

The Learning Strategies of ESL Learners

We will examine here the language learning strategies that our ESL students use and if they differ from the strategies that are usually considered positive. For instance, the basic premise in culture-based matrices is that cultural differences can make the learning strategies of different social groups mutually incompatible. We therefore need to examine how compatible the language learning strategies of SBVC ESL students, who belong to collectivist-large power distance group, are with the individualist-small power distance group that our L₁ students belong to. That will tell us whether it is pedagogically advisable, or not, to mix the socio-linguistically disadvantaged L₂ learners with linguistically underprepared L₁ students.

The concern for mapping the learning strategies of effective learners has already produced a general consensus¹ on the factors that characterize positive learning strategies. As for the ESL students at SBVC, I have earlier conducted a questionnaire survey of 80 Hispanic and Asian students in my ESL classes, whose results are directly relevant to our present context. This self-reporting survey comprised a total of 51 question items that were earlier used by Politzer and McGroarty² in a study relating learning behavior to the gains in linguistic and communicative competence. These question items formed three groups (Table 1) and differentiated “positive” learning behaviors from the “negative” ones.

Table 1: The “positive” versus “negative” language behaviors, as identified in the survey questionnaire.

Behavior that promotes communicative skills (positive classroom behavior)	Behavior that promotes linguistic skills (negative classroom behavior)
<p>(a) Classroom Behaviors</p> <p>The student says correct form to oneself on noting other's error or corrects fellow student's mistake when asked to do so, usually says the answers to himself/herself even if teacher has not asked for it, often guesses the meaning of a sentence from the speaker's actions or expressions and the meaning of new words from the rest of the sentence, usually asks the teacher to repeat a phrase or word that is not understood or to know if it is the example of a recently learned rule or to know when and by whom an expression can be used, seeks explanation on noticing an exception to a rule.</p>	<p>The student answers only when he or she is completely sure of the right answer, repeats or learns phrases without understanding for the fear that asking for an explanation will disrupt the class, speaks to fellow students (in class) in the native language.</p>
<p>(b) Individual Study Behaviors</p> <p>The student often tries to get the general meaning of a sentence or paragraph before looking up the unfamiliar words, often looks up words in a dictionary, sometimes talks to oneself in the L₂.</p>	<p>The student tries to memorize sentences without analyzing them, looks up all the unfamiliar words first and writes them in the text before reading it, generally associates words or phrases in the native language instead of L₂ and then memorizes them.</p>
<p>(c) Interaction Behaviors</p> <p>The student seeks help when he/she doesn't know how to express an idea, tries to rephrase when the listener doesn't understand, asks for confirmation when he/she is not sure of having used correct grammar, corrects himself/ herself on noticing a mistake, asks for repetition when he/she doesn't understand someone.</p>	<p>The student sometimes prefers keeping silent than making mistakes and sometimes avoids exposure to L₂ because of the mental fatigue involved in dealing with a foreign language, mentally frames the sentence in the native language first and then translates into L₂, prefers talking only to the native speakers at social gatherings.</p>

As can be clearly seen in this Table, it is not that these negative behaviors really retard learning. Rather, this distinction between the so-called positive versus negative behaviors rests on the theoretical distinction between language learning versus acquisition, made by Krashen³ for instance, that separates behaviors conducive of linguistic competence from the ones that aid the acquisition of communicative competence. The Politzer and McGroarty study thus found that ‘negative’ behaviors promote linguistic skills and ‘positive’ behaviors the communicative skills. The Politzer and McGroarty study also found statistically significant difference between the Asian and Hispanic students, as the latter scored higher in the surveys but made poorer gains in language learning.

Table 2 summarizes the results of this survey. Notice that statistically significant differences between question-item means are found for the classroom and interaction behavior but not for the individual study behavior. Perhaps this was only to be expected, however, for the simple reason that the students in Politzer and McGroarty study came from graduate classes and it is doubtful if the SBVC students sampled here aspire to attain that educational level as yet. This Table also summarizes the statistical comparison of SBVC sample with expected behavior item mean and with what would be expected of random answers. These numbers were estimated as follows. If responses to positive behavior question items were all in the affirmative (= 1 in our scoring scheme) and those to the negative behavior question items were in the negative (= 0), then the expected item mean would be 0.79 (= 11/14) for classroom behavior, because 3 out of the total 14 question items in this set were for negative behavior, 0.80 (= 12/15) for individual study and 0.78 (= 14/18) for interaction behavior. For completely random responses, on the other hand, question item mean = 0.50 for each of these sets. Pursuing these alternatives would be unnecessary, of course, if the results of a survey of this type were to be as clear-cut as theory requires. Unfortunately, neither the SBVC sample that was subsequently extended to a total of 198 students, nor the Politzer and McGroarty study, satisfy this condition.

Table 2: Statistical comparison of the results of SBVC sample on student learning behaviors with those of Politzer and McGroarty study and under other assumptions explained in the text.

	Expected Mean	SBVC Students		Politzer & McGroarty		Are the SBVC sample statistics significantly different, at $\alpha = 0.05$, from		
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Politzer and McGroarty data?	Expected Mean?	Random Process?
Classroom Behavior	0.79	0.61	0.18	0.69	0.19	YES	YES	YES
Individual Study	0.80	0.64	0.16	0.65	0.19	NO	YES	YES
Interaction Behavior	0.78	0.62	0.18	0.72	0.19	YES	YES	YES

The results in Table 2 yield a simple inference. The SBVC question-item mean values differ significantly from the expected mean and are clearly nonrandom. The learning behavior of these students diverges markedly, therefore, from those conducive of communicative competence and towards those promoting linguistic proficiency. In terms of instructional pedagogy, this reinforces the inference drawn in the preceding section. Had the language learning behavior of our ESL students favored communicative competence, mixing them with the L₁ students in a single class would have posed no problem.

The results of this study thus suggest that putting our L₂ and L₁ students in a single ENGL 015 or ENGL 101 class creates a divided forum in which the L₁ students are required to seek communicative competence at the same time as the L₂ students are seeking linguistic proficiency!

1. Rebecca Oxford, *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know* (Heinle & Heinle, 1990).
J. Michael O’Malley and Anna Uhl Chamor, *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
Andrew Cohen, *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language* (Addison-Wesley, 1998).
2. Robert Politzer and Mary McGroarty, “An Exploratory Study of Learning Behaviors and their Relationship to Gains in Linguistic and Communicative Competence”, *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 103-123 (1985).
3. Stephen Krashen, *The Natural Approach : Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (Prentice Hall, 1996).