford Placement Test (already discussed under **Definition and assessment of proficiency**, **CHAPTER 2**). New students were taken on the first day to a room set aside for testing and asked to complete the listening test (taking about ten minutes) and the grammar test (taking about 50 minutes) under supervision by a member of staff. The listening test consists of 100 sentences which are read on a tape provided with the test pack, along with the forms on which the students mark their responses. The students must listen to the tape and choose from two possible answers (for instance "Will you get me some soap/soup at the supermarket"). The pairs are chosen so that either alternative is logically or grammatically possible in order to minimise the possibility of students guessing the correct answer without listening. The grammar test also consists of 100 items printed on a test sheet included in the test pack. In the grammar test, students must select one of three options (for instance "In hot climates people sit at/in/under the shade"). When completed, the listening and grammar tests were taken away for marking. Using the marking stencils provided, this process could be completed relatively quickly and provided a score out of 200.

The OPT score was used to guide initial placement according to the thresholds determined by the school. In addition, as recommended in the Quick Placement Test handbook (2001), students' speaking ability was assessed by a member of staff during a five minute interview, in the course of which the ability to communicate effectively and fluently and to understand and answer questions with appropriate vocabulary and

grammatical accuracy was noted. According to this oral assessment, the level suggested by the OPT results might be adjusted. For instance, a student who achieved a good score in the OPT but who did not perform well in the oral interview might well be placed lower than normal for the score. Conversely, students who did not perform well in the OPT but who were obviously able to use what they knew fluently in order to get meaning across were often placed higher than normal for the score.

Because of time constraints, a writing task was not usually included in the assessment at this time, unless there was uncertainty over appropriate placement as indicated by the other assessment methods. In this case a writing task might be set in order to help to clarify the situation. In this way, the OPT was used as a guide, but not as an absolute indicator of level in an endeavour to place students in classes where they would be comfortable but appropriately challenged (Brown, 1994).

After placement, students were given regular tests in subsequent weeks based on the work covered in class, according to which they might be promoted. All of this meant that the level at which a student happened to be at any one time depended on a number of factors: the initial placement test score, the assessment of the school representative responsible for the placement regarding communicative ability and performance on class tests after placement. Although the differences between an elementary student and an advanced student are usually very obvious to those experienced in the field of teaching speakers of other languages, as has already been acknowledged, proficiency in terms of levels in an environment such as the one where the study took place is difficult to assess exactly. This difficulty with specifying

proficiency in precise terms needs to be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study, and will be further discussed later in the thesis.

Materials

Oxford Placement Test - OPT

As previously explained in **CHAPTER 2**, The Oxford Placement Test is a commercially available test consisting of a listening section and a grammar section. The OPT takes about one hour and results in a score out of 200. In the literature which comes with the test, Allan (1995) claims that it has been shown to be highly reliable as well as relatively quick and convenient (important features in a language school environment).

In the Teacher's Introduction to the Oxford Placement Test, Allan (1995) informs us that the 100 items in the listening section of the OPT are derived from a bank of authentic misunderstandings involving native and non-native speakers of English which have resulted from an inability to discriminate between sounds and led to a failure of communication. According to Allan, all the items were pre-tested on groups of native speakers and then trialled on groups of students in language institutions before being subjected to statistical analyses. Allan claims that this process has resulted in a test which is reliable, objective, economical and easy to administer.

The grammar section is described as a written multiple-choice test of the grammatical structures of English covered in a wide range of coursebooks. Allan (1995) claims

that the structures included in the test have been chosen as a result of detailed research into the content of existing coursebooks and examinations, and that the format and item-balance are based on computer evidence of difficulty levels across an international sample. According to Allan, the items were trialled on multi-level and multi-national samples of students before being analysed statistically.

Allan (1995) claims that the resulting Oxford Placement Test “is a reliable means of grading students at all levels from elementary upwards” (unnumbered pages). In addition, the items of the OPT are identified according to type so that a diagnostic assessment of errors may be carried out and students may be provided with remedial work focussed on their weak points.

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning - SILL

The basic instrument for measuring frequency of language learning strategy use in the current study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). According to Oxford (1996) many major studies have used the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which has appeared in several different versions. It is the 50-item version for speakers of other languages learning English (Oxford, 1990) which is involved in the present study. The SILL is a self-scoring, paper-and-pencil survey which consists of statements such as "I review English lessons often" or "I ask questions in English" to which students are asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). As Gu *et al* (1995) point out, because of their ambiguities of

reference, such scales can produce results which are “dangerously inadequate and unreliable” (p.7). To counteract such difficulties, they strongly recommend methodological triangulation, for instance by following up a questionnaire with interviews, as has been done in this study.

Although the SILL provides a potentially useful framework for analysing language learning strategy use, the items included in the SILL cannot be viewed uncritically. Some of the strategy items are vague and therefore open to differing interpretations (especially by speakers of other languages), thereby possibly affecting reliability. (For instance, to what kind of “relationships” does Item 1 of the 50-item version of the SILL for speakers of other languages refer? What is meant by “patterns”, Item 20?). Some of the items are macro-strategies, which address the overall task of language learning (for instance, Item 16: “I read for pleasure in English”). Such general items, which really require further analysis before they become particularly informative of behaviour, are listed alongside micro-strategies, which are more focussed on a particular learning behaviour within an area of skill (for instance, Item 27: “I read English without looking up every new word”). Since the items are decontextualised, students’ responses may vary according to the situation in which they envisage using the strategies. In spite of such difficulties (which will be further discussed at various points later in the thesis), Oxford’s taxonomy is possibly the most comprehensive currently available (Ellis, 1994) and, as such, provides a useful starting point for an examination of the strategies used by students in the process of learning language.

According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), the strategies which were included in the SILL were gathered from an extensive literature review. Nevertheless, the SILL is

still, of necessity, somewhat selective since "dozens and perhaps hundreds of such strategies exist" (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, 1989, p.29). On the basis of factor analyses, the SILL items were divided into sub-categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social), listed previously under **Definition of language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2**. Oxford (1996, p.3) informs us that these sub-categories were developed "with the intent that each sub-scale would have an adequate number of items to facilitate more in-depth understanding of the learning strategies". According to Green and Oxford (1995, p.265), these sub-categories "were also constructed to redress a problem, namely, that many previous inventories of strategies included a severely limited number of items reflecting affective and social strategies and contained a relative overabundance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies". Oxford (1990) acknowledges the possibility that the categories will overlap. She gives as an example the metacognitive strategy of planning, which, in as far as planning requires reasoning, might also be considered a cognitive strategy. Cohen and Dornyei (2002) also discuss the problems of strategies shifting from one category to another, so that a strategy which, on one level is cognitive, may also involve planning (metacognitive), anxiety management (affective) and interaction (social).

In addition to the difficulties created by lack of mutual exclusivity, the sub-categories (as Green and Oxford (1995) acknowledge) do not necessarily correspond to the results of *a posteriori* factor analyses, thereby generating debate regarding the principles according to which the items of the SILL have been grouped. LoCastro (1994), for instance, questions the grouping of memory strategies as separate from cognitive strategies, since memory involves mental (cognitive) processing, and

memory and cognitive strategies might therefore be considered as belonging to the same group. As defined by Oxford (1990), however, memory strategies “reflect very simple principles, such as arranging things in order, making associations, and reviewing” (p.39), whereas cognitive strategies involve “manipulation or transformation” (p.43). By implication, memory strategies, although they involve mental processes, would seem to be of a lower order than cognitive strategies, which involve some kind of interaction with the material to be learnt rather than mere memorisation. Another categorisation difficulty relates to the compensation group of strategies which, according to Ellis (1994, p.539), are included “somewhat confusingly”, since they might be considered communication strategies rather than learning strategies (a dichotomy discussed preciously under **Definition of language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2**). Oxford (1990, p.49), however, justifies their inclusion on the grounds that they “help learners become more fluent in what they already know [and] may lead learners to gain new information about what is appropriate or permissible in the target language”. In other words, communication may lead to learning. Issues regarding the grouping of strategies remain a source of controversy and a focus of research effort right up to the present, and will be further discussed at various points later in the thesis. Findings from this study regarding strategy groupings will be presented later in this chapter.

When considering reliability, Oxford (1996, p.37) claims that "in general, the SILL reliabilities have been high". These reliabilities, using Cronbach alpha for internal consistency, are quoted in Green and Oxford (1995) as ranging from .93 to .95 depending on whether the students take the survey in their own language or in the target language. Although the reliability of the SILL declines if taken in the target

language rather than in the first language, Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p.6) claim that reliability remains "very acceptable".

The SILL has been translated into various languages other than English (11 others according to Oxford, 1996), and it would seem to stand to reason that completing such a survey in one's own familiar first language would result in greater reliability. For this reason, having the SILL translated into other languages was considered for the purposes of the present study. However, the practical difficulties of translation into the 21 different language groups involved placed this option out of the question. The option of translation into selected languages was also discarded on the grounds that such selectivity raised ethical questions of its own. Although the possibility of a slightly lower reliability for an English version is acknowledged, at least this option presents a level playing field for all participants and avoids the difficulties of comparisons across translations. In addition, presented, as it was, as classroom material, the English version of the SILL was readily acceptable to students as a useful learning activity in its own right.

Defending the validity of the SILL, Oxford (1996) considers the construct validity (how well the theoretical construct is measured), the criterion-related validity (demonstrated in the relationship between the SILL and performance), and the content validity (the degree to which the content is appropriate). On all of these, validity is argued to be "very high" (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995, p. 7-8).

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) the SILL has utility, defined as "the usefulness of an instrument in real-world settings for making decisions relevant to

people's lives". Possible uses of the SILL include "individualising classroom instruction based on the strategy use of different students"(p.6). In the case of the present study, it was used to raise students' and teachers' consciousness regarding the use of language learning strategies.

Commenting on the SILL's fakability, Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p.11) point out: "If people are not honest in their answers, validity is destroyed". Dishonest answers are ascribed to two main reasons: to please the researcher, or to make the respondent appear in a more favourable light. The authors claim that repeated studies have failed to discover any social desirability response bias, a result which Oxford (1996, p.33) ascribes to the "nonthreatening" nature of the SILL.

The SILL, then, was chosen as the initial instrument for the present study because of its comprehensiveness (Ellis, 1994), and because of claims that it is valid, reliable and appears to be lacking in social desirability response bias (Oxford, 1996; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). In addition, the established questionnaire format (although slightly adapted for this study – see Appendix A) facilitated its use as a research instrument and subsequent comparison with other studies. It was quick and easy to prepare and administer, and, because of its utility, the SILL was well received by students who readily accepted it as a normal classroom exercise which provided immediate feedback on their reported strategy use as well as stimulating discussion of strategy possibilities with classmates.

Although the questionnaire format as published by Oxford (1990, p.293-296) was altered slightly in order to make it easier to read and to copy, the strategy statements

themselves were left as printed in order that the results might be able to be compared with other SILL studies as appropriate. Initial reservations that some of the strategy statements might prove difficult for lower level students proved to be unfounded in all but a very few cases. It was found that students generally approached the survey positively, were happy to treat the more difficult lexical items (such as "location", "physically") as a vocabulary extension activity and to persevere until all items were completed. The few students who found the survey simply too difficult were not pressured to finish it, although incomplete surveys were not included in the study.

In order to gather the biographical data that would be required especially for Part A, Section 2 of the study, a question sheet was added to the back page of the SILL questionnaire. Students were asked for details of their nationality, sex, birthdate and present level. A discussion sheet was added for use in the classroom to stimulate an exchange of ideas between pairs or among groups of students once they had completed the questionnaire.

Data collection procedures

As far as possible, the SILL was administered according to the procedures outlined by Nyikos and Oxford (1993). The research purpose was explained, after which the questionnaire was completed during class time as part of a normal classroom activity aimed at getting students to reflect on their learning and to raise awareness of strategy options.

After collection, ideas from the questionnaire were used to stimulate a discussion where students exchanged views on learning strategies so that they could consider the thoughts and experiences of their classmates. At the beginning of the study, all classes operating in the school at the time were asked to complete the questionnaire, resulting in a large initial inflow of surveys (n=69). Subsequently, a special Study Skills class was set up to promote the concept of language learning strategies among new students and to act as an ongoing source of research data. From this class, held during the students' first week at the school, 279 questionnaires were collected over a period of a year. In all, 348 completed student questionnaires were collected.

Generally speaking, students seemed to enjoy the exercise and find it useful. Even quite low level students, although understandably slower, usually rose to the challenge and used the exercise to learn new vocabulary as well as to glean ideas about how to learn. Very few questionnaires had to be discarded because they were unfinished.

Data analysis procedures

Once collected, the data from the SILL questionnaires were transferred to databases (Excel and SPSS) which enabled the data to be analysed. Several statistical procedures were followed:

1. The data were examined for reliability over the entire questionnaire and according to the six sub-groups

2. Average reported frequency of use was calculated across all students for each strategy statement plus the overall average reported frequency of strategy use across all students.
3. A factor analysis was carried out in order to determine whether any elements of the questionnaire might vary in synchrony with each other.
4. A Pearson product-moment correlation co-efficient was used in order to investigate whether there was a statistically significant relationship between proficiency and reported frequency of language learning strategy use.
5. Student's *t* was used in order to investigate whether the difference in reported frequency of language learning strategy use by elementary and advanced students was statistically significant.
6. Averages were examined for highly frequent use, defined as average=3.5 or above. This frequency range includes approximately the top quartile (n=12) of the average frequency ratings across all students (see *Table 3.1*), and is also the high frequency threshold defined by Oxford (1990) and used by Nyikos and Oxford (1993).
7. The data were examined for patterns of strategy use across all students and by students grouped according to proficiency levels.
8. A univariate regression analysis was carried out in order to determine the amount of variance in proficiency accounted for by a group of strategies used highly frequently by advanced students in addition to strategies used highly frequently across all students.

Results (Part A, Section 1)

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use overview (SILL)

The alpha co-efficient for reliability of the instrument across all students was .92. The students who participated in this study (n=348) reported an average frequency of strategy use over all SILL items of 3.2, ranging from 2.3 to 3.9.

According to the average frequency of use for each strategy item, there was no apparent division of reported frequency of strategy use according to the SILL sub-groups. The alpha co-efficients for reliability for the sub-groups were:

memory	.65
cognitive	.82
compensation	.67
metacognitive	.79
affective	.52
social	.77

In order to explore alternative groupings, a Principal Component Analysis was carried out. According to this procedure, 39 of the 50 items of the SILL formed a unified

group which was not able to be statistically sub-divided (Appendix B). Items from all six of the SILL sub-groups were included in this large grouping of strategies.

The SILL strategy statements in order of average reported frequency of use across all students are set out in *Table 3.1*, along with the standard deviations. The twelve most frequently used strategies, representing approximately the top quartile, and falling into the high frequency category as defined by Oxford (1990) and used by Nyikos and Oxford (1993) (that is average=3.5 or above, as explained under Data collection procedures) are shaded for emphasis. The overall average reported frequency of strategy use is added to the bottom of the table.

Table 3.1: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use (as itemised in the SILL) with standard deviations (SD).

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	Average	SD
Metacognitive	32	I pay attention to someone speaking English	3.9	1.0
Social	45	I ask others to speak slowly or repeat	3.9	1.0
Compensation	25	When I can't think of a word I use gestures	3.7	1.1
Compensation	29	If I can't think of a word I use a synonym	3.7	1.1
Cognitive	11	I try to talk like native speakers	3.6	1.1
Metacognitive	33	I try to find how to be a better learner	3.6	1.1
Social	49	I ask questions in English	3.6	1.1
Cognitive	12	I practise the sounds of English	3.5	1.0
Cognitive	15	I watch TV or movies in English	3.5	1.3
Metacognitive	30	I try to find many ways to use English	3.5	1.0
Metacognitive	31	I use my mistakes to help me do better	3.5	1.0
Metacognitive	38	I think about my progress in learning English	3.5	1.0
Memory	1	I think of relationships	3.4	1.1
Cognitive	10	I say or write new words several times	3.4	1.1
Cognitive	14	I start conversations in English	3.4	1.1
Compensation	24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words	3.4	1.1
Affective	40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid	3.4	1.1
Cognitive	19	I look for similar words in my own language	3.3	1.2
Metacognitive	35	I look for people I can talk to in English	3.3	1.1
Affective	39	I try to relax when afraid of using English	3.3	1.1
Social	48	I ask for help from English speakers	3.3	1.1
Social	50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers	3.3	1.2
Memory	3	I create images of new words	3.2	1.1
Memory	8	I review English lessons often	3.2	1.1
Cognitive	20	I try to find patterns in English	3.2	1.1
Metacognitive	36	I look for opportunities to read in English	3.2	1.1
Social	46	I ask for correction when I talk	3.2	1.1
Social	47	I practise English with other students	3.2	1.1
Memory	2	I use new words in a sentence	3.1	1.0
Memory	9	I use location to remember new words	3.1	1.1
Cognitive	18	I skim read then read carefully	3.1	1.1
Cognitive	21	I divide words into parts I understand	3.1	1.1
Compensation	26	I make up words if I don't know the right ones	3.1	1.2
Compensation	28	I guess what the other person will say next	3.1	1.1
Metacognitive	37	I have clear goals for improving my English	3.1	1.1
Affective	42	I notice if I am tense or nervous	3.1	1.1
Memory	4	I make mental pictures	3.0	1.1
Metacognitive	34	I plan my schedule to have time to study	3.0	1.1
Cognitive	16	I read for pleasure in English	2.9	1.1
Affective	41	I give myself a reward for doing well	2.9	1.1
Affective	44	I talk to someone else about how I feel	2.9	1.1
Cognitive	13	I use words I know in different ways	2.8	1.0
Cognitive	17	I write notes, messages, letters, reports	2.8	1.1
Cognitive	23	I make summaries	2.8	1.1
Compensation	27	I read without looking up every new word	2.8	1.1
Cognitive	22	I try not to translate word for word	2.7	1.2
Memory	7	I physically act out new words	2.6	1.2

Memory	5	I use rhymes to remember new words	2.4	1.1
Memory	6	I use flashcards to remember new words	2.3	1.2
Affective	43	I write my feelings in a diary	2.3	1.3
Overall average reported frequency of strategy use			3.2	0.5

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency (SILL)

For an explanation of *proficiency* as the term is used in the context of this study, refer to **Definition and assessment of proficiency**, **CHAPTER 2** and Assessing proficiency levels, **CHAPTER 3**.

The overall average reported frequency of strategy use across all 348 students (seven levels) was 3.2 and the number of strategy items reportedly used at a high rate of frequency (average=3.5 or above as explained under Data analysis procedures, **CHAPTER 3**) across all students was 12.

The overall average reported frequency of strategy use for advanced students (N=34) was 3.4 and advanced students reported using 27 strategy items at a high rate of frequency. Elementary students (N=44) reported an overall average frequency of strategy use of 3.1 and they reported using only three strategy items at a high rate of frequency. (See *Table 3.2*). In order to highlight the contrast between reported strategy use by the most proficient (advanced) and the least proficient (elementary) students, data for the five intervening levels between advanced and elementary have not been included in the table.

A statistically significant relationship was discovered between reported frequency of overall language learning strategy use and level of proficiency (r=.29, p<.01, n=348).

Furthermore, the difference in reported frequency of language learning strategy use between elementary students and advanced students was found to be significant (t=3.45, df=76, p<.01).

With the exception of only nine items, advanced students reported a higher average frequency of use of each strategy than did elementary students. (See *Table 3.2*). In addition to the core of 12 strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students (see *Table 3.1*), advanced students reported using another 15 strategies highly frequently (see *Table 3.2*). A univariate regression analysis indicated that this group of 15 strategies, when combined into one group and used as the independent variable, accounted for 10.9% (R=.33) of the variance in proficiency.

The strategy statements with the average reported frequencies of use for elementary and advanced students as well as across all students can be seen in *Table 3.2* . Overall average reported frequency of strategy use and the number of strategy items reportedly used at a high rate of frequency for elementary, advanced and all students are summarised at the bottom of the table. The strategies reportedly used at a higher rate of frequency by elementary students than by advanced students (n=9) are shaded for emphasis in the "elementary level" ("E") column. The strategies reportedly used highly frequently (average=3.5 or above) by advanced students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently by all students (n=15) are shaded for emphasis in the "advanced level" ("A") column. The strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students (n=12) are shaded for emphasis in the "all students" ("AS") column.

Table 3.2: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use for elementary level (E), advanced level (A) and all students (AS) with number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	E	A	AS
Memory	1	I think of relationships	3.3	3.6	3.4
Memory	2	I use new words in a sentence	3.1	3.4	3.1
Memory	3	I create images of new words	3.3	3.0	3.2
Memory	4	I make mental pictures	3.1	3.4	3.0
Memory	5	I use rhymes to remember new words	2.2	2.4	2.4
Memory	6	I use flashcards to remember new words	2.6	1.8	2.3
Memory	7	I physically act out new words	3.0	2.1	2.6
Memory	8	I review English lessons often	3.3	2.5	3.2
Memory	9	I use location to remember new words	3.2	2.9	3.1
Cognitive	10	I say or write new words several times	3.4	3.6	3.4
Cognitive	11	I try to talk like native speakers	3.4	4.0	3.6
Cognitive	12	I practise the sounds of English	3.4	3.9	3.5
Cognitive	13	I use words I know in different ways	3.0	3.2	2.8
Cognitive	14	I start conversations in English	3.4	4.0	3.4
Cognitive	15	I watch TV or movies in English	3.2	4.1	3.5
Cognitive	16	I read for pleasure in English	2.5	3.4	2.9
Cognitive	17	I write notes, messages, letters, reports	2.5	2.7	2.8
Cognitive	18	I skim read then read carefully	2.9	3.5	3.1
Cognitive	19	I look for similar words in my own language	3.2	3.6	3.3
Cognitive	20	I try to find patterns in English	3.1	3.5	3.2
Cognitive	21	I divide words into parts I understand	2.8	3.7	3.1
Cognitive	22	I try not to translate word for word	2.3	3.5	2.7
Cognitive	23	I make summaries	2.5	2.9	2.8
Compensation	24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words	3.0	3.9	3.4
Compensation	25	When I can't think of a word I use gestures	3.6	3.9	3.7
Compensation	26	I make up words if I don't know the right ones	3.1	2.9	3.1
Compensation	27	I read without looking up every new word	2.5	4.1	2.8
Compensation	28	I guess what the other person will say next	3.1	3.3	3.1
Compensation	29	If I can't think of a word I use a synonym	3.1	4.6	3.7
Metacognitive	30	I try to find many ways to use English	3.4	3.7	3.5
Metacognitive	31	I use my mistakes to help me do better	3.1	4.0	3.5
Metacognitive	32	I pay attention to someone speaking English	3.5	4.5	3.9
Metacognitive	33	I try to find how to be a better learner	3.2	3.6	3.6
Metacognitive	34	I plan my schedule to have time to study	3.0	2.7	3.0
Metacognitive	35	I look for people I can talk to in English	3.3	3.4	3.3
Metacognitive	36	I look for opportunities to read in English	3.0	3.3	3.2
Metacognitive	37	I have clear goals for improving my English	3.1	3.4	3.1
Metacognitive	38	I think about my progress in learning English	3.3	3.8	3.5
Affective	39	I try to relax when afraid of using English	3.3	4.0	3.3
Affective	40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid	3.3	3.8	3.4
Affective	41	I give myself a reward for doing well	2.7	2.8	2.9
Affective	42	I notice if I am tense or nervous	2.9	3.0	3.1
Affective	43	I write my feelings in a diary	2.6	1.7	2.3
Affective	44	I talk to someone else about how I feel	3.0	2.5	2.9
Social	45	I ask others to speak slowly or repeat	3.7	4.3	3.9
Social	46	I ask for correction when I talk	3.0	3.5	3.2
Social	47	I practise English with other students	3.1	3.4	3.2
Social	48	I ask for help from English speakers	3.4	3.6	3.3

Social	49	I ask questions in English	3.3	4.1	3.6
Social	50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers	3.0	3.7	3.3
Overall average reported frequency of strategy use			3.1	3.4	3.2
Number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently			3	27	12

Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation

(Part A, Section 1)

Patterns of strategy use

Reliability over the entire SILL across all students proved to be very high (Cronbach alpha=.92). This is well above the standard reliability threshold of .70 (de Vaus, 1995) and in the range described as "very respectable" by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p.7). Reliabilities for the sub-groups, however, were generally low to moderate, with only three of the sub-groups (cognitive, metacognitive, social) rising above the standard reliability threshold of .70 (de Vaus, 1995).

As can be seen from *Table 3.1*, there is no apparent pattern of strategy use according to the SILL sub-groups when items are ordered according to average reported frequency of use. The 12 most frequently used strategies come from four different sub-groups and at no point do sub-groups appear to cluster around a common average. Furthermore, a factor analysis failed to produce alternative sub-groupings. Although the division of strategies into different groups according to some unifying theme is intuitively appealing, the Principal Component Analysis indicated that most of the SILL items in fact belonged to one large group which could not be divided according to such labels as "memory", "affective" and so on. In addition, there was an

awareness that many of the items of the SILL did not appear to belong exclusively to the sub-groups in which they appeared (as acknowledged by Green and Oxford, 1995). For instance, “I look for people I can talk to in English” (Item 35) could be considered “social” as well as “metacognitive”, and “I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English” (Item 1) might be “metacognitive” as well as “memory”.

A potential explanation for this difficulty with establishing meaningful sub-groupings of strategies may lie with the possibility that they are all basically cognitive, that is that they all involve mental processes, a view which accords with the placing of language learning strategy theory in the cognitive tradition of learning as discussed in **Language learning strategy theory**, **CHAPTER 2**. An “affective” strategy such as “I try to relax when afraid of using English”, for instance, involves conscious mental effort to recognise the problem (fear) and to decide what to do about it (try to relax). A “memory” strategy such as “I make mental pictures” involves conscious visualisation, and a “social” strategy such as “I ask for correction when I talk” involves thinking about the error and learning the correct form. Viewed this way, the only distinction remaining is between cognitive (learning by thinking) strategies such as “I try to find patterns in English” (Item 20), and metacognitive (thinking about thinking) strategies such as “I use my mistakes to help me do better” (Item 31). Even this simple binary distinction, however intuitively appealing, is not supported by the results of the factor analysis.

Although some studies (for instance Lund, 2000) have attempted to analyse strategy use according to the SILL sub-scales in some depth, the procedures undertaken in the

present study seem to indicate that the sub-scales are themselves not statistically viable. For this reason, when the SILL sub-groups are mentioned in this study they are written in quotation marks as a reminder that they are the terms as used in the SILL and with the reservations mentioned above in mind.

In the light of what researchers such as Green and Oxford (1995) have already discovered regarding more frequent reported use of language learning strategies among more proficient learners, it was really no surprise to discover a significant correlation between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency in this study (r=.29, p<.01, n=348). Though modest, this correlation is more than would be expected merely by chance and was considered to be sufficient to justify further investigation. As expected, advanced students reported higher frequency of language learning strategy use (average=3.4) than elementary students (average=3.1), a difference which proved to be significant (t=3.45, df=76, p<.01). These results appear to support the belief that, in general, more proficient students report using language learning strategies more frequently than less proficient students.

"Core" strategies

The twelve strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students (see *Table 3.1*) seem to form a core of strategies which have some elements in common with what Green and Oxford (1995, p.289) call "*bedrock strategies*" (authors' italics), reportedly used at similar rates of frequency across all levels. Green and Oxford suggest that such strategies are not necessarily unproductive, but that they may

"contribute significantly to the learning process of the more successful students although not being in themselves sufficient to move the less successful students to higher proficiency levels" (p.289). Certainly, these "core" strategies are all included among the strategies reportedly used highly frequently by the more proficient students. Advanced students, however, also report using a large number of other strategies highly frequently in addition to the "core" strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students, which would seem to suggest that the "core" strategies may be necessary but not sufficient for students at higher levels of proficiency in language learning.

"Plus" strategies

The group of 15 strategies reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students (see *Table 3.2*) in addition to the strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students seems to characterise the more successful learners. These "plus" strategies appear to be the ones which set the more proficient students apart from the less proficient learners. A univariate regression analysis indicated that this group of "plus" strategies accounted for 10.9% (R=.33) of the variance in proficiency. Considering the wide range of possible factors which might conceivably contribute to variations in proficiency, including some which have not been considered in this study at all (intelligence, aptitude, personality, learning style, beliefs, personal circumstances to mention but a few of a potentially very long list), to discover a factor which accounts for more than a tenth of the variance in proficiency is of interest in terms of possible implications for effective learning.

It is interesting to note that strategies relating to interaction with others feature strongly among the "plus" strategies (Items 14, 46, 48, 50). The inclusion of four interactive strategies among those used highly frequently by more proficient students would seem to support the idea that interacting in the target language and with the target culture is important when learning a new language, a concept promoted by the Communicative Language Teaching Movement in recent years. This emphasis may well reflect an awareness of the communicative nature of language and also increased confidence by the more proficient students in their ability to manage such communication. (The issue of confidence will be discussed later in this chapter).

Also well represented are strategies relating to vocabulary (Items 10, 19, 21). For some years, emphasis on vocabulary has been somewhat unfashionable (Nation, 1990), although there has recently been a renewed interest in the contribution made by vocabulary to academic success (Loewen and Ellis, 2001). The lexical approach to language learning (Lewis, 1993; 1997) has also revived the awareness of the importance of vocabulary in the language learning process (although the emphasis tends to have shifted away from the traditional vocabulary-list, discrete-word approach and towards word clusters and collocation). The inclusion in this group of strategies used highly frequently by more proficient students of three vocabulary-related strategies would seem to support the idea that vocabulary is an important element of language development.

The inclusion of three strategies relating to the ability to tolerate ambiguity (Items 22, 24, 27) supports Naiman *et al's* (1978) inclusion of this type of strategy among the

characteristics of the “good” language learner. Good language learners tend not to be the ones who demand “the answer”, and are constantly checking with their dictionaries for exact meanings: they are able to develop strategies to cope with a “degree of inherent uncertainty” (White, 1999, p.450). The strategies in this sub-group are used by more proficient students as a means of managing continuity of learning in the face of imperfect knowledge. At the same time, it is difficult to be sure whether strategies to tolerate ambiguity lead to proficiency; or whether the additional confidence which comes with increased proficiency enables students to more easily compensate for the smaller gaps in their knowledge; or whether the relationship is a spiral one, with one factor augmenting the other. This is an issue which will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Also included by Naiman *et al* (1978) among the characteristics of the “good” language learner is the ability to come to terms with the systems of language (commonly known as “grammar”). Like vocabulary, the importance of language systems, or grammar, has been somewhat downplayed in recent years (Gass, 1991). More recently, however, there has been a rediscovery of the importance of grammar for those who speak other languages (Tonkyn, 1994) and of the need to understand how language works, although the modern concept of grammar goes beyond the narrow framework of prescriptive notions of correct use to include syntax, morphology and perhaps phonology and semantics (Pearsall, 1998). The inclusion of these strategies among those used highly frequently by more proficient students (Items 1, 20) would seem to indicate the importance of developing strategies to recognise relationships and patterns in what is learned and how this new knowledge fits into the overall language system.

According to Naiman *et* al (1978) it is important to come to terms with the affective demands of learning a new language. Krashen (for instance, Krashen, 1981) is another who stresses the importance of what he calls the "Affective Filter", which he believes, under unfavourable conditions, can block language acquisition. This was Burling's (1981) experience of spending a year trying to learn Swedish while he was guest professor at a Swedish university: although intelligent and judging himself to be highly motivated, the affective difficulties he experienced left him feeling his progress was unsatisfactory. My own experience of many years in the classroom leads me to believe that students underestimate the importance of affective considerations, and often do not want to admit to affective difficulties. According to the results of this study, the more proficient students report highly frequent use of strategies for managing feelings and controlling emotions, especially of fear, so that they remain relaxed and positive (Items 39, 40).

A strategy relating to reading (Item 18) completes the list of "plus" strategies. In addition, it is interesting to note that Item 16 ("I read for pleasure in English) is only just under the high frequency threshold (average=3.4), which adds support to the possibility that reading in the target language is a useful language learning strategy, as discovered by Huang and van Naerssen (1987) and by Ehrman and Oxford (1995).

The finding that these "plus" strategies are all reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students but not by all students, suggests the possibility that they are underutilised by students in general. The possibility that these are strategies which teachers might usefully encourage students to use more frequently in order to

"enhance their success record" (as Rubin (1975, p.42) puts it), has exciting pedagogical implications, notwithstanding the questions regarding the teachability of language learning strategies raised by writers such as Rees-Miller (1993) (discussed previously in **CHAPTER 2**). It would, however, be naïvely over-optimistic to believe that, merely by presenting students with such a list of strategies, a major enhancement of their success might instantly result. The relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency is complex, and it is possible that what works for one student or group of students might not necessarily work for all students. The issue of how the findings regarding "plus" strategies relates to learner variables is explored in **CHAPTER 4**, and the relationships to individual students is explored in **CHAPTER 5**. The issue of how insights regarding strategy use might be made available to students in such a way that they can take them on board for themselves is further explored during the classroom phase of the study in **CHAPTER 6**.

"Base" strategies

According to the results of this section of the study, there is a group of 9 strategies reportedly used more frequently by elementary students than by advanced students: Items 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 26, 34, 43, 44. (See *Table 3.2*). Five of this group of strategies (that is, more than half) relate to vocabulary (Items 3, 6, 7, 9, 26). The emphasis in these strategies on memorisation (including Item 7, where the actions are presumably to assist memory, although this is not stated directly) may indicate that most are of a somewhat different order from the strategies relating to vocabulary reportedly used highly frequently by advanced `students, which seem to involve manipulation of

vocabulary rather than memorising previously unknown words. This may possibly be an example of the less sophisticated use of strategies by unsuccessful students noted by both Porte (1988) and Vann and Abraham (1990).

There are also two strategies out of these nine which relate to the management of feelings, compared with two out of nineteen in the "plus" list (Items 43, 44). The higher proportion of this type of strategy among those reportedly used more frequently by elementary students than by advanced students might possibly indicate higher anxiety levels among lower level students. These strategies typical of lower level students, furthermore, appear to involve rather solitary activities (writing a diary) or rather introspective interaction (talking about feelings), whereas those relating to the management of feelings on the "plus" list involve more outgoing attempts to relax, to communicate and to control nervousness concerning interaction with others.

The two remaining strategies reportedly used more frequently by elementary than by advanced students might be considered to relate to the management of learning (Items 8, 34). These strategies which appear to typify lower level students seem to involve attempts to control their own study patterns in perhaps a rather isolated fashion (indicating that they may be of a somewhat different order from the strategies relating to the management of learning reportedly used highly frequently by European students discussed in **CHAPTER 4**).

This examination of patterns of reported language learning strategy use, then, seems to indicate not only that the most proficient students report using a large number of

language learning strategies highly frequently, but also that many of the strategies reportedly used highly frequently by higher level students seem to be qualitatively different from those which are favoured by lower level students. The discovery of a group of strategies reportedly used more frequently by elementary students than by advanced students raises questions regarding pedagogical practice: is it useful for teachers to encourage students (as they commonly do) to write diaries (item 43), to review their lessons (item 8), or to plan their schedules (item 34) when research indicates that use of these strategies is more typical of lower level students? Or is it possible that strategies such as these have their usefulness early on the road to proficiency and only become a problem if they are retained past the point where they are useful, perhaps if students become fixated on one or other of them to the exclusion of others (for instance students who spend most of their time in their rooms reviewing lessons or writing diaries at the expense of spending time talking to host families or watching TV)?

Perhaps these strategies typical of lower level students might form a base which expands with practice and confidence into the kind of strategy structure more typical of higher level students. If this were the case, these “base” strategies could be shown to serve an important function in helping to lay the foundations of language learning and supporting students while confidence develops. The question of the evolution of strategy use as students become more proficient will be further explored in the course of the longitudinal study which is reported in **CHAPTER 6**.

The issue of confidence

The issue of confidence, raised in relation to strategy evolution brings up the vexed question of cause and effect regarding the relationship between language learning strategies and proficiency: does a strategy such as not looking up every new word, for instance, help to develop proficiency and, if so, should dictionaries be totally banned from all classrooms; or is it just that more proficient students have a wider vocabulary and are therefore able to use confidently the knowledge they have as a framework to enable them to work out what they do not know? Would removing dictionary support from less proficient students help them to develop high proficiency-related behaviour, or would it simply remove a useful tool which they need at that point in their language development while the foundations of the new language are still being laid?

These are difficult questions akin to the age-old riddle about the chicken and the egg: which comes first? Perhaps it is useful to view cause and effect in this field not so much as linear but as a spiral, where language learning strategies may help to develop proficiency, which affects language learning strategy choice, which may further increase proficiency and so on in a hopefully ever widening spiral (the Tornado Effect?). If this is the case, since the analysis of the data indicates that some language learning strategies are reportedly used more frequently by more proficient students than by others (for instance looking for patterns, learning the culture) perhaps teachers might usefully conclude that the strategies which are more typical of higher level students (although possibly their use ought not to be imposed whether students are ready or not) are goals to be aimed for and encouraged where appropriate.

Conclusion

Although the importance of frequency of language learning strategies has been questioned (for instance Purpura, 1999), indications from this study suggest that, overall, the frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies is reported by the most proficient learners. This finding would seem to suggest that, in general, more is indeed better when it comes to reported frequency of language learning strategy use. Within this generalisation, however, it is possible that not only the overall reported frequency (quantity), but also the type of language learning strategies chosen may be important, since certain types of strategies (such as strategies relating to interaction or to vocabulary and so on) appear to be typical of more proficient students. Where use of these types of strategies is reported by less proficient students, the specific items chosen appear to be qualitatively different from those favoured by more proficient students (for instance, more proficient students report using strategies which involve manipulation of vocabulary rather than the memorisation favoured by the less proficient students).

In the light of these findings, it would seem sensible that teachers should, with some caution, encourage students to expand their language learning strategy repertoires, since the most proficient students report frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies. Perhaps teachers should also (while acknowledging the possible importance of a wide range of strategies used by learners at various times during the learning process) actively encourage the use of strategies relating to interaction with others, to vocabulary (especially involving manipulation rather than memorisation), to

the tolerance of ambiguity, to language systems, to the management of feelings (especially relating to extroverted rather than to introverted activities) and to reading. These types of strategies have been shown, according to the results of this study, to be typical of more proficient students.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that the results obtained so far relate to students overall or to students grouped according to their levels of proficiency. Learners, however, may vary considerably from each other in the ways they approach the learning task (Skehan, 1988). The question of whether language learning strategy choice is related to learner variables such as nationality, sex or age, and whether, if so, such choices are related, in turn, to proficiency, is explored in the next chapter, while the reported use of language learning strategies by individuals is explored in **CHAPTER 5**.

CHAPTER 4

THE STUDY – PART A, SECTION 2:

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY USE AND PROFICIENCY ACCORDING TO LEARNER VARIABLES (SILL)

Rationale (Part A, Section 2)

Although the discovery of a positive relationship between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency reported in **CHAPTER 3** is interesting, no account was taken at that point of the effect of learner variables such as nationality, sex or age on reported language learning strategy use. It is possible, however, that the language learning strategies reportedly used on the road to proficiency may not be the same for all groups of learners, and that learner characteristics may have a "significant bearing on how learning proceeds" (Cohen and Dornyei, 2002, p.170).

As Ellis (1994, p.472) comments, there is a "veritable plethora of individual learner variables which researchers have identified as influencing learning outcomes". Obviously, researching the effects of all possible learner variables on reported language learning strategy use is out of the question in practical terms in the scope of one study. Therefore, three of the variables which appeared to have a bearing on the

way students involved in the current study went about their learning have been selected for closer examination. These are: nationality, sex and age. Some of the issues relating to these three variables have been previously discussed under **Language learning strategy theory**, **CHAPTER 2**, and research on them has been summarised under **Previous research into language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2.**

Section 2 of Part A of the study is an extension of Section 1, and therefore builds on the rationale established for the previous section. Whereas, however, Section 1 concentrated on the binary relationship between reported language learning strategy use and proficiency, Section 2 acknowledges that this view, while revealing to a degree, is overly simplistic. Learners are infinitely variable, and any such two-dimensional perspective is unlikely to be sufficiently robust to be particularly useful in a real teaching/learning situation. Having discovered that the most proficient learners report highly frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies, we need to know whether language learning strategy use varies with learner variables such as nationality, sex or age, so that students might be able to make informed choices regarding appropriate strategies for themselves.

Research questions (Part A, Section 2)

- How frequently are language learning strategies (as listed in the SILL) reportedly used by students who are speakers of other languages grouped according to nationality, sex or age?

- Are there any differences in the reported frequency of language learning strategy use or proficiency levels of students grouped according to nationality, sex or age?
- Are there patterns in variations in reported language learning strategy use according to nationality, sex or age?

Method (Part A, Section 2)

Since Section 2 is an extension of Section 1 of Part A of the study, the participants, materials and data collection procedures were basically the same. To summarise:

The participants

There were 348 students from a private language institution in New Zealand included in Part A of the study. Proficiency levels varied from elementary to advanced and students were from 21 different nationalities, There were both males and females varying in age from 14 to 64. (See Participants, **CHAPTER 3** for details).

Materials

The two main instruments used were the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 1995) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). The

biographical data gathered on the SILL questionnaire form was central to this section of the study. (Refer to Materials, **CHAPTER 3**).

Data collection procedures

The data for Section 1 and Section 2 were collected at the same time as part of normal classroom activities. (See Data collection procedures, **CHAPTER 3**).

Data analysis procedures

1. Data were grouped according to nationality, sex and age and average reported frequencies calculated according to these variables for each strategy item and over all items.
2. Average proficiency levels were calculated according to nationality, sex and age
3. Student's *t* was used to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in proficiency or in reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to the learner variables under investigation (nationality, sex and age).
4. Where significant differences were found, strategy averages were examined for patterns of high frequency of use (average=3.5 or above) according to nationality, sex or age. (The high frequency threshold was explained in Data analysis procedures, **CHAPTER 3**).

5. Where appropriate, a Pearson product-moment correlation co-efficient was used to test for significant relationships.
6. A univariate regression analysis was carried out in order to determine the amount of variance in proficiency accounted for by a group of strategies used highly frequently by European students in addition to those used highly frequently by advanced students.

Results (Part A, Section 2)

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use, proficiency and nationality (SILL)

When grouping the 348 students according to nationality, it was discovered that 219 (63%) were Japanese, 61 (18%) were Taiwanese, 21 (6%) were Korean and 30 (9%) were European. The remaining 17 students (4%) were from various other Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong. This group was not analysed further because the numbers were too low to make analysis statistically viable.

The Europeans were grouped together because no one European country was represented in sufficient numbers to form a statistically viable group on its own. The European group included Germans, Swiss, Czechs, Russians, Swedish, Danish and also South Americans such as Brazilians, Chileans, Columbians and Argentineans (included because they speak a European language). Although this is a very diverse

group, it was considered that students from countries such as Germany and France, Sweden and Russia, Spain and Argentina are culturally and linguistically more similar to each other than, for instance, Germans and Koreans. They were, therefore, grouped together in the interests of creating a statistically viable unit.

Average proficiency levels and average reported frequency of language learning strategy use are set out in *Table 4.1*.

Table 4.1: Average proficiency levels and average reported strategy frequency of use according to nationality and across all students.

Nationality	**proficiency average (7 levels)**	**strategy frequency (5-point scale)**
Japanese (n=219)	3.1	3.1
Taiwanese (n=61)	3.9	3.2
Korean (n=21)	4.2	3.4
European (n=30)	5.2	3.5
all students (n=348)	3.4	3.2

As can be seen from *Table 4.*1, European students scored the highest average level of proficiency and also the highest average for reported frequency of strategy use. Significant differences in levels of proficiency were found between:

European students and Japanese students (t=6.67, df=247, p<.05)

European students and Taiwanese students (t=2.93, df=89, p<.05)

European students and Korean students (t=2.01, df=49, p<.05)

Significant differences in reported frequency of language learning strategy use were found between:

European students and Japanese students (t=5.21, df=247, p<.05)

European students and Taiwanese students (t=4.74, df=89, p<.05)

European students and Korean students (t=2.45, df=49, p<.05).

Europeans (the most proficient group) reported using 17 strategies at a high rate of frequency which were not reportedly used at this rate across all students. Of these, four (Items 16, 35, 36, 47) were additional to the strategies reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students but not by all students. A univariate regression analysis indicated that these four strategies, when combined into one group and used as the independent variable, accounted for 7.5% (R=.27) of the variance in proficiency.

A comparison of reported frequency of language learning strategy use for each strategy item according to nationality can be seen in *Table 4.2*. The four strategies reportedly used highly frequently by Europeans in addition to those used highly frequently by advanced students but not by all students (the "plus" strategies) are shaded for emphasis in the "Europeans" column. At the bottom of *Table 4.2* the overall averages for the reported frequency of language learning strategy use and the number of strategies reportedly used at a high rate of frequency (average=3.5 or above) according to nationality and across all students are summarised.

Table 4.2: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use (SILL) for Japanese (J), Taiwanese (T), Koreans (K), Europeans (E) and all students (AS) with number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently.

Group	SILL	**Statement (paraphrased for brevity)**	**J**	**T**	**K**	**E**	**AS**
Memory	1	I think of relationships	3.2	3.4	3.9	3.9	3.4
Memory	2	I use new words in a sentence	3.1	2.9	3.5	3.4	3.1
Memory	3	I create images of new words	3.1	3.2	3.8	3.4	3.2
Memory	4	I make mental pictures	2.9	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.0
Memory	5	I use rhymes to remember new words	2.5	2.4	2.0	2.0	2.4
Memory	6	I use flashcards to remember new words	2.2	2.4	2.0	2.5	2.3
Memory	7	I physically act out new words	2.7	2.7	2.7	1.9	2.6
Memory	8	I review English lessons often	3.3	2.9	3.6	3.1	3.2
Memory	9	I use location to remember new words	3.0	2.9	3.1	3.4	3.1
Cognitive	10	I say or write new words several times	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.9	3.4
Cognitive	11	I try to talk like native speakers	3.4	3.5	3.8	4.1	3.6
Cognitive	12	I practise the sounds of English	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.5
Cognitive	13	I use words I know in different ways	2.7	3.1	2.9	3.1	2.8
Cognitive	14	I start conversations in English	3.3	3.2	3.7	4.4	3.4
Cognitive	15	I watch TV or movies in English	3.3	3.3	4.0	4.3	3.5
Cognitive	16	I read for pleasure in English	2.7	3.0	3.0	3.9	2.9
Cognitive	17	I write notes, messages, letters, reports	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.8
Cognitive	18	I skim read then read carefully	3.0	3.1	3.9	3.6	3.1
Cognitive	19	I look for similar words in my own language	3.1	3.3	3.6	3.9	3.3
Cognitive	20	I try to find patterns in English	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.2
Cognitive	21	I divide words into parts I understand	2.9	3.4	3.5	3.2	3.1
Cognitive	22	I try not to translate word for word	2.6	2.8	2.7	3.7	2.7
Cognitive	23	I make summaries	2.7	3.1	3.0	3.1	2.8
Compensation	24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.4
Compensation	25	When I can't think of a word I use gestures	3.7	3.7	3.9	3.9	3.7
Compensation	26	I make up words	3.1	3.2	3.0	3.0	3.1
Compensation	27	I read without looking up every new word	2.6	2.8	2.6	3.	2.8
Compensation	28	I guess what the other person will say next	3.0	3.3	2.9	3.1	3.1
Compensation	29	If I can't think of a word I use a synonym	3.6	3.9	4.0	4.3	3.7
Metacognitive	30	I try to find many ways to use English	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.8	3.5
Metacognitive	31	I use my mistakes to help me do better	3.4	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.5
Metacognitive	32	I pay attention to someone speaking English	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.5	3.9
Metacognitive	33	I try to find how to be a better learner	3.5	3.8	4.0	3.7	3.6
Metacognitive	34	I plan my schedule to have time to study	2.9	3.0	3.5	2.9	3.0
Metacognitive	35	I look for people I can talk to in English	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.7	3.3
Metacognitive	36	I look for opportunities to read in English	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.7	3.2
Metacognitive	37	I have clear goals for improving my English	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.1
Metacognitive	38	I think about my progress in learning English	3.5	3.4	4.2	4.0	3.5
Affective	39	I try to relax when afraid of using English	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.3
Affective	40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid	3.3	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.4
Affective	41	I give myself a reward for doing well	2.8	2.8	3.4	3.0	2.9
Affective	42	I notice if I am tense or nervous	3.1	3.2	3.8	2.9	3.1
Affective	43	I write my feelings in a diary	2.4	2.3	1.6	1.8	2.3
Affective	44	I talk to someone else about how I feel	2.9	3.0	3.5	2.3	2.9
Social	45	I ask others to speak slowly or repeat	3.7	4.0	3.9	4.7	3.9
Social	46	I ask for correction when I talk	3.0	3.2	3.1	4.3	3.2
Social	47	I practise English with other students	2.9	3.4	3.4	4.0	3.2
Social	48	I ask for help from English speakers	3.2	3.3	3.4	4.2	3.3
Social	49	I ask questions in English	3.5	3.4	3.7	4.5	3.6
Social	50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers	3.2	3.3	3.6	3.9	3.3
Overall average reported frequency of strategy use			3.1	3.2	3.4	3.5	3.2

Number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently	8	11	25	29	12

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use, proficiency and sex (SILL)

When grouped according to sex, there were 114 (32.8%) male students and 234 (67.2%) female students. As with the study by Green and Oxford (1995), the results of this study indicated that women reported using language learning strategies (average=3.2) more frequently than men (average=3.1). Women also had a higher average level of proficiency (average=3.5) than men (average=3.3). These results are set out in *Table 4.3*.

Table 4.3: Average levels of proficiency and average reported strategy frequency of use according to sex and across all students

Sex	**Proficiency average (7 levels)**	**Strategy frequency (5-point scale)**
male (n=114)	3.3	3.1
female (n=234)	3.5	3.2
all students (n=348)	3.4	3.2

In spite of the fact that these averages indicated that females were on average more proficient and reported using language learning strategies slightly more frequently than males, the differences in proficiency and in strategy use according to sex were not found to be statistically significant (Student's *t*).

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use, proficiency and age (SILL)

When grouping according to age, the students were divided as closely as possible in half. The ages of the younger group (n=172) ranged from 14 to 23, the ages of the older group (n=176) ranged from 24 to 64. Younger students had a higher average level of proficiency (average=3.6) than older students (average=3.2), although the difference in proficiency according to age was not found to be significant (Student's *t*). The overall average reported frequency of language learning strategy use was the same for both groups (average=3.2).. (See *Table 4.4*).

Table 4.4: Average levels of proficiency and average reported strategy frequency of use according to age and across all students.

Age	**Proficiency average (7 levels)**	**Strategy frequency (5-point scale)**
younger (n=172) (age=14-23)	3.6	3.2
older (n=176) (age=24-64)	3.2	3.2
all students (n=348) (age=14-64)	3.4	3.2

Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation (Part A, Section 2)

This section of the study examined three learner variables (nationality, sex and age) for their relationships with proficiency and with reported language learning strategy use. The purpose of this examination was not, of course, to attempt to show that any one group of students is either better or worse than any other. The study wanted to investigate whether any differences in language learning proficiency might be related to the language learning strategies typically employed by a particular group of students. Since, according to Wenden (1991, p. 18), language learning strategies are

"*amenable to change*" (author's italics), it would seem possible that students might be able to benefit from an awareness of the way more proficient students, or groups of students, report using language learning strategies.

In spite of popular beliefs and some previous research evidence which might have led to contrary expectations (as already discussed in **CHAPTER 2**), no significant differences were discovered in proficiency or in reported frequency of strategy use according to either sex or age. Average reported frequency of strategy use was remarkably similar for both men and women and identical for both older and younger students. Although female students were slightly more proficient on average than male students, and younger students slightly more proficient than older students, these differences were not found to be significant. It is, of course, possible that differences in the reporting patterns of men/women or younger/older students might have contributed to these results. It is possible, for instance, that women might have a lower threshold for "often" than men, or vice versa. It is possible that older students might use different strategies from younger students because of their educational backgrounds, and these strategies may or may not be represented in the SILL. Although some insights into some of these issues emerge from the interview data in **CHAPTER 5**, in general the present study was not set up to investigate these important issues which might provide interesting bases for further research.

Significant differences in proficiency and in strategy use were found, however, according to nationality, that is between European students and the other groups of students (Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean). It is, of course, possible that many factors might contribute to the higher average proficiency of European students. It is

possible, for instance, that similarities of language, culture and educational practices make it easier for Europeans to learn English than it is for non-Europeans. Many Europeans use the same graphic conventions as English, for instance, whereas languages such as Chinese use an ideographic system of writing which is very different from English. Many European languages share common vocabulary and similar grammatical systems which can provide a point of reference for students, whereas Asian students have no such advantage. Europeans (especially younger students) are typically educated to communicate ideas freely, whereas in other cultures (for instance Japanese) students tend to be expected to show polite restraint at all times (Usuki, 2000).

Although factors such as these may help to explain the higher average levels of proficiency attained by European students, another factor appears to be that European students report using language learning strategies more frequently than other students. Although the possibility of cultural bias in the items included in the SILL must be considered as a contributor to this higher average reported frequency of use (some languages, for instance, do not have the concept of rhyme, so they find Item 5: "I use rhymes to remember new words" very difficult even to understand), the finding of a relationship between reported frequency of language learning strategy use (as itemised in the case of this study in the SILL) and proficiency suggests that an examination of the strategies used by the more proficient Europeans might help to throw further light on how strategies might be used by other groups.

European students reported highly frequent use of four strategies which the advanced students (including students of all nationalities) did not report using highly frequently

(Items 16, 35, 36, 47 – see *Table 4.2*). If these four items are added to the list of "plus" strategies reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students in addition to the strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students discussed in the preceding chapter, a list of 19 strategies results which is reportedly used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students (advanced and Europeans) in addition to the strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students and by students of other nationalities (see *Table 4.5*).

Table 4.5: "Plus" strategies reportedly used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students.

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)
Memory	1	I think of relationships
Cognitive	10	I say or write new words several times
Cognitive	14	I start conversations in English
Cognitive	16	I read for pleasure in English
Cognitive	18	I skim read then read carefully
Cognitive	19	I look for similar words in my own language
Cognitive	20	I try to find patterns in English
Cognitive	21	I divide words into parts I understand
Cognitive	22	I try not to translate word for word
Compensation	24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words
Compensation	27	I read without looking up every new word
Metacognitive	35	I look for people I can talk to in English
Metacognitive	36	I look for opportunities to read in English
Affective	39	I try to relax when afraid of using English
Affective	40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid
Social	46	I ask for correction when I talk
Social	47	I practise English with other students
Social	48	I ask for help from English speakers
Social	50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers

Of the four strategies reportedly used highly frequently by Europeans but not by students of other nationalities, two relate to interaction with others (Items 35, 47). These items are in addition to the strategies related to interaction noted in the previous chapter. Item 35 involves actively looking for opportunities, and Item 47 involves practising English with other students. While it is not uncommon to find students who complain that it is a “waste of time” to talk to other students whose English is not

perfect, the highly frequent use of this strategy by a more proficient group of students suggests that interaction in English is useful, whether "perfect" or otherwise.

Two strategies relating to reading are also reportedly used highly frequently by European students in addition to the strategies on the "plus" list in **CHAPTER 3** (Items 16, 36). Getting students who are speakers of other languages to read in English is not always easy. For many years the importance of reading when learning a language was unquestioned, but in recent years the perceived usefulness of reading in the target language has diminished (Bowler and Parminter, 1992). Reading in the target language, however, can be motivating, it can provide access to culture and it can expand students' language awareness (Lazar, 1993). The inclusion of reading-related strategies among those used highly frequently by the most proficient group of students would seem to add support to the belief that reading is important when learning a new language.

As well as relating to interaction with others and to reading, Items 35 and 36 seem to represent a type of strategy relating to the management of learning. These kinds of strategies were identified by O'Malley *et al* (1985) as typical of higher level learners. In the light of comments about the typically passive nature of Asian students (Usuki, 2000), it is interesting that these strategies which indicate an ability to actively self-direct are characteristic of the more proficient Europeans. This would seem to be an area where non-Europeans might be encouraged to take more initiative and actively seek opportunities to improve their learning.

Strategies relating to the use of resources (Items 16, 36) are also included among the strategies used highly frequently by Europeans. In the case of both of these strategies, the "resource" is books. Other SILL items which refer to resources (such as TV and movies) are used highly frequently by all students and therefore become a "core" strategy rather than a "plus" strategy. Generally speaking, however, the SILL includes relatively few strategies of this type, an issue which will be further addressed during the interview phase of the study in **CHAPTER 5** and during the classroom phase in **CHAPTER 6**.

Although the possibility for cultural bias in strategy items has been acknowledged, these four strategies would appear to be ones which students of all nationalities might use with reasonably equal ease. Although it would be overly naïve to suggest that, because strategies relating to interaction with others, to reading, to the management of learning and to the use of resources appear to be effective for one group of students (Europeans), these types of strategies would necessarily be as effective for other groups, the possibility that patterns of strategy use may contribute to the higher levels of proficiency in English attained by European students would seem to be worthy of consideration and further research. The experience of Sinclair Bell (1995) and the observations of O'Malley (1987) and Porte (1988) would seem to indicate support for the need to be flexible in the strategies used to approach the learning of a new language (whether it is European or Asian) and that an inability to adopt strategies appropriate to the target language may limit success.

Conclusion

This section of the study which focusses on learner variables has found that Europeans are the most proficient of the national groups which commonly study in New Zealand and that there appear to be certain strategy patterns which are typical of European students (especially strategies relating to interaction, to reading, to the management of learning and to the use of resources). Male students and older learners may be encouraged to learn that, according to the results of this study, their younger female classmates do not appear to be either significantly more proficient or significantly strategically more active, as commonly believed.

The next chapter looks in greater depth at how the general conclusions reached so far (regarding the relationship between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency, and regarding the effects of nationality, sex and age on proficiency and on reported frequency of language learning strategy use) apply to individuals.

CHAPTER 5

THE STUDY - PART B:

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THE INDIVIDUAL (INTERVIEWS)

Rationale (Part B)

Valuable as figures may be for indicating trends and general truths, they can never represent more than paper profiles of flesh and blood learners in all their complexities. As Wong Fillmore (1982, p.157) points out: “Anyone who works with second language learners, whether in teaching or in research, discovers quickly how much individual variation there is”.

Learners are much more more than mere animated columns of statistics. As Horwitz (1999, p.558) reminds us: “language learners are individuals approaching language learning in their own unique way”. In reality, individual language learners are often full of statistically inconvenient contradictions which an analysis of the aggregated data can never portray. Over a sufficient number of cases, these contradictions tend to become levelled out, but this does not alter the fact that, on an individual level, learner characteristics of one kind or another can be a real force to be reckoned with. For this reason, a multi-method approach to data collection becomes very important in order to obtain a rounded perspective by approaching the questions from as many different directions as possible (White, 1993). In order to amplify the quantitative

questionnaire data and to exemplify the findings, it was decided to employ a complementary qualitative data collection method, as recommended by Chaudron (1986).

A technique used by many researchers to probe the complexities of the individual learner is the interview. Interviews provide a means of adding a qualitative dimension to the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires, which is necessary to "capture the richness of learners' constructions" (Oxford 2001, p.94). The importance of this is emphasised by Green and Oxford (1995, p. 293) when they comment that this kind of multifaceted approach produces insights "that are at once broadly applicable and rich in observed detail". Interviewing real learners can help to contextualise the depersonalised statistics and remind us that "we can learn a great deal from listening to our learners" (Nunan, 2000, p.8). This kind of "qualitative refinement" is important if the quantitative analysis of the data is to have relevance (Chaudron, 1986, p.714)

The interview technique has been used successfully by many researchers, including Naiman *et al* (1978, p.37) who comment that "the interview proved to be a useful research technique" and O'Malley *et al* (1985, p.35) who report that "generally we had considerable success in identifying learning strategies through interviews". In support of the advantages of using the interview as a research method, Wenden (1987, p.76) presents the common-sense point of view that "the best way to get at what strategies learners actually use as they go about their learning tasks is to ask them".

As explained by Nunan (1992), interviews vary from structured, through semi-structured to unstructured. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the most suitable for the present study because of its flexibility and because of the rich information which such interviews can produce (Dowsett, 1986). Indeed, according to Gillham (2001, p.65), the semi-structured interview is "the richest single source of data". Since the aim of the interviews was to try to bring a human, qualitative perspective to the quantitative data provided by the questionnaires, rather than approach my interviewees with clinical distance, I have tried to portray them as the three dimensional human beings that I, as their teacher/director, knew them to be, while also trying to avoid the opposite extreme of allowing my knowledge of them as people to cloud my judgement regarding their language learning strategy use. By doing this, I have tried to add a qualitative dimension which complements and extends the quantitative findings of the questionnaire data.

Interviews were recorded in note form, as the most direct and least intrusive procedure for collecting this kind of data. It was initially planned to make audio tapes of the interviews. However, the tapes resulting from the first few interviews were of such poor quality as to be virtually inaudible and attempts to place the recorder in a more prominent position, or to get students to speak more loudly or clearly for the tape resulted only in inhibiting natural responses, difficulties acknowledged by Aldridge and Levine (2001). It was, therefore, decided to rely on pencil and paper notes as a record of the interview. The notes were later examined for strategy patterns, for relationships with other parts of the study, and for new insights.

Research questions (Part B)

- To what extent do the insights gained from the questionnaire-based study of Part A regarding reported frequency of language learning strategy use apply to the individual student
- Which strategies do individual students reportedly consider most effective for themselves (key strategies)?

Method (Part B)

The participants

From among the students studying English at a private language school in New Zealand, 26 were selected to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted after the SILL questionnaire phase of the study had been completed, so that these students were not among those who had participated in the initial questionnaire. The interviewees were purposively selected to be as representative as possible of the learner variables included in the study in terms of proficiency, sex, age and the major national groups. A grid was drawn up along the following lines, in order to identify the types of interviewees who were being sought:

Older European woman	Older Korean woman	Older Taiwanese woman	Older Japanese woman
Older European man	Older Korean man	Older Taiwanese man	Older Japanese man

Younger European woman	Younger Korean woman	Younger Taiwanese woman	Younger Japanese woman
Younger European man	Younger Korean man	Younger Taiwanese man	Younger Japanese man

For each of the above learner types, a student was sought at a high level and at a low level of proficiency. Out of a possible 32 participants yielded by the grid, 26 were obtained. However, the data obtained from the 26 were rich and varied, and the non-availability of representatives in certain categories (there were, for instance, no older Korean women in the school, and no older Japanese women at a high level of proficiency) appeared not to detract from the aim of covering a representative range of individuals. Accordingly, it was decided to conclude the interview data collection phase of the study after the 26th interview had been completed.

Materials

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

This was used as the basic instrument to guide initial placement and determine level. (For further details, see Materials, **CHAPTER 3**).

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning – (SILL)

This was used as the basic instrument to obtain information about the frequency with which these students reported using language learning strategies and to act as a

stimulus for ideas about language learning strategy use. (For further details, see Materials, **CHAPTER 3**).

Interview guide

This consisted of three main questions (regarding key strategies, learning difficulties and the effects of learner variables) designed to further probe a student's strategy use and to explore some of the factors which inter-relate with this strategy use. The interview guide (see Appendix C) was designed to complement the SILL's quantitative approach by adding a qualitative element in the form of individual opinions, attitudes, reactions or beliefs. During the interview, the interviewer asked the student the questions on the guide and noted the responses for later summarising. In addition to providing direct answers to the questions, students were encouraged to elaborate on their answers by providing examples and personal insights, which were also noted by the interviewer.

Data collection procedures

The 26 students completed a Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and were invited to a semi-structured interview which lasted about half an hour, during which time their responses and comments were noted. The students were not rewarded materially in any way for agreeing to participate. They were all very willing to be interviewed, regarding the occasion, perhaps, as an opportunity to practise interaction in English.

During the interview, the SILL responses were discussed. The students were asked about the strategies they had found most useful and about their development of strategies to deal with the difficulties they had found with learning English. Students were also asked whether they thought their nationality, their sex, or their age affected their choice of language learning strategies and/or how they felt these factors affected others with whom they learnt. Any other interesting insights were also noted.

Data analysis procedures

Following the student interviews, the notes were examined for useful insights into strategy use and ten were selected for closer examination. These ten students were chosen to be as varied as possible in terms of proficiency, nationality, sex and age also in terms of the success or otherwise they achieved during their courses (information obtained from their class teachers and from test results). The selected interviewees were also chosen because of the quality of the insights they provided during the interview and the degree to which these insights added something new to previous interviews (some tended to be rather repetitive of material obtained previously)

Using the notes and the SILL responses, learner profiles of the ten selected interviewees were constructed. Learner characteristics (nationality, sex and age) were noted and the SILL results (average frequency, number of strategies rated 5, number of "core" strategies rated 5, number of "plus" strategies rated 5, number of "base" strategies rated 5) summarised. (The terms "core", "plus" and "base" have been

explained in **Discussion**, **CHAPTER 3**). Achievement (in terms of examinations passed) was recorded or rate of progress (in terms of levels per month) calculated. Learning difficulties encountered were noted as well as the key strategies (the ones students identified as being important for themselves) employed.

Following the profiles, the SILL results and achievement/rates of progress are summarised in table form (*Table 5.1*) for ease of comparison among the ten selected interviewees.

Student profiles and summary of results (Part B)

In this section, student profiles consisting of learner characteristics, SILL results, achievement or rates of progress, learning difficulties and key strategies of the ten selected interviewees will be set out, followed by the SILL results and achievement/ rates of progress summarised in table form (*Table 5.1*). These results will be amplified and the implications discussed in the next section.

Student profile 1: Nina

Learner characteristics

Nationality: German Sex: female Age: 19

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.5
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	14
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	3
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	9
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	1
Achievement:	passed CAE and CPE

Learning difficulties

*Speaking in English

Key strategies

*Talking to people in English to improve speaking skills.

*Consciously working to manage lack of self confidence.

*Living in an environment where English is spoken.

*Writing new language items down in a notebook.

Student profile 2: Kira

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Japanese Sex: male Age: 28

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.8
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	19
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	8
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	6
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	1
Progress:	2 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Understanding spoken English *Grammar

*Reading and writing

Key strategies

*Watching TV to practise listening. *Reading newspapers

*Talking to native speakers. *Writing sentences in a notebook.

*Working specifically on knowledge of grammar.

*Consciously manipulating position in the classroom.

*Doing homework and revision regularly.

*Providing for time out from study in order to refresh himself.

Student profile 3: Fernando

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Argentinian Sex: male Age: 23

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.7
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	18
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	7
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	8
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	1
Progress:	1.2 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Prepositions *Pronunciation

*Understanding native speakers

Key strategies

*Asking for help *Learning from correction

*Learning language in chunks *Keeping a notebook

*Watching TV, especially for listening practice and pronunciation modelling

*Speaking only in English

Student profile 4: Kim

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Korean Sex: female Age: 20

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.7
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	18
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	8
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	7
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	1
Progress:	1.2 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Idioms *Vocabulary

*Grammar

Key strategies

*Writing language items (especially idioms, vocabulary, grammar) in a notebook and consciously learning them

*Watching TV and listening to tapes to practise listening skills

*Reading newspapers, magazines, stories to improve reading and writing

*Putting a lot of time into study

*Speaking English to the homestay family and non-Korean friends

Student profile 5: Mikhail

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Russian Sex: male Age: 24

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.2
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	9
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	5
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	3
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	0
Progress:	0.6 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Grammar (especially tenses)

Key strategies

*Watching TV

*Talking to friends in English

*Consulting friends for answers to language questions

Student profile 6: Yuki

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Japanese Sex: female Age: 44

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	2.1
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	0
Number of “core” strategies rated 5:	0
Number of “plus” strategies rated 5:	0
Number of “base” strategies rated 5:	0
Progress:	0.25 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Speaking and writing

*Grammar

Key strategies

*Reading easy books in English

Student profile 7: Hiro

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Japanese Sex: male Age: 64

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use: 3.3

Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always): 11

Number of "core" strategies rated 5: 4

Number of "plus" strategies rated 5: 6

Number of "base" strategies rated 5: 0

Progress: in the same class for the month he was here

Learning difficulties

*Grammar *Vocabulary

Key strategies

*Reading newspapers *Listening to radio and songs

*Watching movies *Speaking only the target language

*Recording grammar and vocabulary in a notebook

*Learning language from the environment (e.g. posters, signs)

*Remembering new vocabulary by connecting it with something memorable

*Using "face saving" techniques such as avoiding threatening situations by becoming absorbed with note taking

Student profile 8: May

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Taiwanese Sex: female Age: 35

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.6
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	5
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	3
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	2
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	0
Progress:	0.66 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Listening and speaking *Cultural differences

*Grammar (especially tenses and sex differentiation)

*Vocabulary (especially synonyms)

Key strategies

*Listening to and copying native speakers *Making non-Taiwanese friends

*Working consciously to expand vocabulary *Trying not to worry about mistakes

*Maximising exposure to English for instance by going to movies, watching TV, listening to tapes and going on school activities.

Student profile 9: Kang

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Korean Sex: male Age: 41

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.2
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	3
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	1
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	0
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	2
Progress:	1.0 levels per month

Learning difficulties

*Pronunciation

Key strategies

*Revising lessons *Doing homework *Listening to tapes

*Eating western food *Watching TV *Listening to the radio

*Going to the movies *Using a dictionary

*Listening to people talking *Adapting to the teacher

*Using a textbook for vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar

*Noting language from signs, notices and advertising in a notebook

Student profile 10: Lily

Learner characteristics

Nationality: Swiss Sex: female Age: 26

SILL results and progress/achievement

Average reported frequency of use:	3.7
Number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always):	15
Number of "core" strategies rated 5:	4
Number of "plus" strategies rated 5:	9
Number of "base" strategies rated 5:	1
Achievement:	obtained 8.5 in IELTS and passed CPE

Learning difficulties

*Grammar (especially tenses)

Key strategies

*Communicating in spoken English *Repetition

*Consciously studying grammar *Reading in English

*Not translating word for word

The SILL results of the 10 selected student interviewees are set out in *Table 5.1*. Setting these results out in this way facilitates the comparison of one student with another. Items rated 5 are shaded for emphasis. For strategy statements, refer to Appendix A.

The “core” items in the SILL column which were reportedly used highly frequently (average=3.5 or above) across all students are marked **“c”** in the “SILL” column.

The “plus” items reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students in addition to those used highly frequently across all students are marked **“+”** in the “SILL” column.

The “base” strategies reportedly used more frequently by elementary students than by advanced students are marked **“-”** in the “SILL” column.

At the bottom of the table there is a summary of the following key statistics:

av: the average reported frequency of strategy use

no: the number of strategies rated 5 (always or almost always)

core: the number of “core” strategies rated 5

plus: the number of “plus” strategies rated 5

base: the number of “base” strategies rated 5

ach/prog: the achievement in terms of exams passed or the rate of progress in levels per month.

Table 5.1: Reported frequency ratings of language learning strategy use (SILL) by interviewees 1-10 with progress in terms of levels per month

SILL	Nina	Kira	Fernando	Kim	Mikhail	Yuki	Hiro	May	Kang	Lily
1+	4	3	4	3	3	2	4	3	2	5
2	3	5	5	5	3	2	3	3	3	4
3-	2	5	1	4	4	2	3	4	4	4
4	2	5	3	3	4	2	3	3	3	4
5	1	3	1	3	3	2	3	3	2	2
6-	1	2	3	1	1	3	3	2	2	2
7-	1	2	3	1	1	2	2	2	4	1
8-	3	4	4	5	1	3	3	3	4	3

9-	5	3	4	3	4	2	4	4	4	3
10+	5	5	1	4	3	2	3	4	3	4
11c	5	5	1	5	5	3	3	4	4	5
12c	4	5	4	4	4	2	3	4	2	4
13	3	3	4	4	3	2	3	4	3	3
14+	5	4	4	5	4	2	2	4	3	5
15c	5	3	4	5	5	3	5	3	4	5
16+	5	2	3	5	4	3	3	4	4	5
17	5	4	3	4	1	2	2	2	3	3
18+	5	3	5	5	3	2	5	4	4	3
19+	5	3	4	4	4	2	5	4	2	4
20+	3	5	3	3	4	2	5	4	4	4
21+	5	3	1	3	1	2	3	3	4	4
22+	3	2	5	3	4	2	2	4	1	5
23	2	3	3	4	5	2	3	4	4	3
24+	5	4	2	4	5	2	5	3	2	5
25c	4	4	5	5	3	2	2	4	4	3
26-	4	4	3	3	4	2	4	2	4	3
27+	5	3	5	5	5	2	5	2	1	5
28	3	4	5	2	4	2	5	3	2	2
29c	5	4	5	5	5	2	4	5	4	4
30c	3	5	4	3	4	2	4	3	3	4
31c	4	5	5	5	4	2	4	4	4	4
32c	3	5	5	5	5	2	5	5	4	4
33c	3	5	5	5	4	2	5	4	4	3
34-	2	5	5	3	1	2	4	4	3	5
35+	3	5	4	3	1	2	3	4	3	3
36+	3	5	4	5	1	2	3	4	3	5
37	4	5	4	5	2	2	3	4	2	5
38c	4	5	3	4	5	2	5	4	5	3
39+	4	5	5	2	5	2	5	4	2	4
40+	5	5	5	3	2	2	4	5	4	3
41	3	2	3	3	3	2	1	1	2	2
42	2	4	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	4
43-	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	4	5	1
44-	2	3	2	1	4	2	1	4	5	3
45c	4	4	5	3	4	2	4	5	4	5
46+	3	3	5	2	1	2	4	4	2	3
47+	4	3	5	5	4	2	1	4	3	5
48+	3	3	5	4	3	2	4	4	3	4
49c	4	5	5	5	4	2	4	4	3	5
50+	4	4	3	5	3	2	4	5	4	5
Av	3.5	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.2	2.1	3.3	3.6	3.2	3.7
No	14	19	18	18	9	0	11	5	3	15
Core	3	8	7	8	5	0	4	3	1	4
Plus	9	6	8	7	3	0	6	2	0	9
Base	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	1
ach/prog	CPE	2.0	1.2	1.2	0.6	.25	0	.66	1.0	CPE

Discussion and amplification of results (Part B)

An examination of the interview data relating to how individuals reportedly use language learning strategies would seem to indicate general support for the findings from the survey data that the most successful students report frequently using a large

number of language learning strategies. Nina, for instance, who gained an A pass in the high level Cambridge Proficiency in English examination (CPE) reported highly frequent use of many language learning strategies and was also able to add a number of key strategies of her own to the SILL items. At 19 years old, Nina had already studied English for nine years in her native Germany and had passed the Cambridge First Certificate examination. She was, therefore, already at quite an advanced level on arrival. After sitting the Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) and the Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE) examinations, Nina planned to return to Germany to study English at University in order to equip herself for a career in a field where her English would be useful.

The results of Nina's SILL indicated that she reported using language learning strategies highly frequently (average = 3.5) with 14 of the 50 items being given the maximum rating of 5 (always or almost always). Nina gave a rating of 5 ("always or almost always") to three of the 12 "core" strategies (used highly frequently across all students) and to nine of the 15 "plus" strategies (reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students). Of the "plus" strategies, three relate to vocabulary (Items 10, 19, 21), two relate to the ability to tolerate ambiguity (Items 24, 27) and one relates to reading (Item 18). Nina also gave a rating of 5 to Item 16 ("I read for pleasure in English"), reportedly used highly frequently by European students. She gave a rating of 5 to only one of the 9 "base" strategies (reportedly used more frequently by less proficient students than by more proficient students). (See *Table 5.1*). This pattern of strategy use suggests a student who makes good use of the strategies typical of higher level students, who is able to cope with a degree of uncertainty, and who is especially aware of the importance of vocabulary and the

usefulness of reading in English. She has obviously grown beyond the "base" strategies, although she still uses location to remember new words.

As a European, Nina felt she had an advantage over Asian students because of the similarities of the languages and she felt that women are more likely to study language than men, who are more likely to be expected by others to study something practical. She felt that it was an advantage for herself to be doing something others accepted as "normal" rather than having to fight against the expectations of others. She did not feel, however, that either nationality or sex affected the strategies which were likely to lead to success. As for age, she commented that when she was younger she used reading as her main strategy (receptive), whereas now she was more aware of the importance of writing (productive).

During the interview, Nina said that a key strategy she used was to always write everything she learnt down since this helped to fix it in her mind and meant she could revise and learn it later. She had found talking to people in English the most useful strategy as a means of improving speaking skills, an area in which she lacked confidence. She felt that the best way to overcome this difficulty with confidence was to stay in an environment where the language was spoken (e.g. NZ), preferably living with a native-speaking family (as she did) since this maximised opportunity for practice and meant that she had to make the effort to interact in English whether she wanted to or not.

Nina was such a competent student, it was easy to forget that confidence (as mentioned above, and discussed in **CHAPTER 3**) is an issue, even with someone like

her. One day she arrived in class uncharacteristically flushed and flustered. When asked what was the matter she told us that, as she was walking to school and waiting to cross at the lights, a woman came up to her and asked how to get to the station. Trying to think how best to direct her, Nina said “Um”, and the woman immediately said “Oh, so you are a foreigner too!”. This brief exchange really unsettled Nina and threw her into a tail-spin of self doubt. “I didn’t say anything!” she exclaimed to us in class. “Only ‘Um’, and from that she could tell I was a foreigner!”.

Although visibly affected by this encounter, it was not long before Nina had recovered from this ego-denting experience, as might, perhaps, have been expected from the high rating she gave to Item 40: “I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake”. It is difficult to be sure, however, whether the use of such a strategy might be a cause of language learning effectiveness, or whether the fact that Nina was already a successful learner gave her the underlying confidence to recover her composure and use such a strategy effectively (as has already been discussed in **Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation**, **CHAPTER 3**).

Although, unlike Nina, he did not sit an examination to provide an external measure of success, Kira made the fastest rate of progress of the ten selected interviewees in terms of progress through the levels of the school (two levels per month). Kira reported the highest average frequency of language learning strategy use (average=3.8) and the highest number of strategies rated 5 (“always or almost always”, n=19). Of these, eight were “core” strategies, six were “plus” strategies and only one was a “base” strategy. (See *Table 5.1*).) It is also interesting to note that

Kira gave a rating of 5 to all nine of the SILL's "metacognitive" strategies. Although the validity of grouping the strategies in this way has been previously discussed (see **Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation**, **CHAPTER 3**), it is nevertheless of interest that a student as successful as Kira opts so emphatically for the group of strategies which may relate to the ability to manage the learning process.

When 28-year-old Kira started his English language course he was placed in a mid-elementary class on the basis of the placement procedures adopted by the school (explained in Assessing proficiency levels, **CHAPTER 3**). He said he wanted to learn English in order to obtain a new job and so that he could write English lyrics for songs which he could perform with the band he had in Japan. Although Kira had not studied English formally since leaving school and had "forgotten much", even at an early stage in his course he was a very confident speaker and managed to use the knowledge he had very effectively, an ability which he put down to having worked in a duty free shop where he had to speak English to customers, and to having been in a band where he sang in English.

Like Nina, Kira was very focussed: he knew what he wanted and he worked very hard. Staff members often mentioned having to evict him from the self-study room as they were going round the school locking up long after the majority of the students had gone. According to all the teachers who had him, he was a delight to have in class, always participating keenly in classroom activities. He was also very popular among the students, having, among other things, organised a school soccer team which gave him status and a high profile and provided time out from direct study, which he used as a deliberate strategy to "refresh myself".

During his interview, Kira was very definite and specific about his key strategies, readily producing a long list. He said he watched TV as much as possible to practise listening and read newspapers. In order to re-activate the knowledge acquired in his school days, he spent two to three hours a day working on his grammar. In class he always sat next to the teacher, so that it was easy to ask questions, or next to the best speaker in the class, so that he could use the other student's knowledge to expand his own. He did homework and lesson revision every day and talked with his host family in the evenings. He used every opportunity to converse with native speakers such as taxi drivers and shop keepers and kept a special notebook in which he wrote sentences. Kira believed in writing full sentences in order to check the usage: isolated words and meanings he found insufficient. In order to give himself a break from study, on the weekends he played sport, which he considered beneficial.

Kira felt that the responsibility for learning was basically the students', who needed to make positive efforts to learn if they were to be successful. However, he believed a teacher could be very helpful, especially by creating a good atmosphere, by providing useful feedback, and by acting as a reference. He told me that he had not been a good student of English when he was young. However, when he was about six or seven years old he used to go to visit a friend of his mother's who spoke good English and she would play language games with him. He found this a lot of fun and, therefore, from an early age developed a positive attitude towards English, the importance of which is stressed by Stern (1975).

Kira made excellent progress, moving through six levels (mid-elementary to advanced) in a mere 3 months (two levels a month). Even allowing for the possibility that some of this progress might have been the result of re-activating stored knowledge, this was a remarkable rate of promotion. The consensus among his teachers was that he was a conspicuously excellent, hard-working student who was keen to participate in everything and who approached his studies with a consistently positive attitude which made him a pleasure to have in class. Kira had an outgoing personality and showed real leadership qualities among the other students while his disciplined approach to his learning earned everyone's respect and helped him to achieve an all-round excellence which is a rare accomplishment in such a short time. And all of this in spite of being a somewhat older Asian male (all factors sometimes believed to be negatively correlated with success in language learning). The possibility that some of this success might be related to Kira's extensive repertoire of language learning strategies is suggested by the positive relationship which was discovered between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency.

Two other interviewees (Fernando and Kim) who made very good progress (1.2 levels per month) also reported high average frequency of use (average=3.7) and high numbers of strategies rated 5 (n=18). (See *Table 5.1*). These two students have several points of similarity and also some interesting differences, so they are interesting to compare and contrast with each other.

Fernando was a 23-year-old from Argentina (which placed him in the "European" category for the purposes of this study, as explained in **Results**, **CHAPTER 4**. At the

beginning of his five-month English language course he was placed at mid-elementary level. At this stage he struggled to communicate verbally in English and his grammar was especially weak. He was, however, extremely focussed, determined and assertive, indeed the term “pushy” was used to describe him on more than one occasion. He had left a job to come to New Zealand and had financed his own studies which he wanted to use to improve his job prospects. He was, therefore, very aware of what the course was costing him in monetary terms and there was an urgency about his determination to make the best of his time at the school which was not evident with many of the other students whose courses were often being paid for by parents or others. Highly motivated, therefore, to make the best use of his time and money, he agitated ceaselessly for promotion and within a few weeks of arrival settled into a class working for the Cambridge First Certificate examination.

When Fernando’s SILL questionnaire was examined, a high average reported frequency of strategy usage (average=3.7) was discovered and also a high number (n=18) of strategies rated in the “always or almost always” (rating=5) category, of which eight were “plus” strategies (reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students but not by all students). Fernando gave a rating of 5 to five of the six “social” strategies. (See *Table 5.1*). Although the validity of the SILL sub-groupings has been discussed previously (see **Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation**, **CHAPTER 3**), a student who opts so emphatically for this group of strategies might be expected to be very aware of the advantages of interaction when learning language.

The most difficult aspects of learning English, according to Fernando, were prepositions, understanding native speakers, and also working out the pronunciation

of English words. Although English has a lot of vocabulary which is related to Spanish, he found that it is often not possible to work out the pronunciation from the written form as is usually the case with Spanish. However, he said he was not afraid to ask people if he was unsure of pronunciation and was prepared to learn from correction (though, in fact, he was often so busy talking that he would continue right over attempts to correct him!).

Asked what he found the most useful strategies Fernando said he liked to learn language in related chunks rather than as isolated words, a strategy which he credited to a highly esteemed private teacher with whom he studied prior to coming to New Zealand and which was also prominent in Kira's strategy repertoire. Other key strategies included keeping a notebook in which he recorded language items new to him (eg prepositional usage) and watching TV as much as possible in order to practise listening and as a model for pronunciation.

When I pointed out to him that his SILL questionnaire indicated that he reported very little use of "memory" and "cognitive" strategies and suggested that he might usefully consider using such strategies (for instance writing letters, reading for pleasure) more often, Fernando expressed impatience with this advice and insisted that speaking English only was the most important learning strategy. His considerable South American charm certainly facilitated the exercise of this strategy by ensuring him of a constant supply of eager (female) companions, with whom he no doubt spent the time speaking English constantly!?

Fernando left the school from the advanced class, having moved through six levels in five months. This is a good rate of progress and due very much to his single-minded

determination. He did not pass First Certificate, however, a failure which may well be at least partly attributable to the fact that he did not put nearly as much effort into the formal areas of his studies as he did into the communicative aspect (an observation made by his teachers and also able to be inferred from an examination of the types of language learning strategies he used, of which, as has already been noted, a high number were "social" strategies). Although interactive strategies may be important (as evidenced by their inclusion among the types of "plus" strategies used highly frequently by more proficient students), Fernando's lack of all-round success (such as achieved, for instance, by Nina) suggests the possibility that it may also be important to balance different types of strategies so that all aspects of language development are worked on.

Like Fernando, when 20-year-old Kim from Korea came to New Zealand for a five-month English course, she was initially placed in a mid-elementary class. She had come to study English in order to improve her job prospects and to have a "better life" and she had worked for eight months as a teacher and librarian in order to earn the money for her course. She worked hard and made steady progress. She was a good student in class, participated well in all activities and was not especially demanding as far as promotion - she was promoted purely on her results, without the kind of pressure other more "pushy" students, such as Fernando, sometimes exerted.

An examination of her SILL results showed a high average reported frequency of language learning strategy use (average=3.7) and also a high number of strategies (n=18) used in the "always or almost always" (rating=5) category. Co-incidentally, both the reported strategy average and the total number of strategies rated 5 are the

same as Fernando's. Unlike Fernando, however, who gave ratings of 5 to five "social" strategies, Kim gave ratings of 5 to five "metacognitive" strategies. Although the validity of dividing strategies in this way has been previously discussed (see **Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation**, **CHAPTER 3**), the choice of such different types of strategies might suggest rather different types of learners: Fernando highly sociable and keen to use interaction with others to improve his English, Kim more aware of the need to control her own learning.

Kim said she found idioms especially difficult when learning English and she felt that Europeans had an advantage here because "their thinking is closer to English - they can guess". English vocabulary was also a problem. In spite of the Korean education system's well-developed method for teaching vocabulary in lists, Kim found it difficult to distinguish between the many words in English which mean almost the same thing. English grammar was similarly problematic, since it is "completely different" from Korean and she found the unfamiliar conventions of English (such as word order) hard to get used to. Kim had found it necessary to pay conscious attention to these areas of English, writing idioms, vocabulary and grammar in a notebook as she came across them and consciously learning them later. Other key language learning strategies she said she had found useful were watching TV and using tapes in the self study room to improve her listening skills, as well as reading magazines, newspapers and stories, which she found helped her writing as well as her ability to read.

Kim said she put a lot of time into her study, believing: "We must study steadily and with patience". She also tried to speak to her host family or non-Korean friends at

school as much as possible in order to improve her speaking and listening skills with which she lacked confidence because in Korea her lessons had been textbook-based and she had had no access to English speakers before coming to New Zealand. She did not concern herself too much with strategies relating to feelings because “it is important to keep your mind on your work and not to worry too much about feelings”. As might have been expected from Kim’s emphasis on “metacognitive” strategies in the SILL, she believed in taking charge of her own learning. As she put it: “The teacher leads, but learning is up to the student”.

Kim was well thought of by all her teachers and the other students. She left New Zealand planning to continue at an English school in Korea and to go back to university to study accountancy. She was such a quiet, steady worker that it was actually a surprise, at the end of her five-month course, to discover that she had gone all the way from mid-elementary to advanced (six levels), a rate of progress which matched Fernando’s. It is encouraging to discover that, in spite of European students' higher average levels of proficiency in English, Asian students can progress as rapidly. The possibility that appropriate language learning strategies may be related to Kim’s excellent progress is suggested by the positive correlation which was shown by the results of the data analysis to exist between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency.

Compared with these four students (Nina, Kira, Fernando and Kim) who all gave high frequency ratings to many strategies and who all made excellent progress, Mikhail, who gave only nine strategies a rating of five and whose average reported frequency of strategy use (average=3.2) was below the high frequency threshold of 3.5, progressed through only 0.6 levels per month. Mikhail was a 24-year-old Russian

who, like Kira, was initially placed in a mid-elementary class. When interviewed ten months later, he had been working in the advanced class for some weeks. His promotion to this level, however, had not been without reservations on the part of myself and of the various teachers he had had along the way.

Mikhail was very ambitious and keen to achieve the status of being in a higher level class. Over the months he managed to become very fluent and able to communicate what he needed to say with little difficulty. Those of us who knew him better, however, realised that this surface fluency often disguised the fact that his underlying grammatical competence by no means kept pace with his communicative competence. When listened to with more than conversation-level care, Mikhail's utterances would be discovered to be liberally sprinkled with extremely suspect structures, such as "Twenty-oneth of January", "One month and half of holiday", "When I have been in elementary class I study quite hard" and so on. However, in line with the philosophy behind the currently fashionable communicative approach to language teaching and learning, that the most important aspect of language is the ability to use it to communicate, Mikhail was promoted as he desired and essentially in line with his verbal communicative ability.

The weaknesses in grammatical competence were even more evident in Mikhail's written work. His own awareness of this was suddenly and rather uncomfortably brought home to him in his last week at school when he sat an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) practice test prior to sitting the exam itself the following week. Needing to get at least a level 6 in order to fulfil his (and his

parents') ambition to enter university the following year, he was dismayed to discover that the practice test indicated a level considerably below what he needed.

According to his reported use on the SILL, Mikhail did not employ language learning strategies highly frequently (average = 3.2). He gave only nine of the SILL items a rating of 5 (always or almost always). Of these nine, three (30%) are grouped in the SILL under the category of "compensation" strategies, or strategies employed to make up for missing knowledge. Of the "plus" strategies reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students he gave a rating of 5 to only three, of which two related to the tolerance of ambiguity and one to the need to relax! (See *Table 5.1*)

When asked whether he could suggest any reasons for the rapid progress he had made in his verbal communication skills, Mikhail said that he felt that watching TV (especially American comedy) and talking to friends (especially Kiwi friends) had been more important than formal study. He complained that English grammar, especially the tense system, was difficult to come to terms with. As for strategies he might use to overcome the problem he rather dubiously suggested checking a grammar book, but then said he would be more likely to consult a friend.

Ostensibly, further education was Mikhail's main reason for learning English – he was studying to be a lawyer. However, he himself did not consider this a particularly urgent motivation - he was doing it mainly to please his parents. For himself, he needed English mainly for social purposes such as drinking and going to parties. It was clear that for Mikhail, having a good time was his major reason for learning English, a motivation reminiscent of Wes's in the well-known study by Schmidt

(1953). The problem for Mikhail seemed to be that the language required to survive well in the limited contexts of the language school and the parties he attended left him with a false sense of his own ability, the deficiencies in which suddenly became vividly apparent when he had to sit the IELTS examination, at which time all the terrifying spectres of parental expectations also suddenly re-surfaced.

Faced with the probability of failing the qualification he needed to enter university and satisfy his parents, Mikhail said he wished he had put more work into building up his underlying knowledge base of English by consciously studying English grammar and vocabulary to underpin his admittedly considerable gains in fluency. In fact, when Mikhail sat IELTS he actually scored only 4.5, well below the level he needed for university, and he had to endure the indignity (as he felt it) of being enrolled by his parents in a foundation programme which involved working on his English for another year before he was able to go on to university.

Even less conspicuous than Mikhail by her progress (0.25 levels per month) as a language learner was Yuki, who reported the lowest average frequency of language learning strategy use of the interviewees (average=2.1) and the lowest number of strategies rated 5 (n=0). When 44-year-old Yuki started her English language course, she had already been in New Zealand with her children on a visitor's visa for one year. Wanting to stay in New Zealand, rather than having to return to Japan leaving her children here, she applied for a student visa, which meant that she was obliged to attend school. On the Oxford Placement Test (Allan 1995) she scored 81, which is categorised as a "minimal user" and she was placed in the lowest class.

For some time her attendance was very erratic. She or her children were often sick

and she “moved my house” four times. After being warned of the possible consequences of breach of the conditions of her visa, she became more regular. After four months she was moved to a mid-elementary class, and three months later to an upper elementary class. Her ability to communicate remained very low, however, often requiring the services of the Japanese counsellor to translate. The results of the monthly tests were also unspectacular. After nearly a year at the language school, and after nearly two years in New Zealand, Yuki was still only in the upper elementary class.

Yuki was not easy to interview because she found it difficult to understand the questions, and, when she understood, found it difficult to express what she wanted to say in English. The English she could manage was frequently extremely ungrammatical: “I can’t express myself very well English”. The most difficult aspect of learning English she found to be speaking and writing (production skills). She thought that using the telephone and writing long sentences might be useful strategies to help with these difficulties though she said she did not actually use either of these. As a Japanese, she found English grammar difficult, but was unable to suggest strategies for dealing with the difficulty. The only key strategy she was aware of using was reading easy books in English. Yuki thought English was difficult to learn because “my mind is blank”, a condition which she put down to her age. Her motivation for coming to New Zealand was her children’s education, and she attended an English Language School only because she needed a student visa to stay in New Zealand. As such, her motivation to learn English appeared low and her progress was minimal.

Although Yuki believed she was too old to learn English, she was far from the oldest student in the school. Hiro was a 64-year-old Japanese man who came to New Zealand to spend a month studying English. His entry test indicated that he was at pre-intermediate level, and he studied at this level throughout the month he spent here. He said he had spent seven years studying English, but "that was a long time ago" during the war, when he believed he had been handicapped because there were no books, no paper, and he was taught by non-native speakers.

In spite of his age, Hiro was extremely well-liked and respected by the younger students and he got on with them extremely well. As an older Japanese, however, especially as an older man, interacting with younger students (who in many cases were a lot more communicatively competent than he was) was fraught with cultural difficulties. They could not display superiority without being, in their terms, impolite, and he could not appear to be inferior without losing face in a way that they would all have found socially very difficult. Hiro was, therefore, acutely aware of the need, as an older learner, to develop effective strategies to cope with the social difficulties of interacting with students much younger than himself. One such strategy he used was to busy himself with his notebook when he found classroom communicative activities too threatening. This “opting out” strategy, however, created some problems with classroom dynamics. His teacher was concerned that Hiro spent quite a lot of class time recording new grammar and making long lists of vocabulary in his notebook, and even complaining that the class was not given enough "new" grammar and vocabulary. The teacher felt that vocabulary acquisition strategies such as these were not as useful as, for instance, interacting with other students and practising using the vocabulary they already knew, and she also felt defensive at the suggestion that Hiro

was perhaps discontented with her teaching. She reported that, although generally a delightful student, Hiro had a tendency to be a little rigid and formal in his approach to his learning. Understandable given his age and background, this was almost the only negative comment ever made about Hiro during his time at the school.

In addition to the avoidance and note-taking strategies already noted, Hiro said he found the most useful strategies for learning English were reading newspapers, listening to radio and songs, going to movies, and noting language from the environment such as posters and signs. He felt it was useful to speak only the target language and to try to remember new vocabulary by connecting it with something memorable. As an example of this he mentioned remembering the word "notorious" by connecting it with Tuku Morgan (a politician who gained notoriety by paying $89 for a pair of boxer shorts).

As reported on the SILL questionnaire, Hiro did not employ language learning strategies at a high rate of frequency (average=3.3). He gave a rating of 5 to 11 of the SILL items, six of which were “plus” strategies (used highly frequently by more proficient students but not by all students). (See *Table 5.1*).

When asked his reasons for learning English Hiro said it was just a hobby. He felt that this was a good motivation for learning English, since being relaxed and unworried about the outcome would help him to automatically employ strategies to help him learn more effectively, such as picking up natural language from the environment. As he delightfully put it: "I have worked hard all my life. Now I am going to have some fun!" Although his course was too short for any conclusions to be drawn regarding his

rate of progress, and even though there was no difference in reported frequency of language learning strategy use between older and younger students, Hiro's case points to some interesting possible implications regarding the use of language learning strategies (such as "face saving" strategies) by the older learner and suggests some possibly fruitful areas for further research specially designed to investigate age-related differences in strategy use.

Although, in general, when students report a high average frequency of language learning strategy use there is also a high number of strategies used highly frequently, this is not always the case. May, for instance, reported highly frequent language learning strategy use (average=3.6), but the numbers of strategies rated as 5 were relatively low (n=5). An examination of her responses (see *Table 5.1*) reveals an unusually high number of items rated 4 ("usually") compared with the others, which has the effect of increasing the average in spite of a low number of strategies used "always or almost always". This might possibly be an example of the "highly valued modesty" referred to by Gu *et al* (1995, p.3) as typical of Asian students, creating a tendency to use the middle of a scale rather than the extremes.

At 35 years old, May was older than average for the school. On the results of her intake test, she was initially placed at pre-intermediate level when she arrived in New Zealand from Taiwan for a six-month English course. In spite of her greater age, her cheerful, obliging personality meant that she fitted into her classes among generally much younger students without obvious difficulty. Indeed, her mature attitudes were an asset to the class and much appreciated by her teachers. Prior to coming to New Zealand she had worked for a trading company and came here in the hope that better

English would improve her job prospects, although she also wanted to travel and "change my life".

According to May, the most difficult aspect of learning English was listening and speaking. The main reason for this, she said, is that the schooling system in Taiwan is very formal, with large classes and so "we learned just reading and writing". Even the reading and writing which she had learned in school presented problems for May. As she explained, her native language uses Chinese ideographs for writing which bear no relationship to the pronunciation, unlike languages such as Korean where there is a phonic correspondence with the written form of the word. Consequently, when asked to read English aloud from a text (such as a newspaper) in class, May often strugled to work out words she did not already know or even to produce an accurate version of words she did know (eg she might read "complex" for "complexity", "learn" for "learned", "read" for "reading" and so on).

For May, the complications of English grammar and the size and complexity of English vocabulary were also a challenge. Especially problematic was the tense system. Compared with Taiwanese verbal concepts, usually consisting of just one form with tense expressed by an adverbial ("I go yesterday", "I go now", "I go tomorrow"), she found the contortions of English tense structures extremely difficult to master. Added to this, the vast array of synonyms in English, all meaning more or less (but not quite) the same thing, was also a constant anxiety.

Another problem was sex differentiation, which, she informed me, does not exist in Chinese languages as it does in English. This helps to explain why Chinese students

can say “she” when talking of a man and be quite unaware of the incongruity. The fact that English speakers often find this kind of mistake amusing and are likely to laugh can be a problem in itself because of the Asian fear of “losing face”. This was something May said she had learnt while in New Zealand: it is natural to make mistakes, and she tried not to be afraid of doing so.

According to May, cultural differences manifested themselves not just in what people did but in how they thought: “They have different logic”, as she put it. Although I came back to this rather intriguing statement several times during the interview, attempts to get her to explain what she meant or provide examples proved fruitless, perhaps, in itself an example of our “different logics”. I, as a European, expected to be able to analyse and rationalise such a statement. For May, the insight itself was enough. Perhaps, though, her anxiety over cultural differences might help to explain the rating of 5 that she gave to the strategy “I try to learn the culture of English speakers”.

May’s reported strategies for coping with her many difficulties in learning English included making conscious efforts to maximise her exposure to English. She went to movies, watched TV, listened to tapes and went on school activities to increase her opportunities to meet native speakers. When she went to restaurants and cafes she listened to the English being spoken around her and tried to “copy their sentence”. She tried to make friends with non-Taiwanese, endeavoured to learn “many vocabularies” and tried not to worry about making mistakes.

At the end of six months May had progressed from pre-intermediate to advanced (four levels). At this point she decided to stay in New Zealand rather than go home and enrolled spasmodically at the school. She decided, however, that she did not want the pressure of working at advanced level and so asked to be put back to upper intermediate. “I am tired,” she told me. “I have been here a long time. I don’t want to pressure”. In fact, it was probably true that upper intermediate was a more suitable level for her, since, although communicatively she had become very competent (even on the phone, which most ESOL students find very difficult), and although, when she studied, she could do well in tests (according to which she was promoted), her grammar remained unreliable to say the least and she did not seem to have the will to work on it as would have been necessary for the improvements needed in this area.

So May spent another six months in New Zealand, sometimes at school, sometimes not, but picking up a lot of English just from being here. However, her unwillingness to push herself meant that she never quite got to be as good as she might have been, and the interference from her own language meant that her spontaneous utterances remained full of grammatical inaccuracies to the end when, by way of explaining why she was finally going home, she told me: “My uncle she want me come back Taiwan”!!

While May, even with a high reported average frequency of strategy use failed to make particularly good progress, Kang, with less than highly frequent average reported strategy usage (average=3.2) and the lowest number (n=3) of strategies rated 5 except for Yuki, still managed to make good progress (one level per month – see *Table 5.1*). Like Yuki, Kang was in his forties, but apart from their age, they could

hardly have been more different. When the 41-year-old Korean first arrived he was initially placed in the lowest elementary class. At this point, his knowledge of English was negligible, although he was evidently fluent in Japanese, so not inexperienced as a language learner.

Although he had left his wife and young children in Korea and obviously missed them, Kang settled single-mindedly to his work. Like Kira, he spent long hours in the self-study room revising lessons, doing homework and listening to tapes, especially pronunciation tapes, which was the area he found most difficult. An interesting theory that he had was that pronunciation is affected by the food we eat, because different kinds of foods require different movements of the mouth and tongue. Accordingly, while in New Zealand, he eschewed his traditional Korean diet (a major sacrifice!) and ate Kiwi food instead, a strategy aimed at helping him to get his mouth around the sounds of English.

Although, according to his SILL, Kang did not make highly frequent use of language learning strategies, he nevertheless mentioned quite a list of key strategies during his interview, including listening to radio, watching TV, and going to the movies. Kang said he consulted a text book for vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar and used a notebook to write down language he picked up from signs, notices and advertising. He kept a dictionary with him at all times and listened to people talking around him.

Unlike some other students who believed that “good” or “bad” teaching was responsible for their success or otherwise, Kang accepted realistically that some

teachers are going to be better than others, and that some teachers' styles may affect the way some students learn. Therefore, he believed, students must change their attitudes and strategies if they are to make the best of the teacher and succeed. This acceptance of the responsibility for his own learning was another characteristic he shared with Kira and with fellow Korean, Kim.

Although age is often considered to be a disadvantage when learning language, Kang was more successful than many of the much younger students with whom he studied. By the end of his seven-month course he was working in the advanced class, although difficulties remained with typical Korean pronunciation problems such as r/l and f/p discrimination, in spite of seven months of Kiwi tucker! It is possible that previous language learning experience (Japanese) may have played a part in his success, and he was also able to detail a wide repertoire of language learning strategies, in spite of not reporting a high frequency of strategy usage on the SILL.

Asked why he thought he had made such good progress, Kang told me "My heart is one hundred percent want to learn". He wanted to learn English in order to improve his job prospects so that he could provide better opportunities for his family. This strong motivation showed itself in the focus which he brought to his work, in the disciplined and thorough way he went about his study and in his keen awareness of the importance of strategies for learning.

Motivation, however, is not necessarily constant, as exemplified by Lily. When Lily came to New Zealand from Switzerland with her husband, they planned to immigrate. She was 26 years old and her native language was Swiss German. She had been a

primary school teacher in Switzerland, and she wanted to improve her already very good English in order to get a position as a teacher in New Zealand and to strengthen her eligibility for immigration. She had already been in New Zealand for several months when she enrolled for a class studying for the Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE), a very high level examination close to native speaker standard. In the same class as Nina, Lily began the course as a very hard-working student, focussed on her goal. In fact, she scored higher than Nina on the initial placement test. She was cheerful and positive in class, keen to participate in all activities, meticulous with homework, and also willing to use her skills as a teacher to support other students.

According to her SILL, Lily reported using language learning strategies at a high level of frequency (average=3.7). She also used a large number (n=15) of strategies "always or almost always" (rating=5). She gave a rating of 5 to nine of the "plus" strategies (strategies reportedly used highly frequently by advanced students but not by all) and to one of the "base" strategies (strategies reportedly used more often by elementary students than by advanced students). Lily's frequency ratings compared with the other interviewees can be seen in *Table 5.1*.

Lily believed that communicating in spoken English was the most important strategy since it provided the opportunity for repetition which her experience as a teacher had indicated was important for learning. As she put it: "You only learn something when you do it several times". She found grammar, especially tenses, the most difficult aspect of learning English. Lily believed that German speakers generally found the English tense system difficult because the patterns of German tenses are different from those of English. She believed in consciously studying grammar and looking up

points she was unsure of, but said she found it difficult to bring the theory and the use together. A personal difficulty which she had was that she lived with her husband and also Swiss flatmates, so inevitably the tendency was to speak Swiss German at home. She felt this placed her at a disadvantage compared with other students (such as her classmate Nina) who lived in an English speaking environment.

Lily felt that if a high level of proficiency was the goal, it was important not to translate word for word, but to develop a "feeling" for the language. She acknowledged that this was easier for Europeans, whose languages were often related to English, than for Asian students who were often more dependent on dictionaries because their languages were too different from English to make it possible for them to guess when unsure. Another key strategy she reported using was reading in English, often voluminous novels. She said she found books more useful than TV because the reader had more control over a book and a book could be reviewed as required. Lily believed that how much students learnt depended on how much they wanted to learn (that is their motivation) and on the intensity of their desire to succeed which would affect their choice of strategies.

In the light of the last comment, an interesting change occurred in Lily about half way through the course. At this point she and her husband decided to apply for permanent residence in New Zealand, so suddenly she urgently needed proof of her English level. With the CPE still some weeks away, she decided to sit for IELTS, an examination which can be sat at short notice with the results available in about a fortnight. After some hasty tuition in IELTS techniques she got 8.5, which put her close to native speaker level (the top score being 9). She was delighted with this

result, but when their permanent residence application was declined she was bitterly disappointed. She was less cheerful and positive in class and she often complained of being tired. The written work she handed in had more errors than previously, possibly indicating less time and attention spent on homework, and when she made an error she was more likely to repeat it rather than learn from her mistakes. She rarely asked questions in class, and if she were asked a question she was much more likely than previously to answer incorrectly.

To really add to the difficulties Lily appeared to be having at this time, her mother came out from Switzerland about two weeks before the Proficiency exam. Lily became very homesick and lacked focus on her study right at this critical time. She got a C pass in CPE, which was satisfactory, especially in such a high-level exam, but in the light of her initial level and the 8.5 she got in IELTS, she might have been expected to do better. (As previously stated, Nina, whose score was lower than Lily's on the initial placement test, got an A pass).

There is a postscript to the story, however. Lily came in to see me at school about eighteen months later. She had a new baby in a pram and looked glowingly contented. She told me that after finishing her course she had had several relief teaching jobs before she became pregnant. A few days previous to her visit she and her husband had finally been given permanent residence. When the baby was older she was planning to apply for a teaching position in New Zealand, so she was looking forward positively to the future. She was, in fact, back to her old, cheerful, positive self, and her English was excellent! I am not sure I want to go so far as to seriously suggest having a baby or immigrating as good strategies for learning English, but Lily's case would seem to

support Gardner and MacIntyre's (1993) proposal that attitudes interact with strategies to affect success in language learning.

Key strategies

It should be noted that the six students who progressed through one or more levels per month or who passed their examinations (Nina, Kira, Fernando, Kim, Kang, Lily) were all able to identify key strategies they used to address the difficulties they were having with learning English. Nina, for instance, lived in an environment where English was spoken in order to work on her difficulties with speaking in English. Kira read newspapers to improve his ability to read in English. Fernando asked for help when he could not understand native speakers. Kim used a notebook to record idioms so that she could review them later. Kang ate western food to help with pronunciation. And Lily made a conscious effort to learn the problematic rules of English grammar.

Compared with these students who were all successful in terms of progress made or exams passed, Mikhail was only able to tentatively suggest as a key strategy asking a friend to help with grammar difficulties, and the only key strategy suggested by Yuki (reading easy books in English) did not address the difficulties of which she was aware (speaking and writing in English and learning grammar). Although Hiro said he recorded grammar and vocabulary in a notebook in order to help him with his difficulties with these areas of English, these strategies were perhaps not always used appropriately since they often appeared to be employed in order to avoid interacting with other members of the class. For May, although she reported using quite a list of

strategies to cope with her difficulties, the main problem seemed to be lack of real motivation to succeed in learning English.

Although this study was not set up to investigate the influence of motivation on language learning in depth, an examination of the interview data suggests that success in language learning is linked to motivation, as discovered also by Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Ehrman and Oxford (1989) and Oxford and Nyikos (1989) and considered at some length by Dornyei (2001). As Cohen and Dornyei (2002, p.172) comment: " Motivation is often seen as the key learner variable because without it, nothing much happens. Indeed, most other learner variables presuppose the existence of at least some degree of motivation". The students who progressed one or more levels per month during the time of their courses (Kira, Fernando, Kim, Kang) and Nina (who gained an A pass in the Cambridge Proficiency in English examination) were unwavering in their focus on their studies and wanted to learn English either for further study and/or future employment. All of them except Kang reported a high average frequency of language learning strategies, a high number of strategies rated 5, and a high number of "plus" strategies. Even Kang, as has already been discussed, reported a high number of key language learning strategies of his own.

Compared with highly-focussed and successful students like Nina, Kira, Fernando, Kim and Kang (whose motivation for learning English was essentially vocational) Yuki used her English study as a means of staying in New Zealand, May wanted it to "change her life" and for Hiro it was a "hobby". Although she passed her exam, Lily's motivation wavered during her course, which may well have been reflected in her

lower than expected grade in Cambridge Proficiency, and Mikhail's motivation, like that of Wes (Schmidt, 1983) was essentially social.

Another possible contributor to variations in language learning strategy use suggested by the interview data might be learning style. Although care has been taken during this study to keep the concept of learning style separate from the concept of language learning strategy (as discussed in **Definition of language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2**), it is well recognised that learning style can have a major influence on the way students learn and on the types of language learning strategies which they choose (for instance Carrell *et al*, 1989; Cohen and Dornyei, 2002; Reid, 1989, 1998; Willing, 1988). An examination of the interview data reveals considerable differences in the ways the individual learners went about their learning and in the key strategies which they reported choosing to use. Fernando, for instance, was highly interactive, whereas Kang spent long periods of time revising and doing homework on his own. Lily's style was rather introspective and she used reading as an effective strategy to provide language input, whereas Kira (who didn't really enjoy reading) preferred sport and other means of interacting with native speakers as a means of promoting his knowledge of English. It is also possible that the learning styles (as exemplified by the interviewees in this study) might interact with personality, an issue explored by Ehrman and Oxford (1989; 1990). Although this study was not set up to investigate the effects of either learning style or personality on language learning strategy use, the interview data suggests that these could be useful areas for future research.

If the key strategies reportedly used by the six students who progressed through one or more levels per month or who passed their exams (Nina, Kira, Fernando, Kim, Kang, Lily) are brought together, the following list emerges:

Watching TV
Reading magazines
Reading novels
Listening to radio
Working through text books
Using a dictionary
Noting language in the environment (e.g. signs)
Learning in an English-speaking environment
Manipulating position in class
Learning from correction
Spending a lot of time studying
Talking to people in English
Consciously working on grammar
Making a note of new vocabulary
Consciously working on lack of self-confidence
Reading newspapers
Reading stories
Listening to tapes
Watching movies
Listening to people talking
Using the teacher
Revising
Doing homework
Organising time out
Keeping a notebook
Repetition
Asking for help
Learning language in chunks
Not translating word for word

Kang's strategy of eating western food, although it was made in all seriousness, was not included in this list, since it seemed rather too idiosyncratic to be the kind of strategy other students might like to copy, and also since there was little evidence that it had produced the desired results (that is an improvement in pronunciation). Of these key strategies, some are represented in the SILL (for instance watching TV, reading in

English), but many others are not included in the SILL (such as manipulating position in class, learning language in chunks, organising time out, working on self-confidence), an issue which will be further explored in the next chapter. The existence of what Lund (2000) calls nonSILL strategies serves, as she points out, to emphasise the individuality of learners, and to remind us, that though we can learn a lot from an overall perspective by using an instrument such as the SILL, language learning strategy use at the individual level may not always be reflected in the overall view, as this list of key strategies demonstrates.

Many of the key strategies relate to the use of resources (TV, tapes, movies, people, the environment, newspapers, magazines, stories, novels, radio, text books, dictionaries, the teacher). Very few such strategies are listed in the SILL. The more proficient students, however, appear to be very aware of the need to use available resources as a strategy to learn more effectively.

As listed here, many of the key strategies are rather general and ill-defined. “Doing homework”, for instance could cover a range of behaviour, each of which might be considered a strategy in its own right. The same might be true of “Using a dictionary”, “Keeping a notebook” and so on. Although time did not permit a more detailed examination of the use of these strategies in the context of the interviews, **CHAPTER 4** goes on to further explore strategy use as suggested by students in a real language learning context.

Relationship of interview data to quantitative findings

The findings from the quantitative data obtained from Part A of the study using the SILL questionnaire (see **CHAPTERS 3, 4**) indicated that the most proficient groups of students report highly frequent use (average=3.5 or above) of a large number of language learning strategies, and that they may favour the use of certain types of strategies. The qualitative interview data from Part B of the study generally supported these findings from Part A. Most of the students who achieved high levels of proficiency or who passed the exams for which they were preparing reported a highly frequent overall average use of language learning strategies and gave ratings of 5 ("always or almost always") to a large number of language learning strategies, including many of the "plus" strategies (see details of Nina, Kira, Fernando, Kim, Lily earlier in this chapter).

However, there were individual exceptions to this general finding. Kang, for instance, made very good progress during his course in spite of not reporting highly frequent use of the language learning strategies itemised in the SILL, while May failed to make particularly good progress despite highly frequent reported language learning strategy use (these individual cases have been discussed earlier in this chapter). Factors which emerged from the interview data as possible contributors to an explanation of these varying levels of reported language learning strategy use and differing rates of progress included motivation, learning style and personality.

In Part A of the study, statistically significant differences were discovered between European students and the other major national groups in the study (Koreans,

Taiwanese, Japanese) in terms of both proficiency and reported frequency of language learning strategy use. The qualitative interview data, however, indicated that, although European students appear to have an advantage over Asian students when learning English, some Asian students manage to study English to a high level of proficiency, a successful outcome possibly related to the patterns of language learning strategies employed. This is highlighted especially by comparing Kim from Korea and Fernando from Argentina. They were initially placed at the same level (mid-elementary) for a course of the same length (five months). They reported the same frequency of strategy use (average=3.7) and the same number of strategies rated 5 (n=18). They both finished their courses at advanced level. Although she was Asian and he European, and although there were differences in the types of strategies they reported using, their rates of progress and overall strategy patterns were remarkably similar.

Although no statistically significant differences were discovered in Part A for proficiency or reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to either sex or age, there were indications from the interview data (such as Hiro's "face saving" strategies) that older students might go about their learning in ways which are qualitatively different from the approaches employed by younger students. Although there are some interesting possibilities for research in this area (especially given an ageing student population reported by some learning institutions), generally, the failure to discover significant differences in proficiency according to age supports Ehrman and Oxford's (1990) conclusion that there is "optimism for older learners" (p.317). Certainly, students like Kang demonstrate that it is possible for older learners to learn very effectively.

The finding that many of the interviewees regarded as key strategies items not listed in the SILL suggested the need to further investigate the strategies reportedly used by students in the situation where the study took place. This issue will be pursued in the next chapter (**CHAPTER 6**).

CHAPTER 6

THE STUDY - PART C:

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY USE IN A TEACHING/LEARNING SITUATION (ELLSI)

Rationale (Part C)

Although acknowledged as extremely comprehensive and impressive in its breadth (Ellis, 1994), by the time the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), (Oxford, 1990) had been used for about a year to gather data for Parts A (the questionnaire phase) and Part B (the interview phase) of the study, there were some reservations regarding how well it matched the strategy use of the students in the situation where the study took place. As explained in **CHAPTER 3**, the setting for this study was a private language institution in Auckland, New Zealand catering for mainly Asian fee-paying international students.

In this context, there were some strategy items (such as using rhymes or flashcards) which did not seem to be rated highly by any of the students – indeed students often had difficulty understanding what these strategies involved. Conversely, there were other strategies which students mentioned during discussions, or identified as key strategies during interviews, or were commonly observed using which are not

included in the SILL (as noted also by Lund, 2000). Examples of these "missing" strategies might be looking up a dictionary, referring to the teacher, using a self-study room, keeping a notebook, listening to radio or reading newspapers. It was felt that an inventory more truly representative of the strategies the students reported using would be more informative as a research instrument and more useful as a teaching/learning tool for the Study Skills class in which students new to the school participated during their first week. Another pragmatic difficulty with the SILL was its length. Although the 50-item version is, in fact, considerably shorter than other versions, it nonetheless took students up to an hour to complete which, at times, led to some impatience among students who were keen to proceed with learning English rather than bothering too much with *how* to learn. Experience indicated that students (who often believed they knew all they needed to know about learning strategies) would tolerate a certain amount of strategies-focussed material, but failed to see the relevance of extended exercises or discussions.

It was, therefore, decided to try to construct a shorter strategy list using a "bottom up" approach including only the strategies the students actually said they used. During the Study Skills class, students were asked for their input regarding their strategies, and these were gathered over a period of several weeks into an original questionnaire. By using this approach it was hoped that a fairly complete but concise picture of the language learning strategies that the students reported using might emerge. The new questionnaire was called the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI). (See Materials section for details of how the ELLSI was constructed).

The ELLSI was used first of all to cross-check the results of the SILL study which indicated the existence of statistically significant relationship between reported language learning strategy use and proficiency. In addition, since the Study Skills class provided a convenient pool of research participants, a longitudinal study was set up in order to explore changes in strategy use over time. This involved surveying longer-term students on arrival at the school during the Study Skills class, and then again three months later in an attempt to discover the degree to which strategies might have developed and whether particular strategy patterns were related to greater or lesser progress in level of proficiency. Since the ELLSI was being used in the Study Skills class at this point in the research, and since the ELLSI was constructed to represent the strategies reported by the students at the school, this became the survey to which the results of the longitudinal study relate. Although three months is not a long time in language learning terms, as has already been explained the students in the context of this study came for a minimum of only two weeks and were rarely enrolled for longer than three months. It was hoped that, in addition to providing some interesting insights in its own right, this rather short-term longitudinal study might point out some interesting directions for further research.

Since this part of the study looked at language learning strategies in the teaching/learning situation, and since teachers are "pivotal in the enterprise of teaching and learning " (Freeman and Richards, 1996, p.1), teachers were also surveyed in order to explore their perspectives on students' language learning strategies. As Richards (1996) reminds us, teachers are individuals as much as their students are and teacher practices and beliefs are critically important because these factors often influence the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process. The

question of teacher perspectives becomes even more important in the light of research which suggests that teachers are generally not aware of their students' learning strategies (for instance O'Malley *et al*, 1985), and that teachers' assumptions about their students' strategies are often not correct (Hosenfeld, 1976). Indeed, it has been shown that teachers may hold beliefs regarding their students' strategy usage which are quite contrary to what their students report (Griffiths and Parr, 2001a). Since such lack of awareness, incorrect assumptions, and mismatches between student reports and teacher beliefs have the potential to affect what goes on in the classroom in quite negative ways, it would seem to be important to discover more about how teachers' perceptions of the importance of language learning strategies relate to reported frequency of language learning strategy use by students in order that such information might be used to inform classroom practice. Teachers were, therefore, given an adapted version of the ELLSI questionnaire (see Materials section for details) and asked to rate the strategy items according to degree of perceived importance. The ELLSI was used for the teachers' survey since, pragmatically, it was the questionnaire being used for research in the school at the time, and since (having been constructed on the basis of strategy items elicited from students at the school) it was considered likely to be representative of reported strategy use by the students in the context of the current study and therefore appropriate as an instrument for surveying teachers' views concerning their students' language learning strategy use.

After completion, data from the teachers' surveys were analysed and the results of the students' and teachers' ELLSIs compared in order to explore the degree to which the strategies which teachers reported considering important matched the strategies which students reported using. It was hoped that this might provide a rounded picture of

language learning strategies in the teaching/learning situation from both perspectives, that is from the point of view of both the teacher and the learner.

The special Study Skills class for new students from which the ELLSI evolved left mixed feelings regarding the effectiveness of language learning strategy instruction, at least in this particular form. Informally surveyed, students generally reported finding this one-off class useful (as long as the questionnaire was not too long and "boring") and some expressed an interest in attending such a class on a regular basis in order to expand awareness and to practise using language learning strategies. With this feedback in mind, and in order to explore effective ways of managing strategy instruction, it was decided to offer a Study Skills class on a regular weekly basis at a time when regular weekly option classes operated (See Data collection procedures for details) and to monitor the progress of this class in order to assess the usefulness or otherwise of this approach for the promotion of language learning strategies among students.

Research questions (Part C)

- Which language learning strategies do students report finding most useful?
- How frequently are language learning strategies as indicated by the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI) reportedly used by students who are speakers of other languages?
- Do students of different levels of proficiency report variations in frequency of language learning strategy use according to the ELLSI?

- Are there any variations in reported frequency of language learning strategy use (as indicated by the ELLSI) according to nationality, sex or age?
- Are there any patterns in reported frequency of strategy use as indicated by the ELLSI?
- Does reported language learning strategy use (as indicated by the ELLSI) change over time, and, if so, how do any such changes relate to proficiency?
- How do teachers' reported perceptions of the importance of language learning strategies correspond with the reported frequency of strategy use (according to the ELLSI) by their students?

Method (Part C)

The participants

The English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI - see Materials section for details) was completed by 131 international students studying English at a private language school in New Zealand over a three month period. Since Part C of the study was conducted after the completion of Parts A and B, the 131 students involved in Part C were different from the students involved in the previous parts. There were both male (n=55) and female (n=76) students from 14 different nations (Japan, Korea, Switzerland, Italy, Argentina, Thailand, Germany, Indonesia, Lithuania, Austria,

Taiwan, Brazil, China, Hong Kong). Ages ranged from 14 to 64 and proficiency ranged over seven levels from elementary to advanced. (Details regarding proficiency levels are in **Method, CHAPTER 3**).

Of these 131 students, thirty longer-term students (that is, students with courses of three months or longer) completed the ELLSI on two occasions. The first was in the week of arrival during the Study Skills class at the same time as other new arrivals, and the second was three months later.

In addition to the students, 34 teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) in New Zealand, who were teaching at the language school at the time, returned the teachers' version of the ELLSI. (See Materials section for details).

Materials

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

As with previous parts of the study, the Oxford Placement Test was used as the basic instrument to determine level and guide initial placement. (For further details, see Materials, **CHAPTER 3**)

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The SILL (Oxford, 1990) was used during Part C of the study to stimulate discussion aimed at producing student suggestions regarding useful language learning strategies. (The SILL is detailed in Materials, **CHAPTER 3**).

English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI- students' version)

The ELLSI was constructed using input elicited from students taking part in a special Study Skills class. This class, for students new to the school, was held during the first week of their course. The purpose of the class was to introduce students to the school facilities, such as the self-study centre, and to raise their awareness of how to study (as distinct from the usual focus on what they studied) in the hope that they might be able to gather ideas for how to study more effectively, and thereby derive maximum benefit from their time at the school.

The Study Skills class had operated for some time in the school. From an administration point of view, its basic purpose was student orientation, but it was also used for research purposes during the period of the current study. During Part A of the study (which lasted about a year), students in the Study Skills class completed the SILL as part of the classroom routine. After the survey had been completed, responses to the SILL were used to generate discussion and an exchange of ideas among students regarding effective language learning strategies.

When Part A of the study was completed, the Study Skills class was involved in the construction of a new questionnaire, the reasons for which have been explained in the **Rationale** at the beginning of this chapter. Over a period of one month, the Study

Skills class followed a set format. The concept of language learning strategies was first explained to the students, and they were then asked for their ideas regarding useful learning strategies. This initial elicitation stage took place before students were exposed to the SILL in order to maximise the likelihood that students' responses would be original and not limited to or influenced by the items in the SILL at this point. These ideas were written on the board, after which the students were given the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) and allowed time to complete it.

Because of the multi-level nature of the class, the length of time taken to complete the SILL varied considerably from student to student, so as surveys were completed, students were divided into groups to compare ideas with each other, leaving slower students to finish in their own time. Sometimes the faster students would help the slower ones. When all the SILLs were finished and the discussion had run its course, the class was brought back together and students were asked for any extra ideas regarding useful learning strategies which might have occurred to them while completing the SILL or during the subsequent discussion. These extra ideas were added to the list on the board. In this way, the SILL, as well as the discussions, acted as a stimulus for the new questionnaire.

Over the month the strategy lists generated in this way were kept and, by the end of this period, a list of 32 items had emerged. These items were written into a questionnaire which was called the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI) (see Appendix D) and used with subsequent Study Skills classes in place of the SILL. When constructing the ELLSI, every effort was made to consider the issues

raised by de Vaus (1995) regarding the construction of questionnaires. The language was kept as unambiguous and as simple as possible. Items were kept as short as possible, and double-barrelled items (such as “Watching TV and movies”, where, although TV and movies appear similar, it is quite possible that a respondent may watch one but not the other) were avoided. Negative questions, which can be difficult to understand and answer appropriately, were also avoided, though a positive alternative could not be found for Item 22: Not worrying about mistakes.

Given the context in which the survey was to be used, every effort was made to keep it as short as possible, as explained in the **Rationale** at the beginning of this chapter. Therefore, although many of the strategies suggested by the students were very general and would be more informative if they were sub-divided into more specific behaviours (the strategy “Doing homework”, for instance, invites many more detailed questions such as When? Where? How long? How often? and so on), to have analysed the strategy items suggested by the students in this way would have produced a questionnaire of daunting length, which would almost certainly have generated student resistance. The 32 strategies were therefore included as representing a broad overview of strategy use as suggested by the students themselves. Further analysis of the items remains an area for further research and development.

An attempt was made to divide the items of the ELLSI into sub-groups before administering it in class. However, the same difficulties with assigning strategies to mutually exclusive categories experienced with the SILL also applied to the ELLSI. A strategy such as Item 8: “Listening to songs in English”, for instance, might be considered to relate to the use of resources or to the management of feelings. A

strategy such as Item 13:“Using a dictionary” might relate to the management of learning or to the use of resources. Because of difficulties with deciding on appropriate sub-groupings for the strategy items, the ELLSI was initially not sub-divided. Instead it was decided to use a factor analysis procedure on the first batch of questionnaires as a possible guide to establishing sub-groups for subsequent versions of the survey.

Like the SILL, students were asked how often they used the strategy items, using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). Students were also asked for some biographical details (including level, nationality, sex, birthdate, length of course).

English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI-teachers' version)

In order to investigate teachers' perspectives on language learning strategies, the teachers' version of the ELLSI asked teachers to rate the 32 strategy items obtained as described above in terms of importance, using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). (See Appendix E)

Data collection procedures

Completed ELLSIs (n=131) were collected from the weekly Study Skills class for new students over a period of three months. In this way the ELLSI served a dual

purpose as a research instrument (which was explained to the students at the beginning of the class) and as a useful classroom exercise from which the students seemed to derive considerable benefit.

Over the same period of time, teachers at the school were given the teachers' version of the ELLSI and asked to hand it in at their convenience. Teachers employed at the time of the start of the project were included and also new teachers who arrived during the three month period covered by the project. Altogether 34 teachers' surveys were handed in.

As student questionnaires were collected, longer-term students were noted (that is those with a course length of three months or longer). These students were asked to complete a second ELLSI as they reached the three-month point in their course and to hand it in at their convenience. The second ELLSI was then matched with the first and assigned a number in the order received. Altogether, thirty such pairs were collected.

In order to explore possibilities for promoting language learning strategies in a teaching/learning situation, it was decided, in addition to the one-off introductory class for new students, to offer the Study Skills class on a regular weekly basis, at a time when regular weekly option classes operated (Wednesday afternoon). These classes were offered for a month, at the end of which time they would be offered again or discontinued, depending on demand. Materials used for the Study Skills class included commercially available texts such as Ellis and Sinclair (1994) and Willing (1989) as well as teacher-generated materials, some of which involved further exploration of the items of the ELLSI (for instance, When do you use a dictionary? What kind of dictionary? When should you NOT use a dictionary? and so on). During

the period when the class was running attendance was recorded and student and teacher feedback informally noted in order to assess the effectiveness of this approach to language learning strategy instruction.

Data analysis procedures

After collection, the information from the ELLSI questionnaires was entered onto databases (Excel and SPSS) to enable data analysis to be carried out. The data obtained from the students' ELLSI questionnaires were analysed for reliability, and a factor analysis was carried out in order to determine whether it was possible to divide the 32 items of the survey into sub-groups. Averages were calculated in order to determine the reported frequency of strategy use firstly among the total group of respondents (n=131) and then according to level of proficiency. The number of strategies used at a high rate of frequency was counted. High frequency was defined as average=3.5 or above. This frequency level included the top seven average reported frequencies across all students for the ELLSI. (See Table 6.1). Although this is slightly less than the top quartile (eight), in fact there are four strategies which all have a reported average frequency of 3.4. To have included these four among those used highly frequently would have taken the total well over the quartile mark. It was therefore decided to establish the high frequency threshold at 3.5, which also has the advantage of maintaining a uniform threshold with other parts of the study. Any other patterns of strategy use were also noted.

In order to investigate the possibility of a statistically significant relationship between proficiency and frequency of language learning strategy use according to the ELLSI, a Pearson product-moment correlation test was conducted. Student's *t* was used to

investigate whether the difference in reported frequency of language learning strategy use by lower and higher level students was significant. In addition, a univariate regression analysis was carried out in order to determine the amount of variance in proficiency accounted for by a group of strategies used highly frequently by higher level students in addition to those used highly frequently by all students.

For the longitudinal study, both the entry and the re-survey averages for reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to the ELLSI, as well as the change in the averages between surveys were calculated for each student (n=30) and overall. In addition, the number of levels through which each student had been promoted was noted and the average calculated. Student's *t* was used in order to investigate whether the difference in the amount of change in strategy use by the most frequently promoted group and the least frequently promoted group was significant. For each of the most frequently promoted students the change in frequency ratings was calculated and then aggregated to indicate the strategies which were most subject to change in frequency of use by frequently promoted students. For students displaying negative strategy growth, the average promotion was calculated and compared with the overall average.

The data obtained from the teachers' ELLSI questionnaires (n=34) were analysed for reliability and averages were calculated in order to determine the level of importance ascribed by teachers to each strategy item as well as to strategy use overall. The number of strategies reportedly considered highly important (using the average=3.5 or above threshold to maintain continuity with other areas of the study) was counted and these results compared with results from the students' data.

The Study Skills class was observed informally during the month it operated and teacher and students questioned regarding its progress. At the end of the month, when the class was discontinued, perceptions of both teacher and students were informally canvassed and summarised.

Results (Part C)

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use overview (ELLSI)

The alpha co-efficient for reliability of the ELLSI across all students was .87.

Using a Principal Component Analysis (see Appendix F), 18 of the 32 ELLSI items were found to form a unified group which could not be statistically sub-divided. The strategies in this group included such conceptually diverse items as “reading books in English” (Item 4), “Talking to other students in English” (Item 12), “Pre-planning language learning encounters” (Item 21), “Listening to the radio in English” (Item 31) and “Writing a diary in English” (Item 32).

The students who participated in this study (n=131) reported an average frequency of strategy use over all ELLSI items of 3.1. Using the high frequency threshold discussed in Data collection and analysis procedures, students in this study reported high frequency use (average=3.5 or above) of seven of the 32 ELLSI items.

The ELLSI strategy statements in order of reported frequency of use are set out in *Table 6.1*. The seven strategies used highly frequently across all students are shaded for emphasis. The overall average reported frequency of strategy use is shown in the bottom row of the table.

Table 6.1: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use (ELLSI) with standard deviations (SD)

ELLSI	average	SD	Statement
13	4.2	0.9	using a dictionary
2	4.0	1.1	learning from the teacher
1	3.8	1.0	doing homework
25	3.8	1.1	listening to native speakers of English
26	3.6	1.1	learning from mistakes
12	3.5	1.1	talking to other students in English
17	3.5	1.1	keeping a language learning notebook
3	3.4	1.2	learning in an environment where the language is spoken
8	3.4	1.1	listening to songs in English
15	3.4	1.0	studying English grammar
18	3.4	1.3	talking to native speakers of English
16	3.3	1.0	consciously learning new vocabulary
27	3.3	0.9	spending a lot of time studying English
22	3.2	1.2	not worrying about mistakes
24	3.2	1.2	trying to think in English
29	3.2	1.3	watching movies in English
6	3.1	1.0	watching TV in English
7	3.1	1.0	revising regularly
19	2.8	1.2	noting language used in the environment
28	2.8	1.2	making friends with native speakers
30	2.8	1.1	learning about the culture of English speakers
31	2.8	1.3	listening to the radio in English
4	2.7	1.1	reading books in English
20	2.7	1.1	controlling schedules so that English study is done
21	2.7	1.1	pre-planning language-learning encounters
5	2.6	1.4	using a computer
14	2.4	1.1	reading newspapers in English
23	2.3	1.2	using a self-study centre
10	2.2	1.2	writing letters in English
11	2.2	1.2	listening to music while studying
9	2.1	1.1	using language learning games
32	1.9	1.2	writing a diary in English
	3.1	0.5	overall average reported frequency of language learning strategy use

Reported frequency of language learning strategy use (ELLSI) and proficiency

As explained in **Definition and assessment of Proficiency**, **CHAPTER 2**, proficiency was assessed using the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1995) with allowance made for communicative ability, according to which students were placed in one of seven levels from elementary to advanced. The relationship between proficiency and frequency of language learning strategy use as measured on the ELLSI was found to be significant (r=.32, p<.01, n=131).

Since in Part C of the study the numbers of students at elementary (n=12) or advanced (n=4) levels were insufficient to be statistically viable for the purposes of further analysis, the students were divided into two levels according to proficiency. The lower level included elementary, mid-elementary and upper elementary students (n=73) and the higher level included pre-intermediate, mid-intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced students (n=58). As in Part A, lower level students reported a lower average frequency of strategy use (average=2.9) than did higher level students (average=3.3), a difference which proved to be significant (t=4.12, df=129, p<.05).

Lower level students reported using five strategy items at a high rate of frequency (average=3.5 or above) while higher level students reported using fifteen strategy items at this rate. Eight strategy items were reportedly used highly frequently by higher level students in addition to those used highly frequently across all students,

while four strategy items were reportedly used more frequently by lower level students than by higher level students (See *Table 6.2*).

The average reported frequencies of use for each strategy item according to proficiency level as well as across all students are set out in *Table 6.2*. The overall average reported frequency of strategy use and the number of strategy items reportedly used at a high rate of frequency are summarised at the bottom of *Table 6.2*. The strategies (n=4) used more frequently by lower level students than by higher level students are shaded for emphasis in the "low level" column. The strategies (n=8) used highly frequently (average=3.5 or above) by higher level students in addition to those used highly frequently across all students are shaded for emphasis in the "high level" column. The strategies (n=7) used highly frequently by all students are shaded for emphasis in the "all students" column.

A univariate regression analysis indicated that the group of eight strategies (shaded for emphasis in the "high level" column of *Table 6.2*) reportedly used highly frequently by higher level students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students (Items 3, 6, 8, 15, 16, 18, 27, 29), when combined into a group and used as the independent variable, accounted for 14.9% (R=.39) of the variance in proficiency.

Table 6.2: Average reported frequency of language learning strategy use (ELLSI) for lower level, higher level and all students with number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently.

ELLSI	low level	high level	all students	Statement
1	3.7	3.9	3.8	Doing homework
2	3.8	4.3	4.0	Learning from the teacher
3	3.3	3.5	3.4	learning in an environment where the language is spoken
4	2.4	3.0	2.7	reading books in English
5	2.5	2.8	2.6	Using a computer
6	2.8	3.5	3.1	Watching TV in English
7	3.0	3.2	3.1	Revising regularly
8	3.2	3.7	3.4	Listening to songs in English
9	1.9	2.4	2.1	Using language learning games
10	1.9	2.7	2.2	writing letters in English
11	2.3	2.2	2.2	Listening to music while studying
12	3.4	3.7	3.5	talking to other students in English
13	4.2	4.1	4.2	Using a dictionary
14	2.0	2.7	2.4	reading newspapers in English
15	3.3	3.6	3.4	Studying English grammar
16	2.9	3.7	3.3	consciously learning new vocabulary
17	3.5	3.5	3.5	Keeping a language learning notebook
18	3.2	3.6	3.4	talking to native speakers of English
19	2.7	2.9	2.8	noting language used in the environment
20	2.7	2.7	2.7	controlling schedules so that English study is done
21	2.6	2.9	2.7	pre-planning language-learning encounters
22	3.2	3.1	3.2	not worrying about mistakes
23	2.4	2.2	2.3	Using a self-study centre
24	3.0	3.4	3.2	Trying to think in English
25	3.5	4.1	3.8	Listening to native speakers of English
26	3.4	3.9	3.6	Learning from mistakes
27	3.2	3.5	3.3	Spending a lot of time studying English
28	2.5	3.2	2.8	making friends with native speakers
29	2.9	3.6	3.2	Watching movies in English
30	2.6	3.2	2.8	Learning about the culture of English speakers
31	2.5	3.1	2.8	Listening to the radio in English
32	1.9	1.9	1.9	writing a diary in English
	2.9	3.3	3.1	overall average reported frequency
	5	15	7	number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently

Longitudinal study (ELLSI)

For the 30 students who completed two ELLSIs at an interval of three months, the overall ELLSI frequency average on entry was 3.4, and the overall re-survey frequency average was 3.5. The average difference between the entry and the re-survey ELLSI averages for reported frequency of language learning strategy use across all 30 students in the group was +0.1. The overall average promotion over that period of time was 1.5 levels.

As can be seen from *Table 6.*3, there were five students who were promoted three or more levels over the 3 months (shaded for emphasis at the top of the "levels of promotion" column) and nine students who were not promoted at all over this period (also shaded for emphasis at the bottom of the "levels of promotion" column). The former group reported an average increase in language learning strategy use of +.6, whereas the latter group reported an average decrease in strategy use of -.1. This difference in the amount of change in average reported frequency of language learning strategy use by the most frequently promoted group and by the least frequently promoted group was found to be significant (t=2.51, df=12, p<.05).

The five students who were promoted three or more levels in the three months reported a combined increase of +5 or more in the entry/re-survey averages for reported frequency of use for a group of ten strategies:

Item 6: Watching TV in English

Item 7: Revising regularly

Item 10: Writing letters in English

Item 14: Reading newspapers in English

Item 16: Consciously learning new vocabulary

Item 17: Keeping a language learning notebook

Item 19: Noting language used in the environment

Item 20: Controlling schedules so that English study is done

Item 25: Listening to native speakers of English

Item 29: Watching movies in English

This frequently promoted group reported reduced usage of two strategies:

Item 13: Using a dictionary

Item 28: Making friends with native speakers

The re-test reported frequency average was lower than the entry reported frequency average for a group of eight students (shaded for emphasis in the "entry/re-survey change" column of *Table 6.3*). With only one exception (student 28) students in this group were promoted only one level or not at all (the average promotion for this group was 0.5 of a level compared with a average promotion of 1.5 levels overall).

The entry and re-survey averages for reported frequency of language learning strategy use for each of the 30 students are set out in *Table 6.3*, along with the changes in the averages between surveys and the number of levels of promotion. The data has been sorted in descending order of levels of promotion and the most frequently promoted group, the least frequently promoted group and the group displaying negative strategy

growth shaded for emphasis. Overall averages are summarised at the bottom of the table.

Table 6.3: Entry and re-survey averages for reported frequency of language learning strategy use (ELLSI), with the change in average reported frequency of strategy use between surveys and the number of levels of promotion.

student number	entry average	re-survey average	entry/re-survey change	levels of promotion
9	4.3	4.6	0.3	4
1	2.5	4.0	1.5	3
4	2.8	3.4	0.6	3
7	3.3	3.7	0.4	3
20	2.9	3.0	0.1	3
10	3.3	3.6	0.3	2
12	3.5	3.7	0.2	2
14	3.4	3.6	0.2	2
15	3.5	3.7	0.2	2
21	3.3	3.3	0.0	2
22	3.2	3.2	0.0	2
28	4.3	3.5	-0.8	2
2	3.3	4.0	0.7	1
3	2.5	3.2	0.7	1
6	3.2	3.6	0.4	1
11	2.8	3.0	0.2	1
13	3.6	3.8	0.2	1
18	2.9	3.0	0.1	1
23	4.0	3.9	-0.1	1
26	3.1	2.8	-0.3	1
30	4.1	2.9	-1.2	1
5	2.8	3.3	0.5	0
8	2.6	2.9	0.3	0
16	3.6	3.7	0.1	0
17	3.2	3.3	0.1	0
19	4.3	4.4	0.1	0
24	3.2	3.0	-0.2	0
25	3.8	3.6	-0.2	0
27	3.7	3.3	-0.4	0
29	4.2	3.1	-1.1	0
overall average	**3.4**	**3.5**	**0.1**	**1.5**

Teachers' perspectives

The alpha co-efficient for reliability of the teachers' version of the ELLSI was .89. Teachers reported ascribing a high level of importance to language learning strategies (overall average=3.6). and they reported regarding 17 of the 32 strategy items (that is, more than half) as highly important (using the average=3.5 threshold used in other areas of the study). (See the "T" column of *Table 6.4*). These 17 strategies regarded as highly important by teachers included five of the seven strategies which students across all levels reported using highly frequently (Items 2, 12, 17, 25, 26), four of the eight strategies reportedly used highly frequently by higher level students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students (Items 3, 15, 16, 18), and only one of the four strategies reportedly used more frequently by lower level students than by higher level students (Item 22).

The average levels of importance ascribed to language learning strategies by teachers are presented in *Table 6.4* alongside the average reported frequencies of strategy use by lower level students, by higher level students and across all students. The averages which indicate a high level of ascribed importance by teachers (average=3.5 or above) are shaded for emphasis in the "T" column. Strategies reportedly used more frequently by lower level than by higher level students are shaded for emphasis in the "low level" column. Strategies reportedly used more frequently by higher level students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students are shaded for emphasis in the "high level" column. Strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students are shaded for emphasis in the "AS" column. The overall average levels of importance or frequency and the number of items considered

highly important or reportedly used highly frequently are summarised at the bottom of the table.

Table 6.4: Average levels of importance ascribed to language learning strategies by teachers (T), and average reported frequency of strategy use by lower level, higher level and across all students (AS) with number of high importance/frequency items.

ELLSI	T	low level	high level	AS	Statement (abbreviated)
1	3.3	3.7	3.9	3.8	doing homework
2	3.9	3.8	4.3	4.0	learning from the teacher
3	4.6	3.3	3.5	3.4	learning in an environment where the language is spoken
4	3.6	2.4	3.0	2.7	reading books in English
5	2.4	2.5	2.8	2.6	using a computer
6	3.2	2.8	3.5	3.1	watching TV in English
7	3.8	3.0	3.2	3.1	revising regularly
8	2.6	3.2	3.7	3.4	listening to songs in English
9	3.5	1.9	2.4	2.1	using language learning games
10	3.2	1.9	2.7	2.2	writing letters in English
11	1.8	2.3	2.2	2.2	listening to music while studying
12	4.4	3.4	3.7	3.5	talking to other students in English
13	3.1	4.2	4.1	4.2	using a dictionary
14	3.4	2.0	2.7	2.4	reading newspapers in English
15	3.7	3.3	3.6	3.4	studying English grammar
16	4.0	2.9	3.7	3.3	consciously learning new vocabulary
17	3.8	3.5	3.5	3.5	keeping a language learning notebook
18	4.8	3.2	3.6	3.4	talking to native speakers of English
19	3.9	2.7	2.9	2.8	noting language used in the environment
20	3.1	2.7	2.7	2.7	controlling schedules so that English study is done
21	3.0	2.6	2.9	2.7	pre-planning language learning encounters
22	3.7	3.2	3.1	3.2	not worrying about mistakes
23	3.2	2.4	2.2	2.3	using a self-study centre
24	4.2	3.0	3.4	3.2	trying to think in English
25	4.4	3.5	4.1	3.8	listening to native speakers of English
26	4.4	3.4	3.9	3.6	learning from mistakes
27	3.2	3.2	3.5	3.3	spending time studying English
28	4.2	2.5	3.2	2.8	making friends with native speakers
29	3.2	2.9	3.6	3.2	watching movies in English
30	3.3	2.6	3.2	2.8	learning about the culture of English speakers
31	3.4	2.5	3.1	2.8	listening to the radio in English
32	3.7	1.9	1.9	1.9	writing a diary in English
	3.6	2.9	3.3	3.1	overall average level of importance/frequency
	17	5	15	7	number of high importance/frequency items

Language learning strategies: the classroom experience

Quite a large number of students (n=12, the maximum number of students allowed in a class) initially chose the special Study Skills option class, designed to run for one month, when it was offered on Wednesday afternoons. Note that this class was different from the Study Skills class for new students offered during the first week of students' attendance at the school. The option classes were designed to provide variety for existing students, and were not available to new students until their second or subsequent weeks at school.

Although initially enthusiastic, by the end of the month the drop-out rate was high and few of the students were actually attending the class. Informally asked why they were not attending class, students reported that after two or three weeks there was nothing new, and they would rather be learning grammar or vocabulary or practising skills (foci of some of the competing classes). They did not perceive the class as useful on a long term basis and therefore either didn't attend or asked to change class.

Teachers who taught the class reported finding it difficult to find or create interesting materials which students would find relevant and useful, and reported being discouraged by lack of student interest. In the light of this rather negative feedback, the class was not re-offered the following month.

Discussion and amplification of results

Patterns of strategy use

Although lower than the alpha co-efficient for reliability of the SILL (.92 in this study), the reliability co-efficients for the students' and teachers' versions of the ELLSI (.87 and .89, respectively) are well above the standard reliability threshold of .70 (de Vaus, 1995) and in the range described by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p.7) as "very respectable".

As in Part A of the study which used the SILL as the basic instrument, a higher average overall use of strategies was reported by higher level students (average=3.3) using the ELLSI than by lower level students (average=2.9), a difference which was found to be significant (t=4.12, df=129, p<.05). Higher level students also reportedly used 15 language learning strategies at a high rate of frequency (average = 3.5 or above) while lower level students reported using only five strategies at this rate. Also as in Part A, a statistically significant correlation (r=.32, p<.01, n=131) was discovered between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency. These results, then, accord with the findings from Part A of the study that more proficient learners report frequently using a large number of language learning strategies.

The attempt to divide the ELLSI into sub-groups on the basis of a factor analysis was no more successful than was the attempt to sub-divide the SILL. Although a Principal Component Analysis identified 10 factors, 18 of the 32 ELLSI items clustered under one factor with no apparent unifying conceptual theme. With the remaining 12 strategy items spread over nine factor groups, numbers in any one group were too small to be useful as a means of identifying underlying pattens of strategies.

Although researchers commonly tend to want to have data neatly pigeonholed into mutually exclusive categories, the difficulties of achieving this ideal state of tidiness is well recognised in the field of language learning strategies, as discussed previously under **Definition of language learning strategies**, **CHAPTER 2**. Nevertheless, some way of dividing up long, difficult-to-manage lists of strategies would make the language learning strategy concept much more manageable as a teaching tool and therefore more useful in a teaching/learning situation. Following the patterns of strategy grouping established in Part A of the study, the ELLSI items have been tentatively grouped according to whether they are "core" strategies (reportedly used highly frequently across all students), "plus" strategies (reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students) or "base" strategies (reportedly used more frequently by lower level students than by higher level students).

"Core" strategies

As with the SILL study, a core of strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students emerges from the ELLSI data. (See *Table 6.1*). The seven "core" ELLSI strategies are mainly very "ordinary" strategies which students can commonly be observed using, such as using a dictionary, doing homework, learning from the teacher, learning from mistakes and keeping a notebook. In addition, students generally report highly frequent use of the strategies of listening to native speakers and talking to other students in English.

As previously discussed in **CHAPTER 3**, these commonly reported strategies would seem to form a possibly important component of a student's strategy repertoire. However, many additional ("plus") strategies are used by the more proficient students.

"Plus" strategies

As with the SILL, a group of strategies (Items 3, 6, 8, 15, 16, 18, 27, 29) emerges from the ELLSI which is reportedly used highly frequently by higher level students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students ("plus" strategies). The inclusion of three resource-related strategies (Items 6, 8, 29) in a list of eight would seem to indicate that students consider resources such as TV, songs and movies very useful as a means of learning English. It may well also reflect in part the much higher number of such items included in the ELLSI compared with the SILL (remembering that the ELLSI items were suggested by students themselves, and could therefore be expected to be truly representative of the strategies they use or are aware

of using). Two strategies relating to the management of learning (Items 3, 27) support the finding by O'Malley *et al* (1985) that higher level students are more capable than are lower level students of employing strategies which enable them to take control of their own learning. Item 18 (relating to interaction with others) would seem to indicate that higher level students are aware of the need to interact in English, but may also indicate higher levels of confidence, as has already been discussed in **Discussion with implications for the teaching/learning situation**, **CHAPTER 3**). Item 18 also raises the issue of relationships with native speakers: new students often arrive full of enthusiasm for making such relationships, but the fact that the reported use of the strategy relating to making friends with native speakers actually declines among those most frequently promoted over a three month period would seem to suggest that the good intentions are not so easy to put into practice. The inclusion of Item 15 in the list of strategies reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students accords with the finding from the SILL study that such students use strategies relating to recognising relationships and patterns (commonly called grammar) highly frequently and adds further weight to the conclusions of Naiman *et al* (1978) regarding the importance of recognising language systems. The inclusion of only one vocabulary-related item (Item 16) in this list of ELLSI strategies reportedly used highly frequently by the more proficient students compared with six SILL items relating to vocabulary may well reflect not so much the fact that the ELLSI respondents considered vocabulary less important as the fact that fewer strategies relating to vocabulary were suggested for the ELLSI questionnaire.

The eight items discussed above account for nearly fifteen percent of the variance in proficiency. Although some psychometricians might not consider this contribution to

the variance noteworthy, considering the large number of potential factors (including nationality, motivation, sex, age, intelligence, aptitude, attitude, personality, learning style, beliefs and so on) which might possibly affect proficiency, a group of language learning strategies such as this which accounts for almost fifteen percent of the variance in proficiency is of interest, and methods of making information about such strategies available to students in ways which might enable them to make use of the insights for their own learning are worthy of further research.

Three types of "plus" strategies which emerged from the SILL data are conspicuous by their absence from the ELLSI "plus" list: strategies relating to reading, strategies relating to the tolerance of ambiguity and strategies relating to the management of feelings. The absence of strategies relating to reading is, perhaps, surprising considering their inclusion among those reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students (especially Europeans) according to the SILL. The reason for the absence of affective and ambiguity-toleration strategies is that no strategies of these kinds were suggested by students at the time of constructing the ELLSI. The fact that these types of strategies were reportedly used highly frequently by the more proficient students in Part A of the study, suggests the need for a review of the types of strategies included in the ELLSI.

"Base" strategies

With only four exceptions (Items 11, 13, 22, 23), all of the ELLSI items were reportedly used more frequently by higher level students than by lower level students.

(See *Table 6.2*). As with the group of SILL strategies used more frequently by elementary students than by advanced students, this quartet of strategies used more frequently by lower level students raises a question regarding teaching practice: should they be discouraged since higher level students use them less often, or should they be recognised for the contribution which they may make to a student's strategy base which supports the structures which will be needed as the student becomes more proficient? This question was discussed in Part A, and the suggestion made that while students should possibly not be deprived abruptly of basic strategies which they may need and depend on at that stage of their learning, since students are presumably all working towards higher levels of proficiency, it may be useful to encourage them to aim towards strategies which are more typical of higher level students.

It is interesting that "listening to music while studying" is used more frequently by lower level than by higher level students. This might lead to the suspicion that the potential for music to relax (as promoted, for instance, by proponents of the suggestopoedia method) is outweighed by the distraction factor. Although it might have been expected that "using a dictionary" would decline in frequency of use as students become more proficient, it is interesting to find the expectation confirmed by the results. The more frequent use of the strategy "not worrying about mistakes" by lower level students is interesting in light of the finding that "learning from mistakes" is used highly frequently by higher level students and by students in general. This would seem to emphasise the point that the ability to pay careful attention to detail and to learn from experience is typical of more proficient students and perhaps outweighs the emphasis on fluency at the expense of accuracy which has been fashionable for some time (Brumfit, 1984). Also interesting, especially in light of the

money which is often spent on self-study centres, is the discovery that lower level students use such a resource more frequently than higher level students, a phenomenon also noted by Cotterall and Reinders (2000). Perhaps the inference from this discovery is that the most important function of a self-study centre may be to get students to a point where they no longer need it. Viewed in this light, the evidently less frequent use of the centre by more proficient students becomes a measure of success: perhaps the main function of a self-study centre (where a staff member is usually available to assist as required) may be to support students until they have developed strategies to cope on their own beyond the centre, rather than fostering long-term dependence. Again, this is a question which deserves further research.

Longitudinal study

Although care needs to be taken when interpreting the results of the longitudinal section of the study because numbers are relatively low (n=30) and the time span relatively short (three months), the fact that a significant difference was discovered in the change in average reported strategy use according to levels of promotion (t=2.51, df=12, p=.05) would seem to indicate that the students who made the most progress were those who reported extending their language learning strategy use at the same time as they were learning English. This result, indicating the possibility that progress is related to increased use or awareness of language learning strategies, would seem to suggest the potential usefulness of helping students to expand their repertoires of language learning strategies and of raising strategy awareness in the teaching/learning situation in order to promote the development of proficiency among students.

Of the group of ten strategies which most increased in use by the five most frequently promoted students, five related to the use of resources (Items 6, 14, 19, 25, 29), four related to the management of learning (Items 7, 10, 17, 20) and one related to vocabulary (Item 16), underscoring the potential importance of these types of strategies. Of the two strategies which decreased in use by this group, it was not surprising in the light of other discoveries from the study to find the use of a dictionary declining. The decline of the strategy of making friends with native speakers may well reflect the reality that many international students arrive with high hopes of new friendships but find making such friendships more difficult than they had anticipated.

Some interesting observations can be made from the surveys collected from the eight students whose re-test averages were lower than their entry averages. (See *Table 6.3*) The entry average (=3.8) for this group was actually very high (the entry average for the other 22 long-term students=3.2). Possible interpretations of this phenomenon might be that students who reported using strategies frequently on arrival might be affected by others who were less strategic in their approach to their studies, by peer pressure, by a desire to fit in, by a need to adapt to the new culture in which they found themselves, or by the sudden absence of the kinds of pressures they had at home. Another possible interpretation might be that the language learning strategies reported on arrival might represent more of a "wish list" rather than be a reflection of actual strategy use. Whatever the reason, these students did not progress as rapidly (average promotion for this group was only half a level in three months compared with an average overall rate of promotion of one and a half levels) as might have been

expected from their initial high strategy averages, given the discovery from both Part A and Part C of this study that frequency of strategy use is related to proficiency.

Student number 28, whom I will call Lee (see *Table 6.3*), is interesting for the light which she, as an individual, may be able to throw onto the question of why it is that some students make more or less progress than others. A 21-year-old Korean wanting to learn English "for myself", she was initially placed at pre-intermediate level. Her initial strategy average was very high (4.3) and she obviously arrived with good intentions of making the best of her time in New Zealand, giving ratings of 5 to strategies such as "Talking to native speakers" and "Making friends with native speakers". However, even in the first survey, completed in the first week of her course, Lee was complaining that "I don't understand NZ teacher accent", that "NZ teacher doesn't talk to Asia student", that "I want talking with native person for long time" and that "I want to stay small [number of] students in my classroom". A picture emerges of a rather inflexible and unhappy student who did not get the kind of individual attention she would have liked and who did not find it easy to fit in to the kind of general course for which she had paid. By the end of three months, Lee's strategy average had decreased to 3.5. Although she had progressed to upper intermediate (two levels of promotion), a rate of progress which is actually higher than the overall average of 1.5 levels, the impression remains that, without the affective difficulties which she seemed to have experienced, she could have done better, given her initial strong strategy base. In her second survey, Lee complains that "I cannot meet English person" and gives "Talking to native speakers of English" a rating of 2, and a rating of only 1 this time to "Making friends with native speakers",

with the implication in her comments that native speakers are difficult to talk to and unfriendly.

By comparison, student number 9, whom I will call Taro, was a 20-year-old Japanese wanting to study English so that he could go to university and get a good job with his knowledge of English as the international language. His average was the same as Lee on the entry survey (4.3), and he improved this average to 4.6 by the time of the second survey. Unlike Lee, during his time at the school he tackled his studies positively, made a lot of friends with Kiwis and other students alike and interacted freely and frequently with his teachers. Taro progressed through four levels in three months, the highest rate of progress in this study.

Lee's and Taro's cases emphasise the point that we can learn a lot from figures and statistics, which can be very useful for indicating general trends. But, in the end, as discussed during the interview phase of the study, students are individuals who never do exactly what might be anticipated and who often do not fit quite neatly into expected patterns.

Pedagogical issues

According to ELLSI, teachers regard language learning strategies as very important, rating more than half of the items (17 out of the 32 - see *Table 6.4* for statements) as highly important (average=3.5 or above), including all but two of the strategies reportedly used highly frequently across all students. This result would seem to imply

that teachers and students are generally "on the same wavelength" when it comes to reported student practices and teacher perceptions of importance, which is an encouraging discovery because of its implications of a good accord between students and teachers in this area and the potential positive consequences in terms of classroom dynamics. Perhaps unexpectedly, though, item 1 ("doing homework") is not included among the 17, although it is reportedly used highly frequently across all students. More predictably, item 13 ("using a dictionary") is also not reportedly considered highly important by teachers, although students report using it highly frequently.

Although generally they appear to be highly aware of the importance of language learning strategies, an area of concern is that teachers rate as highly important only four of the eight "plus" strategies reportedly used highly frequently by the more proficient students in addition to those reportedly used highly frequently across all students (Items 3, 15, 16, 18). Of the four "plus" strategies which teachers do not rate as highly important, three (Items 6, 8, 29) relate to the use of readily available resources (TV, songs, movies). Perhaps in the light of their reported use by high level students it might be useful for teachers to reconsider the level of importance ascribed to this kind of strategy, especially since these resources are such an easy, obvious and inexpensive way for students to increase their exposure to English.

Reassuringly, teachers rate only one of the "base" strategies reportedly used more frequently by lower level students than by higher level students as highly important. This is Item 22: Not worrying about mistakes. This possibly reflects teachers' awareness of the need to encourage the communicative use of language and a desire to promote fluency, which can suffer if students are overly concerned about

correctness. Nevertheless, teachers should also be reminded that highly proficient students appear to be able to learn from mistakes and should try to remain aware of the importance of attention to detail and to correct use of language. Although teachers often do not want to discourage students by over-correction, especially where mistakes do not affect communication, if students' mistakes are never corrected they may continue using incorrect forms unaware of their own errors. Many students, furthermore expect correction, and may feel that their teaching has been inadequate if they find (perhaps at a later date) that they have not been made aware of errors. The point of balance between under-correction to promote fluency and over-correction which may affect confidence is not always an easy one for teachers to find, and may depend on many factors, including their students' personalities, motivation levels and learning styles.

Although a significant relationship was found between reported use of language learning strategies and proficiency, the issue of how to instruct students in language learning strategy use remains problematic. The early demise of the monthly Study Skills class is similar to the experience of a similar attempt reported by Wenden (1987), discontinued after three weeks. The issue of teachability has been previously discussed in **Language learning strategy theory**, **CHAPTER 2**. Perhaps the experience with the Study Skills class reported here points generally to the need to include strategy instruction, whether explicit or embedded, in the general teaching programme since, in general, students seem to quickly lose interest in learning how to learn if it is not perceived as being directly relevant to what they want to learn. This, in turn, would seem to point to the importance of teacher education, so that teachers are made aware of the need to integrate strategy instruction into the content of their

lessons (Cohen 1998, 1999) and are provided with training and practice in how to do this.

Conclusion

The results from Part C of the study have contributed some useful extra insights to those obtained from previous parts of the research. As in Part A, a significant relationship was found between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency, and it was also possible to identify patterns of strategy use which appeared to be typical of more or less proficient students. The longitudinal study indicated that those who progressed most rapidly were those who reportedly increased their strategy repertoires or awareness the most, especially those strategies relating to the use of resources, to the management of learning and to the expansion of vocabulary.

From a pedagogical point of view, it was encouraging to find that teachers regard language learning strategies as highly important, especially in the light of some previous research (for instance O'Malley *et al*, 1985) which seems to indicate the contrary. The question of how best to promote language learning strategy use in the teaching/learning situation, however, remains a vexed one, with this investigation no more successful than previous ones such as Wenden's (1987) in terms of maintaining student interest and attendance.

The ELLSI was developed in an endeavour to produce a survey which was representative of the strategies reportedly used by the students in the context of the current study. Although the ELLSI enabled the findings regarding frequency and number of reported language learning strategy use obtained from the SILL data to be cross-checked, and although some interesting extra insights were obtained using the ELLSI, it must be acknowledged that this new survey has its own set of limitations.

Some types of strategies (especially relating to reading, to the tolerance of ambiguity and to the management of feelings) were not suggested by students for inclusion in the ELLSI. Since these types of strategies emerged from the SILL study as reportedly used highly frequently by the most proficient groups of students, further discussion is needed with a view to raising students' awareness and possibly having these types of strategies included in a revised version of the ELLSI. The tentative grouping of SILL strategies according to type was intended as a contribution to the assignment of useful categories to strategy lists, and it was hoped that the ELLSI might provide some answers to the challenges remaining in this area. However, the need for continuing research into how to achieve statistically viable and conceptually unified groupings of strategy items remains. Most of the items suggested for the ELLSI by the students are very broad and need further "unpicking" before a really useful picture of a student's reported strategy use can be obtained. Given the time constraints and the unwillingness of many students to be involved in lengthy activities which they do not perceive as directly related to language learning (mentioned previously), pragmatic considerations of how to carry out such extended analysis remain a challenge.

Perhaps a useful direction for further research and experimentation might be the development of materials related to language learning strategies which can be built into the course as language learning exercises in their own right but with implicit strategy instruction underlying the language input. Such an approach might help to circumvent student resistance, although a certain level of explicit strategy instruction is probably also desirable (Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 1991).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

General comments

Much of the previous research in the field of language learning strategies has provided inconclusive or even contradictory results. The pioneering studies by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman *et al* (1978) concentrated on investigating what it is that good language learners do that makes them successful, while other researchers such as Porte (1988), Sinclair-Bell (1995) and Vann and Abraham (1990) approached the issue from the point of view of the unsuccessful learner. Although these studies have provided some interesting insights, the picture which emerges is far from unified.

Some researchers (such as Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Green and Oxford, 1995; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989) have sought an explanation for this lack of unity in the variable nature of the learners themselves and have examined some of the learner differences (nationality, sex and age among others) which might help to explain

variable success rates among students. As with other endeavours related to language learning strategies, however, results of studies trying to relate language learning strategies to learner differences have been mixed.

Research into the effects of strategy instruction, furthermore, have produced results no more uniform than the results of any other research in the language learning strategy area. Although language learning strategies are commonly believed to be teachable (Oxford, 1990) and "*amenable to change*" (Wenden, 1987, p.8, author's italics), the best way of going about teaching strategies and facilitating change remains a subject of much debate right up to the present (Brown, 2001).

Against this rather "fuzzy" (Ellis, 1994, p.529) background, the current study was undertaken from the standpoint of a belief in the ability of language learning strategies (defined as specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning language) to be "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley *et al*, 1985, p.43). It was hoped that insights provided by the study might be used to raise learners' awareness of their strategy options, and to suggest possibly useful strategies which they might consider including in their own strategy repertoires. The endeavour was underpinned by central tenets of language learning strategy theory: that learners are capable of taking an active role in their own learning by the use of language learning strategies, that these strategies can, themselves, be learnt, and that it is possible to facilitate this process by raising awareness and by providing encouragement and practice opportunities.

In Part A of the research, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, commonly known as the SILL (Oxford, 1990), was used to survey a large sample of both male and female students of varying nationalities, ages, and levels of proficiency in order to examine patterns of language learning strategy use and how these patterns might relate to proficiency. In Part B, a qualitative element was added in the form of interviews using the SILL as an initial stimulus, which allowed an examination of language learning strategy use from an individual learner's point of view. In Part C, the SILL was used as a base from which to develop the ELLSI (English Language Learning Strategy Inventory), an original language learning strategy survey using student input and developed in a real teaching/learning situation. It was the finding that many of the interviewees regarded as key strategies ones that were not listed in the SILL which provided the impetus for the development of this new survey. The ELLSI was used to cross-check findings from the SILL study, to look for new insights and also to examine changes in strategy use over time and how these related to proficiency. Additionally, since teachers constitute an essential element of the teaching/learning partnership, teachers were also surveyed during the ELLSI stage of the research in order to add their often neglected perspective (Freeman and Richards, 1996) to the total picture.

Key findings and recommendations

The significant relationship which was discovered between proficiency and reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to both the SILL (r=.29, p=<.01, n=348) and the ELLSI (r=.32, p=<.01, n=131) accords with the results of the

research by Green and Oxford (1995). The discovery is encouraging from the point of view of supporting the belief that language learners are “not mere sponges” (Chamot, 1987, p.82), but are capable of taking an effective, active role in their own learning, as suggested by cognitive psychologists such as McLaughlin (1978).

Although the correlations between reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency are statistically significant, they are modest, but were considered to provide enough support to justify further exploration of the relationship. Although evidence gained from the interview stage of the study indicates that it is overly simplistic to suggest an uncomplicated linear association between proficiency and how often an individual learner reports using language learning strategies, nevertheless, the results of this study do indicate that, as a generalisation, reported frequency of language learning strategy use is related to proficiency, and that higher level students report using a large number of language learning strategies more frequently than lower level students. To this extent, from an overall perspective, more would seem to be better in terms of reported frequency of language learning strategy use according to the results of this study.

However, although, on average, more frequent reported language learning strategy use related to higher levels of proficiency, further investigation seemed to indicate that a straightforward more=better equation is too simplistic. A closer examination of the data suggested that there might be varying patterns of language learning strategy use by different groups of students. According to both the SILL and the ELLSI, a core of strategies is able to be identified which is used highly frequently across all students. These “core” strategies appear to form a necessary component of strategy

use, but, like the "*bedrock strategies*" identified by Green and Oxford (1995, p.289, author's italics), do not seem to be in themselves sufficient for students at higher levels of proficiency.

In addition to these "core" strategies, a group of strategies emerges from both the SILL and the ELLSI studies which are reportedly used highly frequently by more proficient students. These "plus" strategies account for 10.5% (R=.33) of the variance in proficiency in the SILL study, and nearly 15% (R=.39) of the variance in proficiency in the ELLSI study. Although such a margin would not represent the difference between a low aptitude learner and a linguistic Einstein, and although it is valid to ask "What about the other 85% to 90%?", given the vast array of other possible contributors to variance in proficiency (discussed in **CHAPTERS 3** and **4**), factors which account for 10% to 15% of the variance are worthy of interest.

An examination of the "plus" strategies, typical of more proficient students suggests the possibility that they may be able to be grouped into strategy types according to common themes. A tentative grouping suggested by these results might be:

strategies relating to interaction with others

strategies relating to vocabulary

strategies relating to the tolerance of ambiguity

strategies relating to language systems

strategies relating to the management of feelings

strategies relating to reading

strategies relating to the management of learning

strategies relating to the utilisation of resources

The assignment of useful categories to lists of strategies which emerge from exploration initiatives remains a major challenge for language learning strategy research, and the tentative groupings suggested above are intended merely to initiate discussion rather than to be taken as in any way definitive. A difficulty with the groupings as suggested above is that several of them are in themselves inclusive of a wide range of behaviour. Utilising resources, for instance, might include reading, writing, speaking or listening and the appropriate strategies involved might depend on a number of factors such as the situation, the nature of the task, learner characteristics, learning style and so on. Reading might involve a wide range of materials and sub-skills, and the strategy items appropriate to dealing with such a range may be qualitatively different from each other: “I skim read then read carefully”, for instance, is much more specific than “I read for pleasure in English”. Also, from a logical point of view, if strategies relating to one skill (reading) are included, why not strategies relating to writing, listening and speaking (though speaking may well be included in strategies relating to interaction). Is the reason for this merely that they were not included in the SILL or the ELLSI and therefore not available for analysis? A recent skills-based questionnaire published by Cohen and Chi (2002) promises to contribute usefully to initiatives in the field of strategy grouping. It will be most interesting to see how this survey performs as a research instrument.

The groups of SILL and ELLSI strategies which are reportedly used more frequently by less proficient groups of students than by more proficient groups of students appear to form a base for a strategy repertoire which students need in the early stages

of learning language, but on which they become less dependent as they reach higher levels. Although these "base" strategies probably have their usefulness early in the language learning process, and care is recommended regarding how their use is discouraged (as sometimes happens in language classrooms), it would seem reasonable to suggest that students should probably be encouraged to move on from them and to develop strategy patterns more typical of higher level students.

Although there are some other studies which have reported on differences in strategy use according to nationality (for instance O'Malley, 1987; Politzer and Mc Groarty, 1985), generally research in this area is scarce. The finding from this study of significant differences in proficiency and in the reported frequency of language learning strategy use between European students and students from Japan, Taiwan and Korea is potentially an important one in a learning environment such as New Zealand where there are a great many Asian students (91% of the participants in the SILL study). Of the four strategies in the SILL study which European students reported using more frequently than other students, two related to reading (Items 16 and 36) and two related to interacting with others in English (Items 35 and 47), while Items 16 and 36 relate to the use of resources and Items 35 and 36 relate to the management of learning. (See *Table 4.2*). Although it would be naïve to suggest that encouraging students of all nationalities to expand their use of the types of strategies which are reportedly used by the more proficient Europeans would necessarily lead to increased proficiency for all students, it is possible that awareness of these results might be of interest to the less proficient groups and that this knowledge might help them to make informed choices regarding their own strategy usage.

Possible ways of promoting use of these strategies among students might include encouraging students to make use of self-access libraries and/or setting up special interest classes focussed on reading, conversation and/or the sharing of resources. My own experience is that once students have got over the initial reluctance that there often is to read in English, and once they have been guided to suitable materials (such as graded readers) which they can read with reasonable ease at their level, they often become quite "hooked" on reading and will continue enthusiastically under their own initiative. A certain amount of effort by teachers or self-access staff often has to go in to getting them to this point, however. The same applies to conversation, where confidence is often an inhibitor requiring a great deal of patient reassurance on the part of the facilitator. Topics of conversation should not just focus on the conversation class itself. In my experience, the most useful items discussed in such groups often revolve around what has happened outside, for instance a failed attempt to purchase an item in a store. Other students may be able to contribute useful ideas about what went wrong, what should have been said or done, and how to avoid the problems next time. A great deal of humour and support can be generated by such discussions, hopefully leading to future successful encounters and increased confidence. An awareness of the resources available and how to obtain or access them is often all that is necessary to get students using readily available materials in English. And, of course, by doing all of the above, students are practising strategies for managing their own learning.

There were exceptions, however to the generalisation that more proficient students report using language learning strategies (at least as itemised in the SILL and the ELLSI) highly frequently. Kang, for instance, reported a frequency average of only

3.2 on the SILL, although he produced a long list of his own strategies, which, had they been included in the SILL, would probably have increased his average considerably. Highly motivated to go home and earn a good income for his family, Kang was unwaveringly focussed from beginning to end of his course and made excellent progress even though his SILL average was under the high frequency threshold. May, by contrast, even though she reported an average frequency of language learning strategy use of 3.6, gave as one of her motives for learning English the rather non-specific "I want to change my life". The lack of focus implied in this reason she gave for her study appeared to be reflected in her approach to her work. Although she did quite well, the feeling among her teachers was that she could have done better if her motivation to succeed has been stronger.

In spite of some other research which has reached contrary conclusions (see **CHAPTER 2**), and contrary to much popular belief, differences in proficiency and in reported frequency of language learning strategy use by males and females were not found to be significant (Student's *t*) in this study. Older and younger students reported the same average frequency of language learning strategy use (=3.2) and the difference in proficiency according to age was not significant (Student's *t*). In spite of these overall findings, however, on an individual level Hiro's comments regarding the need for "face saving" strategies as an older learner were illuminating, and Kang's repertoire of idiosyncratic key strategies raises questions regarding the degree to which the ability to evolve such a set of strategies may be typical of the successful older learner. These are interesting issues which the current study was not set up to investigate, but which are worthy of further research.

Perhaps one of the most interesting discoveries from the research came from the ELLSI section which surveyed students regarding reported frequency of language learning strategy use on entry to the school and again three months later. Although three months is not a long time in language learning terms, and although, at just 30, the sample was not large, the results indicated that rate of progress was related to the degree to which the reported frequency of language learning strategy use increased over the time involved. The group which made the fastest progress reportedly increased especially the use of strategies relating to the use of resources, to the management of learning, and to vocabulary. It would be interesting to repeat this study over a longer period with a larger sample of students. If this finding were to be replicated (that is, that rate of progress is related to increased reported strategy use), it would further strengthen the case for the potential usefulness of intervention aimed at helping students expand strategy awareness and use.

The discovery that teachers report a strong awareness of the value of language learning strategies is encouraging in terms of implications for the efficacy of what goes on in the classroom. This finding runs contrary to the findings of some previous studies (such as O'Malley *et al*, 1985), and may, perhaps, reflect a growing awareness of the importance of language learning strategies in the language teaching and learning field generally. It would appear, however, that teachers need to become more aware of the potential usefulness of strategies relating to the use of resources such as newspapers, TV, radio and movies. On a purely practical level, it is a pity to waste resources which are so readily available, so intrinsically motivating and so easy to incorporate into classroom activities with relatively little preparation or equipment.

Perhaps this is an area where teacher educators need firstly to raise awareness of the usefulness of these resources and then to suggest techniques for their effective use.

Although it is encouraging to find, in general, such a high awareness of the importance of students' language learning strategies among teachers, the question of how teachers can promote effective language learning strategy use among their students has generated considerable debate right up to the present (Brown, 2001). Certainly, the special Study Skills option class was only a lukewarm success as others (such as Wenden, 1987) have also discovered with similar situations.

Perhaps, as Cohen (1998, 1999) suggests, teacher education is the key to progress on the strategy instruction front, so that teachers learn how to integrate language learning strategy instruction into the fabric of their lessons, making strategy instruction both explicit and embedded in order both to make students aware of their actions so that they may be able to transfer this knowledge to other situations, and to provide the practice required for new strategies to become automatic. By doing this, instead of strategy instruction being seen as a waste of time which holds up what students want to learn, the how and the what may be brought together in a mutually supportive partnership. The potential usefulness of such an approach is suggested by the observation that even the most successful students (such as Nina) have room to expand their strategy repertoires and could, therefore, possibly benefit from effective strategy instruction, and by the overall finding from this study that generally (although there are exceptions) the most proficient students report frequently using a large number of language learning strategies.

Limitations of the study

Like any study, the current study has a number of limitations, among which might be the possibility that the type of student involved in this study (relatively well-to-do, non-immigrant, predominantly Asian females in their twenties) may well have produced findings typical of such a group which may or may not be generalisable to other groups with different characteristics. The time span over which the study (especially the SILL section) was conducted and the fact that the SILL data was collected at different points in the students' courses might lead to inconsistencies in the way strategy use was reported. It is possible, furthermore that the assessment of proficiency as obtained in the setting where the study took place may not have been sufficiently precise to enable a clear picture of the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategy use to be achieved. The treatment of proficiency levels as a continuous rather than as an ordinal scale for the purposes of statistical analysis may have affected results (although non-parametric tests yielded similar patterns of results). Conceivably, the nature of the strategy questionnaires used (SILL and ELLSI) may have been inadequate to produce a complete picture of language learning strategy use. Although pragmatics dictated that the longitudinal study was somewhat short-term, it is acknowledged that three months is a very short time for changes in language learning behaviour to manifest themselves and a relatively small number of participants (n=30) was involved. Finally, some interesting questions arose from the data (for instance the relationships among language learning strategies, proficiency and confidence, the issue of language learning strategies and age, issues of strategy

instruction, and the grouping of strategies according to type) which the current study was not designed to investigate or on which further work needs to be done.

Suggestions for further research

This study, although producing some interesting findings regarding the relationship between proficiency and the language learning strategies reportedly used by speakers of other languages, has also raised questions which might provide fruitful areas for further research. Among these might be:

- Similar research might be carried out in different settings (for instance, one where there is a different nationality mix, or where there is a higher percentage of males or older students) to determine the degree to which findings are generalisable to other contexts. Although this has been done to some extent in other studies, I am not aware that the question of how strategy use varies according to context been studied systematically.
- A more precise measure of proficiency (for instance IELTS or TOEFL scores) might be used as a base for establishing levels of proficiency. Such measures might provide a more consistent standard against which language learning strategy use might be measured.
- Further work needs to be done on developing the ELLSI or similar questionnaire so that a more complete picture of language learning strategy use by speakers of other languages might be obtained.

- A longitudinal project might be set up over a longer term and involving a larger number of students to investigate issues of strategy development over time and the relationship with proficiency.
- A study set up to investigate “the tornado effect” would be interesting to explore the possibly spiral relationship among proficiency, confidence and language learning strategy use.
- In spite of the absence of quantitative evidence from this study for a difference in language learning strategy use according to age, there are some interesting indications from the interview data that older students go about their learning in ways which are qualitatively different from the approaches used by younger students. Given an ageing student population, a research project set up specifically to explore these differences could produce some useful findings.
- Work needs to continue on the grouping of strategies, on investigating the degree to which students report using one group or another and the relationship with proficiency.
- A great deal of research remains to be done to discover effective ways of training students to use language learning strategies effectively.

Conclusion

Although, on an individual level, there are exceptions, in general, the results of this study indicate that the most proficient students report frequent use of a large number of language learning strategies, defined as specific actions consciously employed by

the learner for the purpose of learning language. This finding accords with the conception of language learning as a cognitive activity in which the learner is an active participant, capable of processing linguistic information and affecting learning outcomes.

Upon examination, a pattern of strategy use emerges from the questionnaires which enables a strategy profile of the highly proficient student to be suggested. Based on the results of this study, the most proficient groups of students appear to use strategies which enable them to work consciously on their vocabulary and to interact frequently with others (both native and non-native speakers) in English. They report using strategies relating to reading and strategies (such as avoiding literal translation) which facilitate the tolerance of ambiguity. They seem to have effective techniques for understanding the systems of the new language (for instance by looking for relationships and patterns and by studying grammar) and to use affective strategies to manage their feelings so as to remain relaxed and positive. Successful learners also report the use of strategies which enable them to manage their own learning and to utilise effectively available resources (such as TV, songs and movies).

Although (according to the results of this study) this profile may characterise the most proficient students in overall terms, learner variables (such as nationality, sex, age) must be considered when investigating reported language learning strategy use. In the context of the current study, Europeans were the most proficient of the national groups and also reported the most frequent use of language learning strategies. However, no statistically significant differences were found for proficiency or reported language learning strategy use according to either sex or age.

Although the qualitative interview data generally supported the quantitative findings from the questionnaires, they also underlined the variability of the individual learner, since the positive relationship between proficiency and reportedly frequent use of language learning strategies (at least as itemised in the SILL and the ELLSI) did not seem to apply to every individual case. In a real human situation, these inconsistencies are to be expected, and they serve as a timely reminder that, in the end, it is the individual student who is important. While recognising the potential value of quantitative findings such as those from this study, it is essential that educators exercise caution when attempting to apply them to a teaching/learning situation, since it is quite possible that, while generally applicable, such findings may not be appropriate for all learners.

The correlation which was found during the longitudinal phase of the study between reported increase in frequency of language learning strategy use and rate of progress has potentially exciting implications for the teaching/learning situation. Although correlation cannot be taken to imply cause, the finding that the students who made the fastest progress were those who reported the most increase in their language learning strategy use tempts one to suggest that their strategy use might be a contributing factor in their success. If this were the case, awareness of how more proficient students report using strategies might conceivably be of interest to less proficient students, as suggested by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) more than a quarter of a century ago.

The finding that teachers report regarding language learning strategies as highly important has positive implications for the teaching/learning situation since it would seem to suggest a good accord between teachers' perceptions and students' reported practices. However, the most effective way of going about language learning strategy instruction remains a controversial issue urgently needing further research right up to the present.

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NAME _____

Dear Student,

What strategies do you use to learn English? Do you write down each new word you see? Do you try to practise your English with a native speaker every day? Do you listen to the radio to improve your listening skills?

These are all examples of language learning strategies. We are interested in finding out more about your learning strategies. If you would complete the following questionnaire, it will provide data for research and will help us to learn more about you and your needs as a language student. In this way we hope to be able to provide for your needs more completely.

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)
(Version 7.0, (c) R. Oxford, 1989)

DIRECTIONS

Please read the sentences and answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers. Write your answers on the line beside the number of the statement.

1. Never or almost never true of me (means the statement is very rarely true of you)
2. Usually not true of me (means the statement is true less than half the time)
3. Somewhat true of me (means the statement is true about half the time)
4. Usually true of me (means the statement is true more than half the time)
5. Always or almost always true of me(means the statement is true of you almost always)

PART A (memory)

_____ 1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English
_____ 2. I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them
_____ 3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word
_____ 4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used
_____ 5. I use rhymes to remember new English words
_____ 6. I use flashcards to remember new English words
_____ 7. I physically act out new English words
_____ 8. I review English lessons often
_____ 9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign

_____ **TOTAL A**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 9)

PART B (cognitive)

_____ 10. I say or write new English words several times
_____ 11. I try to talk like native English speakers
_____ 12. I practise the sounds of English
_____ 13. I use the English words I know in different ways
_____ 14. I start conversations in English
_____ 15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to the movies spoken in English
_____ 16. I read for pleasure in English
_____ 17. I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English
_____ 18. I first skim-read an English passage (read over the passage quickly), then go back and read carefully
_____ 19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English
_____ 20. I try to find patterns in English
_____ 21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand
_____ 22. I try not to translate word for word
_____ 23.I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English

_____ **TOTAL B**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 14)

PART C (compensation)

_____ 24. To understand unfamiliar English words I make guesses
_____ 25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures
_____ 26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English
_____ 27. I read English without looking up every new word
_____ 28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English
_____ 29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing

_____ **TOTAL C**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 6)

PART D (metacognitive)

_____ 30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English
_____ 31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better
_____ 32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English
_____ 33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English
_____ 34. I plan my schedule so that I will have enough time to study English
_____ 35. I look for people I can talk to in English
_____ 36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English
_____ 37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills
_____ 38. I think about my progress in learning English

_____ **TOTAL D**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 9)

PART E (affective)

_____ 39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English
_____ 40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake
_____ 41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English
_____ 42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English
_____ 43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary
_____ 44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English

_____ **TOTAL E**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 6)

PART F (social)

_____ 45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again
_____ 46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk
_____ 47. I practise English with other students
_____ 48. I ask for help from English speakers
_____ 49. I ask questions in English
_____ 50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers

_____ **TOTAL F**

_____ **AVERAGE** (= total divided by 6)

_____ **OVERALL TOTAL**

_____ **OVERALL AVERAGE** (= overall total divided by 50)

In order to help us gain a more accurate picture of learning strategy use among our students, could you please answer the following questions:

1. NATIONALITY: _____

2. SEX: **M** **F**

3. BIRTHDATE: _____

4. PRESENT LEVEL OF ENGLISH _____

5. HOW LONG HAVE YOU STUDIED ENGLISH? (Including study at school?) _____

_____

_____

6. WHY DO YOU WANT TO LEARN ENGLISH (eg job, immigration, further education, travel) _____

_____

_____

_____

DISCUSSION SHEET

Please discuss these questions with your partner or partners:

1. Which learning strategies do you use most? Why?

2. Which learning strategies do you use least? Why?

3. Do you think learning strategies can help you to learn English more effectively?

4. Are there any other learning strategies you have found to be effective? Which ones?

5. What could your school or your teachers do to help you use learning strategies more effectively?

Dear student: *please read the following list of language learning strategies. Please mark each one according to whether you*

(1)never or almost never use it
(2)do not usually use it
(3 *)sometimes use it*
(4)usually use it
(5)always or almost always use it

1. _____ Doing homework.
2. _____ Learning from the teacher
3. _____ Learning in an environment where the language is spoken
4. _____ Reading books in English
5. _____ Using a computer
6. _____ Watching TV in English
7. _____ Revising regularly
8. _____ Listening to songs in English
9. _____ Using language learning games
10. _____ Writing letters in English
11. _____ Listening to music while studying
12. _____ Talking to other students in English
13. _____ Using a dictionary
14. _____ Reading newspapers in English
15. _____ Studying English grammar
16. _____ Consciously learning new vocabulary
17. _____ Keeping a language learning notebook

18. Talking to native speakers of English
19. Taking note of language used in the environment
20. Controlling schedules so that English study is done
21. Pre-planning language-learning encounters
22. Not worrying about mistakes
23. Using a self-study centre
24. Trying to think in English
25. Listening to native speakers of English
26. Learning from mistakes
27. Spending a lot of time studying English
28. Making friends with native speakers
29. Watching movies in English
30. Learning about the culture of English speakers
31. Listening to the radio in English
32. Writing a diary in English

English Language Learning

Strategy Inventory (ELLS I)

HOW TO LEARN ENGLISH

(ELLSI)

T¥hat strategies do you lise to lear" English? Spending a bit of time thinking about 17m\" :VOll learn can help you to learn more effectivel.v. A Ilswer these questions for yourself, and then compare your ideas with as many of your classmates as J'ou call.

0 f the 32 strategies on the previous page, which ones do you find most useful for yourself:
(1)

(1) Where are you from?

(3)

ABOUT YOU

BIRTHDA TE
daymonth year

SEX 1\,1 F	
PRESENT ENGLISH LEVEL:	
LENGTH OF COt JRSE:	

(2) How long have you been leaming English?

(3) Why do you want to leam English?

(4) What do you find most difficult about learning English?

(5) What do you find thc 1110st useful strategy/ies .for leaming English?

(6) What can the school do to help YOll learn English more effectively?

Appendix C

Interview guide

1. Which language learning strategies have you found most useful for learning English (key strategies)?

2. (a) What have you found most difficult about learning English?

(b) Which strategies have you used to help overcome these difficulties?

3. Do you think the strategies you use have been affected by your

(a) nationality

(b) gender

(c) age

(d) other factors

If so, what effect have these factors had?