Learning Strategies Used by Successful Language Learners

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December 5th 2009

Abstract

This study examines the language learning strategies employed by successful learners of English as a foreign and second language. Two successful English learners whose first languages are Mandarin were interviewed, and asked to complete a questionnaire and a self-evaluation measure to indicate their perceived level of language proficiency as well as their learning goals for each individual language skill in the future. It was found that, in terms of motivation, whereas one learner, Miranda, learns English to excel and to use the language as well as native speakers of English, the other learner, Kate, learns English for her daily communication and academic pursuit in the US. The data from the interviews and the questionnaires show that these learners utilize a wide range of strategies to learn listening, reading, speaking, writing, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. It was also found that strategies for vocabulary learning outnumber those for other language skills and areas investigated. Social strategies were found to be widely used by the learners to improve their English. Additionally, practice was reported to be the key to improving all four language skills as well as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

Literature Review

This literature review will first survey early research on good language learners (GLLs) done by a few remarkable researchers that have laid the foundation for later research on learning strategies in second language acquisition (SLA). Second, definitions of learning strategies, taxonomies of learning strategies, and commonly used inventories for investigating learning strategies will also be discussed. Third, the types of research studies on learning strategies will be presented. Fourth, research methods used to examine learning strategies will also be pointed out. Fifth, a brief discussion of the factors influencing choice of learning strategies will be made. Finally, the importance of learning strategies will be mentioned.

Being able to speak or use another language besides one's mother tongue can be an interesting and challenging task as language learning seems to be an incremental and time-consuming process. Likewise, Rubin and Thompson (1994) wrote: "Language learning is a long process" (p. 9). As researchers and teachers have been working hard to find out effective teaching methods and approaches to language teaching, Brown (2007) noted that certain learners tended to be successful regardless of methods or techniques of teaching; therefore, the importance of individual variation in language learning has been noticed. It seems that in addition to language teaching methodology, learning strategies can significantly enable learners to achieve a high level of success in learning another language. Fan (2003) reasoned that the notion of independent successful learners is closely linked to the increasing importance now attached to the learner-centered approach to language teaching, which is grounded in the assumption that language learners who have greater control of their learning will become more successful than those who do not. Therefore, as Fan stated, the learning strategies used by successful or good language learners have been the focus of attention among both teachers and

researchers. Brown (2007) also observed that some people appear to be endowed with abilities to succeed in language learning, whereas others lack those abilities. Such observation has long been impetus for researchers to attempt to discern the qualities or strategies and techniques employed by good language learners (GLLs). Early works on GLLs include Rubin (1975, 1981), Stern (1975), Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco (1978), Reiss (1985), Wenden (1987), and Stevick (1989).

By observing her students, Rubin (1975) was able to identify seven strategies that GLLs used. First, they are willing and accurate guessers. Second, they have a strong drive to communicate or to learn from a communication. Third, they are usually not afraid of appearing foolish by making mistakes. Fourth, besides focusing on communication, they also attend to form. Fifth, they practice by seeking opportunities to use the language. Sixth, they mentor their speech and that of others by constantly attending to how well their speech is received and whether their performance meets the standard they have learned. Seventh, they attend to meaning. In her later paper, Rubin (1981) divided learning strategies into strategies that directly affect learning (which include clarification, verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practice) and processes that contribute indirectly to learning (which constitute creating opportunities for practice, and production tricks).

Stern (1975) provided a set of ten strategies of GLLs: planning strategies (a personal learning style or positive learning strategy), active strategy (an active approach to the learning task), emphatic strategy (a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and its speakers), formal strategy (technical know-how of how to tackle a language), experiment strategy (a methodological but flexible approach, developing the new language into an ordered system and constantly revising it), semantic strategy (constant searching for meaning), practice strategy

(willingness to practice), communication strategy (willingness to use the language in real communication), monitoring strategy (self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use), and internalization strategy (developing the second language more and more as a separate reference system and learning to think in it).

In general, the early classifications of strategies seemed to highlight the role of practice, communication, and monitoring. In addition, whereas Rubin used the term guessing, Stern used the phrase semantic strategy or constant searching for meaning. Importantly, Rubin was able to divide learning strategies into one that can contribute directly and another that can indirectly to learning. It is also noteworthy that the typologies of strategies proposed by Rubin were based on empirical research, but the set of strategies suggested by Stern, as Grenfell and Macaro (2007) noted, were largely based on Stern's experience as a teacher together with a review of relevant literature.

Naiman et al. (1978) interviewed thirty-four highly proficient language learners and they identified a large number of techniques employed by good language learners but they also found that the results revealed the complexity and individuality of each learning situation and career. The five strategies they were able to identify are active task approach (GLLs actively involving themselves in the language learning task), realization of language as a system (GLLs developing or exploiting an awareness of language as a system), realization of language as a means of communication and interaction (GLLs developing and exploiting an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction), management of affective demand (GLLs realizing initially or with time that they must deal with the affective demand made upon them by language learning and succeeding in doing so), and monitoring of second language performance (GLLs constantly revising their second language system). Additionally, Naiman et al. (1978) were also

able to identify many more specific techniques for language learning such as sound acquisition, grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, learning to talk, learning to write, and learning to read. Among the specific techniques found, those for vocabulary learning were the greatest.

Reiss (1985) found that monitoring and attending to form were the most commonly used by good language learners. It was surprising that, as Reiss noted, attending to form was found to be more important than attending to meaning. Conducting a series of interviews with seven outstanding adult language learners of different languages such as Norwegian, Chinese, Portuguese, German, Russian, Finnish, Korean, Swahili, Rumanian, Arabic, Hebrew, and Japanese, Stevick (1989) was unable to find the similarities among successful language learners as there seems to have great variation with regard to their perceptions and preferences for language learning. Similarly, as Naiman et al. (1978) indicated, identifying the strategies of good language learners is hard. However, Stevick indicated that it may be feasible to find out "an overall pattern" (p. 138) of the GLLs.

Rubin and Thompson (1982) described fourteen strategies that may help one to be a better language learner.
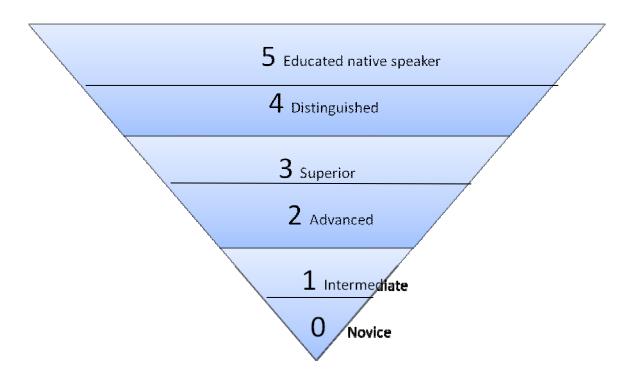
1. Good language learners find their own way to learn and take charge of their own learning.
2. They organize information about the language and their own program of study.
3. They are creative and experiment with the language.
4. They create their own opportunities to practice the language.
5. They learn to live with uncertainty.

6. They use mnemonics by organizing individual items into patterns and linking things together.

7. They make errors work for them and know how to deal with errors (Don't stop talking for fear of errors).

8. They use their linguistic knowledge and rely on what they know such as their first language or other languages they know).

9. They know how to use context to help them understand the message by guessing and taking risks.

10. They need to learn to make intelligent guesses.

11. They learn expressions and idioms as wholes.

12. They learn ways to keep conversations going.

13. They make use of production techniques such as paraphrasing, using synonyms, and asking for help.

14. They use different styles of speech depending on the formality of the context.

In a newer version of their book, Rubin and Thompson (1994) pointed out that learners should keep their objective realistic in language learning and each language skill needs separate attention and practice to develop. As a guideline for language learners to single out the right objective for them to strive to meet, they graphically showed that language learning process can be visualized as "The Inverted Pyramid of Language Proficiency" (p.16) where the lowest level and smallest part labeled 0 is representative of novice language learners (see Figure 1). Right above 0 is 1 which is for intermediate learners. Next is advanced learners labeled 2; after that superior learners are labeled 3; 4 is distinguished learners, and finally the highest and largest part on the top of the inverted pyramid is 5 which stands for educated native speakers. Rubin and

Thompson (1994) further explained and described each individual level of proficiency in detail for each language skill so that learners can choose the appropriate level for them to set their goals. Generally, novice learners are said to be in a prefunctional level where only a few words can be identified, spoken, read, and written. Intermediate learners are in a survival level where learners start to use the language in a limited way due to their lack of grammar and vocabulary and mistakes are often made. Advanced learners are able to use the language with limited working proficiency where learners can use the language to work, socialize or study in a limited way. Superior learners are in a professional proficiency level where learners are able to function fully in a foreign language and finally distinguished learners are in a near native proficiency level where learners can use the language as well and comfortably as their native language.

Figure 1. The Inverted Pyramid of Language Proficiency (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 16).

Interestingly, Rubin and Thompson (1994) never mentioned the chance of being as fluent and competent as native or educated native speakers, which clearly rules out the possibility of

becoming as good as native speakers. Although they did not explicitly state that such a goal of trying to learn a foreign or second language to use the language as well as native speakers of the language is an unrealistic and impossible objective, their indication of attaining near-native proficiency as the terminal objective for foreign or second language learning seems to implicitly inform the learners not to be so ambitious.

Basically, as Ellis (1994) indicated, studies on learning strategies employed by GLLs have been conducted using two approaches. In the first one, good learners were identified to be interviewed or asked to complete a questionnaire. In the second, more successful learners were compared to less successful ones. On the whole, as Ellis (1994) commented, there is convincing evidence from research studies on GLLs to show that paying attention to formal properties of the target language does contribute to success and this is likely to contradict with the claims of Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. Ellis also remarked that research on GLLs has yielded some of the richest insight into the kinds of behavior related to successful language learning and such studies constitute one of the most effective lines of inquiry in research on learning strategies. Moreover, Chamot (2001) observed that studies on the strategies used by GLLs conducted by Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), Hosenfeld (1976), and Naiman et al. (1978) generally identified GLLs as those who are active learners, mentor their language production, practice communicating in the target language, make use of prior linguistic knowledge, use various memorization techniques, and ask questions for clarification. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2005) postulated that research results from earlier studies on GLLs indicated in a relatively consistent manner that it was not merely a high degree of language aptitude and motivation that led to excellence in language learning of some learners but also the students' creative and active participation in the learning process through the use of individualized learning techniques. Such

early research on strategies used by GLLs has initiated a rigorous area of research in second language acquisition. Particularly, as Grenfell and Macaro (2007) pointed out, Rubin's (1975) article can be considered to have announced the birth of language learning strategy research.

Compared to individual differences such as motivation and aptitude, research on learner strategies is in its infancy or this area of this research is at an embryonic stage (Skehan, 1989). Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) observed that learner strategies research was extremely active a few years ago, but it seems to be losing vitality somewhat these days. Nevertheless, publications and research studies on learner strategies in the last few years have not seemed to decrease. Some examples are Cohen and Macaro (2007), Lai (2009), Peacock and Ho (2003), Nisbet (2002), Bruen (2001), Griffiths (2003), Khaldieh (2000), Kim (2001), Anderson (2005), Chamot (2001), Hurd and Lewis (2008), Takač (2008), and Gu (2005).

Research on language learning strategies has been referred to as a relatively "amorphous and messy" area of study by Ellis (2008). In terms of terminology, the term language learning strategies have long been used in many research studies and published articles in the field of SLA, although they may have been called learner strategies, and recently, Cohen and Macaro (2007) used a new term, "language learner strategies". Part of the reason why research on learning strategies has been considered messy may be because of the inconsistencies in the definitions different researchers use to define learning strategies. In fact, the term language learning strategies have been defined differently by different authors and researchers (Rubin, 1975; Wenden, 1987; Chamot, 1987; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Gu, 2003a). In fact, Tseng, Dörnyei, and Schmitt (2006) called this problem "definitional fuzziness of language learning strategies" (p. 95). Even the same author has given different definitions for the term at different points of time (Cohen, 1998, 2003). Oxford (1990) indicated

that learning strategies can be seen as steps taken by students to enhance their learning. Rubin (1975) defined strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p.43). Likewise, Wenden (1987) pointed out the characteristics of language learning strategies as follows.

1. Strategies refer to specific actions or techniques.

2. Some of them are observable and others are not.

3. They are problem oriented.

4. They can either contribute directly or indirectly to learning.

5. They may sometimes be consciously deployed and can become automatized.

6. They are behaviors that are amenable to change.

Dörnyei (2005) pointed out that the concept of language learning strategy reached mainstream recognition in the field of second language acquisition thanks to the publications of three books at the beginning of the 1990s by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Wenden (1991). Moreover, in terms of taxonomy, multiple efforts have been made to identify as well as classify learning strategies employed by language learners (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Purpura, 1999; Cohen & Chi, 2004). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) are probably the best known taxonomies of language learning strategies. Building on the framework of Anderson's cognitive theory (1983), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified learning strategies into metacognitive strategies (selective attention, planning, and monitoring), cognitive strategies (rehearsal, organization, inferencing, summarizing, reducing, imagery, transfer, and elaboration), and social/affective strategies (cooperation, questioning for clarification, and self-talk). Unlike O'Malley and Chamot, Oxford (1990) categorized language learning strategies into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory

strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies constitute metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. In addition, two relatively commonly used inventories for investigating language learning strategies have also been developed. The first is a fifty- item questionnaire named Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990), which can be used for both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The second one is Learning Strategy Use inventory by Cohen and Chi (2004), which consists of ninety items that are subdivided into sections for strategy use for listening, vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, respectively.

Macaro (2001) classified research on language learning strategies into two main types: descriptive studies and intervention studies. The former is said to have attempted to define the features of a good language learner, the total number of strategies learners employ, and the comparisons of strategy use between one group of learners and another group of learners. The latter has attempted to discover if it is possible to bring about change in strategy use in learners through learner training by teachers or researchers. These intervention studies, as Macaro further explained, describe the process of teachers helping students to learn the strategies to learn effectively.

In terms of research methodology, Cohen (1998) delineated six methods that have been used in examining learning strategies: (1) oral interviews and written questionnaires, (2) observation, (3) verbal report, (4) diaries and dialog journals, (5) recollective studies, and (6) computer tracking. As Ellis (1994) noted, three major types of data in second language acquisition are language use, metalingual judgment, and self-report. He also indicated that self-report data which can be obtained in various ways such as written questionnaires, oral interviews, or think-

aloud tasks have proved invaluable in exploring individual differences and identification of the learning strategies learners use. He added that self-report data are the main source for research on learning strategies. Additionally, Ellis (2008) stated that three of the most popular methods used to obtain self-report data from learners are questionnaires, interviews, and personal learning histories. Self-report data, as Ellis (1994) commented, are also as incomplete as other types of data and they have problems in terms of validity because learners may not know their affective and cognitive processes well enough to report accurately. To overcome the problem of reliability, Ellis (1994) suggested that the same subjects could be used to collect information using the same instruments at different occasions.

Various factors may influence learners' choice of learning strategies. For instance, Ellis (2008) assumed that factors influencing learners' choice of learning strategies include (1) learner factors and (2) social and situational factors. Oxford (1990a, 1994) posited that factors influencing the choice of language learning strategies are (1) motivation, (2) gender, (3) cultural background, (4) attitudes and beliefs, (5) type of task, (6) age and stage of second language learning (such as beginner or advanced learners), (7) learning style (general approach to language learning), (8) tolerance of ambiguity (students more tolerant of ambiguity used significantly different learning strategies in some instances than did those less tolerant of ambiguity).

Chamot (2001) postulated that learning strategies are important in second language acquisition for two main reasons. First, by investigating the strategies used by second language learners during the learning process, better insights into the cognitive, social, and affective process in language learning can be gained. Second, it may be possible to teach less successful language learners to use the strategies successful learners employ so that they can become better

language learners. Chamot also asserted that the two main goals in language learning strategy research are to first identify and compare the strategies used by more and less successful learners, and then give instruction to less successful ones so as to help them to learn second languages more successfully.

Overall, Grenfell and Macaro (2007) provided a summary of the broad claims made by authors in the field of learning strategies as follows.

1. The strategies that learners use are accessible and can be documented.
2. A strategy is a construct that can be defined, and what it is and what it does can be described in practical terms.
3. Strategies are important because they are associated with successful learning.
4. Some learner types are more likely to use strategies or use them more successfully than other learner types.
5. Strategies can be taught and learners, as a result, can develop more effective strategic behavior (p. 27).

This review has indicated that early research on good language learners was able to yield fruitful results and has served to lay a firm foundation for later research on learning strategies used by language learners. Thanks to the huge amount of research done so far, much has been learned about not only good language learners but also language learners who are not very successful. Despite the large number of studies in this line of study, much needs to be further examined empirically because each learner is a unique individual who may have different learning aptitudes, styles, preferences, and strategies. This study seeks to contribute to research on learning strategies employed by successful language learners by exploring what two successful learners of English as a foreign and second language did to achieve such a high level of language proficiency. As learning strategies are complex concepts, in this research project, learning strategies are operationalized as the ways that language learners use to improve their language knowledge and performance.

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Statement of the Purpose

This study will aim at looking for the strategies these two learners have employed to learning listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary by an in-depth analysis of lengthy interview transcripts and a questionnaire. This research study may contribute current literature in SLA in two ways. First, it may be able to add some more empirical evidence about the strategies used by two unique individuals who have learned English both as a foreign language and second language. Second, as learners from each culture and country may use different learning strategies to improve their language skills, the case study of these two Taiwanese learners of English may potentially provide some new information on learning strategies used by successful Taiwanese learners of English.

Research Questions

This research study will be guided by the following research questions.

1. What strategies have the good language learners (GLLs) used to improve their listening ability in English?

2. What strategies have the GLLs used to improve their reading ability in English?

3. What strategies have the GLLs used to improve their speaking ability in English?

4. What strategies have the GLLs used to improve their writing ability in English?

5. What strategies have the GLLs used to improve their pronunciation ability in English?

6. What strategies have the GLLs used to learn English grammar?

7. What strategies have the GLLs used to learn vocabulary in English?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the present study are two Taiwanese learners who have achieved a very high level of proficiency in English, despite having learned the language as a foreign language and a second language. The reason for this unclear distinction is because they both started learning English as a foreign language (EFL) when they were in Taiwan, while later they both did their undergraduate and graduate studies in the US for quite a long time. Therefore, English could also be considered as a second language (ESL) for them as they have been in an English speaking country for over six years. The participants are given two pseudonyms to protect their identity: Kate and Miranda. Some biographical data of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. The participants' demographic data

Name	Age	Gender	Age of initial English learning	Major	Educational level	Age of initial arrival to the US	Length of years in the US	First language
Kate	38	Female	12	TESOL	Ed. D (2nd year in progress)	29	6.5	Mandarin
Miranda	52	Female	12	Clinical Psychology	PhD	17	Over 25	Mandarin

After high school, Kate spent three years in Germany to learn to speak German and to play piano. She stated that her German improved very quickly during that time. After that, she came back to Taiwan to teach piano. Later, she wanted to be a student again, so she went to the US at the age of 29 to obtain an undergraduate degree in Communication Studies and then a

Masters degree in TESOL at Eastern Washington University. Having completed her Masters degree, she returned to Taiwan to teach English in a college for seven years before going to the US to obtain a doctorate in TESOL because it was her college requirement that all instructors in her program possess a doctorate to work as an instructor.

Miranda moved from Taiwan to the US at the age of 17. She went to high school in the US for one and a half years, and then did an undergraduate degree in psychology at the City University of New York. After college, she went back to Taiwan to work for one and a half years before going back to the US to complete her Masters degree in Clinical Psychology. She worked in Taiwan for four years after obtaining her Masters degree, and then went back to the US to obtain a PhD in Clinical Psychology at California School of Professional Psychology. She remained in the US permanently since then. Moreover, Miranda has been married to an American husband for 15 years.

Table 2. Participants' self-ratings of their language proficiency and their objectives

	Speaking		Reading		Writing		Listening	
	Kate	Miranda	Kate	Miranda	Kate	Miranda	Kate	Miranda
5 Educated native speaker	✓			✓			✓	✓
4 Distinguished		✓	✓		✓	✓		
3 Superior	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0*
2 Advanced								
1 Intermediate								
0 Novice								

Notes: ✓ = goal

0 = current level of English proficiency (self-rated)

0*= Although being sure that her listening was in level 3, Miranda believes that it could be between level 3 (Superior) and level 4 (Distinguished)

When being asked to self-rate their level of proficiency in four skills in English, both participants consistently think that their four skills are in level 3 (Superior). That is, in general, they can become a full participant in any communicative situation involving English. Rubin and Thompson (1994) pointed out that learners have to study the target language for an extended period of time and have a prolonged period of residence in the country where the target language is spoken to reach this level of mastery. However, although feeling certain that her listening is in level 3, Miranda still thinks that her listening skill may be between level 3 (Superior) and level 4 (Distinguished). Being asked what their objectives for each of the four language skills are, whereas Kate hopes to be able to speak and listen as well as educated native speakers of English, Miranda believes that she will be able to read and listen as well as educated native speakers of English. Apparently, it seems that these two participants share the same goal which is to be able to listen to English as well as educated native speakers.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this research study are structured interviews (Nunan, 1992), follow-up interviews, and a questionnaire adapted from Rubin and Thompson (1994). The rationale behind the use of structured interviews and a questionnaire as the major instruments to collect data from the participants is grounded on Ellis' (1994) statement that the use of structured interviews and questionnaires has been found to be more successful in investigating strategies learners employ. The interview questionnaire in this study covered major areas of interest to the researcher, such as biographical data, general opinion about language learning, strategies used to learn reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. It was first written by the researcher and then later reviewed by a professor in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) to ensure that certain points would be covered in the interviews.

The interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) was used as a guide for the interviewer during the interviews, but the interviewees were also encouraged to talk about what they think is necessary and relevant to help the interviewer understand more about the strategies they use to improve their English. In order to record the interviews, a digital sound recorder was used to record the interviews. The questionnaire (see Appendix B) administered to the participants consists of 42 five-point Likert-scale items. The first 36 items covering strategies for learning grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing are adopted from Rubin and Thompson (1994), but the last 6 items in the questionnaire are written by the researcher to elicit the particular strategies the participants use to improve their pronunciation. The reason to use both structured interviews and a supplementary questionnaire to collect data for this research study is because although interview data can be very insightful, they may not provide many different strategies that the participants use. Therefore, the questionnaire was designed to obtain additional information about the strategies that the participants use.

Procedures

The present research study was conducted as follows. The interview questionnaire was developed by the researcher and then reviewed by a TESOL professor. Two potential participants were identified and invited to take part in the study due to their excellent command of English. Upon their agreement to participate in the study, a schedule was made to interview these two successful learners of English. Each participant was individually interviewed for two hours and all interviews were recorded by a digital sound recorder. After the initial interviews, transcriptions of the interviews were written and carefully read. Based on the transcriptions, a questionnaire was developed to elicit some more strategies that the participants did not mention in the initial interviews (see Appendix B). In addition, points that the participants mentioned in

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the interviews but did not elaborate on were highlighted so that they will be clarified and elaborated on by the participants in the follow-up interviews. The participants were again asked to arrange a time for another meeting with the interviewer where a questionnaire was administered and a follow-up interview was individually done. In addition, immediately after the follow-up interviews, the participants were asked to rate their four language skills based on what has been suggested by Rubin and Thompson (1994), and they were also asked to indicate their objectives for each of the four language skills. Particularly, the participants were handed a table including the four skills: speaking, reading, writing, and listening on the top of the table, and the objectives are found on the left side of the table. The interviewer read the description of each of the levels for each skill while the interviewee listened and filled in the table the level they thought they have achieved as well as the level they wished to attain (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the interviews were read to identify the strategies the learners use. Emerging, common or different characteristics, opinions, and beliefs of the learners were also looked for. Demographic data from the participants were also tabulated and presented. The responses to the questionnaire items were quantified to compare between the two participants. The data from the questionnaire, the participants' self-rate level of proficiency, and their objectives were also used to give a broader picture of the strategies used by the two successful English language learners in order to improve their various language skills.

Results

Strategies for Learning English Grammar

Analysis of the transcripts and the results from the questionnaire show that these two GLLs have employed a wide variety of strategies for grammar learning. Particularly, both Kate and Miranda look for patterns and refer to what they know about the structures when learning grammar. Whereas Miranda strives for perfect mastery of the structure being practiced, Kate does not attempt to attain such mastery. Miranda, however, did not provide particular strategies for grammar learning because, as she indicated, she did not learn grammar formally in the US. Therefore, she had to pay attention to how native speakers use a certain grammar point or rule in communication and figured it out. She also sometimes asked her American friends to tell her about some structures of which she was not sure. Interestingly, she added that they often are unable to explain to her why they use certain structures even though they know how to use them. In addition, Miranda noted that she tries to observe the ways native speakers speak to improve her grammar, but she feels that she cannot find out why certain structures have to be used the way they are. Unlike Miranda, Kate provided several strategies she has used to improve her English grammar.

- I learn grammar by reading textbooks.
- I apply newly learned rules to writing (I practice writing sentences using a new rule or structure).
- I did a lot of practice exercises in grammar books.
- I ask a tutor at the writing center when I deliberately want to know about a grammar point.
- I ask Americans to tell me about a grammar point I want to know.
- I memorize the rules.
- I try to memorize the examples or simple sentences containing the rule to remember it.
- I apply the examples or sentences containing the rule to speaking and writing.
- I pay attention to the way native speakers speak to figure out the patterns.

- If I notice what I say is different from what native speakers do, I will pay close attention to figure out the differences.
- I listen to TV, news, and people talking to improve my grammar.

In general, both seem to have effective grammar learning strategies. Although Miranda scored slightly higher than Kate on the questionnaire (see Table 3), Kate reported numerous strategies she has employed to improve her grammar.

Table 3. Survey of strategies for grammar learning

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
1. When you study grammar, do you look for a pattern or rule and refer to what you already know about this particular structure?	4	4
2. When you complete grammar drills, do you always strive for 100% mastery?	3	5
3. In studying grammar, do you use your knowledge of your own and other foreign languages to try to make sense of the new language?	3	4
4. Do you try to use the sentence patterns of the language you are studying?	3	4
5. When you don't know or can't tell a structure you need, do you use one you know or a combination of simpler structures instead?	4	3
Total scores	17	20

Strategies for Learning English Vocabulary

The results from the survey show that both Kate and Miranda have used many effective strategies for vocabulary learning.

Table 4. Survey of strategies for vocabulary learning

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
1. Do you try to remember words by using them in context, i.e., in a conversation or in writing?	5	2
2. Do you try to organize the words that you have to learn into meaningful groups?	4	4
3. Do you check yourself after you finished studying a list or group of words?	3	4

4. Do you associate new words with those you already know?	4	4
5. Do you periodically review the vocabulary you studied earlier?	3	4
Total scores	19	18

Additionally, the data from the interviews also supported the results obtained from the questionnaires. In fact, both participants provided a much greater number of strategies for learning vocabulary than for learning any other language skills and areas investigated in this study. The following table shows the strategies these two participants reported using during the interviews.

Table 5. Strategies for vocabulary learning

Kate	Miranda
• Use vocabulary lists • Use memorization • Use rote memorization • Write the word ten times (written repetition) • Memorize the sound of the word • Divide the word into syllables • Learn words through examples • Learn the word together with the sentence it appears it • Produce a sentence with the new word • Repeat the word many times (verbal repetition) • Try to spell the word • Find the meaning of the new word first • Ignore a new word if it does not affect comprehension of the text • Guess the meaning if it is the key word • Guess by look at the sentence before and after the word • Guess by analyzing the word structure such as prefix and suffix • Guess by reading the whole text to choose the possible and suitable meaning of the unknown word	• Use textbook as a source of vocabulary learning • Use a dictionary to look up a new word • Ignore unfamiliar words if they do not affect comprehension of the whole sentence. • Use a dictionary for critical words that she does not understand • Ask native speakers to tell the meaning of new words • Write Chinese equivalent next to the word • Use a dictionary to learn the meaning and pronunciation of a word • Write down the phonetic transcription of the new word together with the meaning • Leafing through the dictionary to learn new words • Use and prefer a bilingual dictionary • Read English newspaper and magazines to get familiar with new words • Always keep a dictionary on her desk • Memorize the word's definition in

• Look for the right context of the word Learn simple words • Ask a friend for the meaning a of a word • Memorize the sound of the unfamiliar word heard in class and look it up it a dictionary later • Watching TV with subtitles in English • Write down unknown words seen in the subtitles and look them up in an electronic dictionary • Use monolingual dictionary to learn the way words are defined and paraphrased in English • Keep a vocabulary notebook • Associate the English word with a Chinese word that has a similar sound • Prefer monolingual dictionary	English if no Chinese equivalent is found • Only guess the meaning of a word when in a hurry • Check the dictionary to see if a word has more than one meaning • Memorize word as a whole • Use association to memorize words • Connect new words with known words • Associate new words with other words that have something in common • Learn highly frequently words • Repeat words aloud several times (verbal repetition) • Write words many times (written repetition) • Use index cards to learn academic vocabulary • Testing herself by shuffling the cards • Keep index cards on the desk • Save a few pages at the back of her notebook for academic words

In general, both participants share some strategies for vocabulary learning such as ignoring unfamiliar words if they do not affect comprehension of the whole sentence, using dictionaries, using verbal and written repetition, and asking others for meanings of words. However, there are also some differences in their strategies for vocabulary learning. For example, whereas Kate guesses the meanings of words very frequently, Miranda only guesses when she is in a hurry. While Kate prefers monolingual dictionaries, Miranda prefers bilingual dictionaries. In addition, Kate divides words into syllables to memorize them easily, but Miranda learns a word as a whole.

Strategies for Improving Speaking Ability in English

The results indicate that Kate and Miranda both use effective strategies for practicing speaking. It is noteworthy that both participants reported using circumlocution or asking their conversation partners for help when they fail to be able to express something verbally in English. Moreover, if they cannot say something, both seem to say something else instead. These two learners of English also practice rehearsing in their head if they have to act out a dialogue in class. Interestingly, Kate and Miranda do not seem to like to rehearse with other students.

Table 6. Survey of strategies for learning speaking

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
6. If you have a dialogue to memorize for acting out in class, do you rehearse the situation in your head to make sure you can do it?	4	4
7. If you have a dialogue for acting out in class, do you rehearse it with another student in your class to make sure that you can do it?	3	2
8. When you are in a store or restaurant in your country, do you try to imagine what you would say in the foreign language under these circumstances?	3	2
9. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you try to say it in another way?	5	5
10. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you say something else instead?	5	4
11. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you ask your conversation partner for help?	5	5
12. Do you take every opportunity to practice speaking with native speakers of the language?	3	3
Total scores	28	25

Miranda pointed out that she tried to translate Chinese into English in the initial stage of learning English in the US, but she found that it was not very helpful for her. She then learned to improve her speaking through exchanging ideas with others. If she cannot express something or she forgets a word during a conversation, she asks the person she is talking to for the right word

or way to express her thoughts. Miranda further emphasized that she is not embarrassed to ask for help, as she observes that native speakers sometimes do that too. She also mentioned that practice is the crucial factor that may help one to make progress in learning to speak English successfully. Making mistakes, as Miranda indicated, is very normal in speaking, and one has to learn how to conquer the feeling of being afraid to make mistakes. She reasoned that if one is unable to overcome such a feeling, the learning process will be slow as making mistakes is part of that process. Miranda added that she does not mind if she speaks incorrectly.

Kate contended that she is a quiet student and does not like to talk in class. However, she seems more comfortable talking in small groups of two or three people. She did not try to speak when first learning English, but she only spoke when she had to. Whenever she has to give a presentation in English, she practices speaking in front of the mirror, although she admitted that such a way of practice seems very funny. She also reported practicing speaking in her mind, and she sometimes intentionally practices speaking words that she does not use very often. If she cannot say something, she uses another word such as an antonym or a synonym. She tries to find a chance to talk to others in English to improve fluency, which she believes more important than accuracy. Kate sometimes corrects herself during speaking, but fluency is her prime concern. When she was still in Taiwan where she did not have much opportunity for speaking in English, she practiced speaking in her mind most of the time.

Strategies for Improving Listening Ability in English

The results from the questionnaires show that Miranda uses more effective strategies to improve her listening comprehension than Kate. However, both learners have generally used

relatively effective strategies for improving their listening. Importantly, Kate and Miranda coincidentally feel that listening is the skill they are best at among all other language skills.

Table 7. Survey of strategies to improve listening comprehension

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
13. Do you try to guess if you don't fully understand what is being said?	4	4
14. Do you use your knowledge of the world in understanding a conversation, a movie, or radio/ TV broadcast?	4	5
15. If you don't understand, do you keep listening because you may get a clue as to what was meant?	4	5
16. When you don't understand, do you pinpoint for your conversation partner what exactly you did not understand?	3	4
17. When you don't understand completely, do you summarize what you have understood and ask your conversation partner for verification?	3	5
Total scores	18	23

Miranda listens carefully to native speakers to improve her listening ability in English. She also watches American soap operas as a way to learn speaking because she finds that the topics are daily issues which can easily be understood, the actors often speak slowly, and things are often repeated. She uses gestures and facial expressions of the actors to help her understand what they say. She also mentioned that she was told to listen to the news to improve her listening when she first came to the US, but she later learned that listening to the news is the most difficult part in listening in English as it requires the listener a lot of background knowledge to understand the information. She suggested that learners of English listen to soap operas and postpone listening to the news until they are already good at listening. Another strategy Miranda uses to improve her listening is by talking to American friends (not nonnative speakers, as she emphasized), as she thinks she is a sociable person. She also asks them questions, and then listens carefully to what they say to observe the way they talk. She believes talking to nonnative

speakers of English has a negative influence on her English. While talking to native speakers, Miranda asks them to repeat what they have just said or she paraphrases what she has heard to check if she has got it right. When she fails to understand something when watching TV or listening to the radio, she keeps listening to see if she can get the point. Finally, she believes that the more one listens to English, the better one's listening ability will be.

Like Miranda, Kate also reported employing a large number of strategies to improve her listening comprehension. To Kate, watching TV is one way for her to improve her listening, because the information is authentic and up-to-date. Kate enjoys watching commercials, although she thinks they are "stupid" sometimes. If she cannot understand something on TV, she ignores it. She relies on pictures and people in the background to help her figure out something she may not get. She also sometimes uses her background knowledge to aid her comprehension. Kate added that watching TV with subtitles is one way for her to improve her listening. Moreover, Kate revealed that she often reads the news in her native language first, and then listens to the same topic again in English to help her understand the message more easily. Another strategy Kate uses is listening to the radio while driving. She also pays attention to people talking in English to improve her listening skills. When she had to take a listening test, she would read the questions first to try to figure out what the listening text would be before listening to it. For Kate, pressure helps her to learn more effectively, as she believes that pleasure listening outside class is just a supplement. , Kate believes that if students do not have to do anything, they will not learn much. While listening, she always tries to understand the meaning first. In addition, Kate does not attempt to understand every word.

Strategies for Improving Reading Ability in English

According to the results from the questionnaires, Miranda has used effective reading strategies, as she reported using almost all of the strategies for reading surveyed in the questionnaire. Even though Kate seems to employ only less than half of the strategies for reading presented in the survey, she is by no means considered to not be using effective ways to improve her reading because she was able to describe many other strategies she has employed to read better in English.

Table 8. Survey of reading strategies

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
18. Do you use your knowledge of the sequence of events in the passage to figure out unclear portions of the text?	3	4
19. Do you use your knowledge of the subject matter to figure out unclear portions of the text?	3	4
20. Do you use your knowledge of grammar to figure out unclear sentences or parts of sentences?	3	4
21. Do you rely on words that look similar to words in your native or other language you know to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text?	4	5
22. Do you rely on context to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text?	4	5
23. Do you consider the context when you look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary?	4	5
24. Do you read the whole text first to get the big picture?	3	5
25. Do you ask yourself questions in order to monitor your understanding of the text?	2	3
26. Do you use contextual clues (title, illustrations, layout, etc.) in order to figure out what the text is about?	4	5
Total scores	30	40

Kate reported that she uses a range of various strategies intentionally to help her read English more effectively. She tries to read the newspaper and news on the internet to specifically

improve her reading skills. She indicated that she does not read word for word, but looks at the headlines. She then skims the article to see if she likes it, and if the topic is interesting, she will read the text in detail. At the first stage of learning English in Taiwan, Kate used to try to read word by word and wanted to understand every word, but now she thinks that it is not necessary to know all the words. As Kate argued, even knowing all the words does not sometimes help her to understand a text, so she has changed her strategy. Nowadays, Kate skims and scans more often. She also uses textbooks as a source to improve her reading. To guess the meaning of words while reading, Kate uses the same strategies as she does for vocabulary learning such as looking at the sentence before and after the target word, analyzing word parts, skipping the word if it seems unguessable. Kate reported using her background knowledge to help her figure out the message of a reading text. Moreover, if time is limited, she will only read the first and the last paragraph to get a general sense of what the text is about. Additionally, she believes that reading more also improves one's writing skills, as one may be able to pick up patterns through reading, and one might use the writing styles they read in their own writing. If Kate has to do a reading test, she will always read the questions first, and then reads the passage to find the answers to the questions while reading. If she needs more detailed information in a certain paragraph, she will read that paragraph more carefully. One key factor that Kate thinks is essential for reading well is guessing intelligently. Another key factor to reading well, as Kate suggested, is to read more frequently. Kate further suggested that a good way to start to improve reading is to look for an interesting topic in the newspaper or magazines, and read it first, as she thinks such a topic may be easier and more interesting to read, so one may not give up reading.

Miranda reported using most of the strategies for reading in the questionnaire, but she could provide fewer strategies she uses during the interviews. To Miranda, looking at the table of

contents of a book helps her to have a rough idea about the material she is about to read. Besides, she focuses on the first sentence of each paragraph to get a general understanding of what the reading text is about, and that way helps her to read more quickly. She also reads novels occasionally. Like Kate, she uses textbooks as the main source of materials to improve her reading. She uses newspaper and magazines as another source for improving reading and enlarging her vocabulary. Because she is interested in the magazines that she has subscribed, Miranda reads the whole articles sentence by sentence. If an unfamiliar word is encountered while reading, she uses the same methods as she does for vocabulary learning such as ignoring the word if the sentence is generally understood, or looking it up in a bilingual dictionary if it is a "critical" word that affects her understanding of the whole text. In addition, to deal with reading texts during tests, she reads the text from the beginning to the end first before reading the test questions. Like Kate, Miranda believes that to read well, one needs to read more. Practice is the key to reading effectively, she noted.

Strategies for Improving Writing Ability in English

Whereas both think that writing is definitely the most difficult skill for them, and they identify this skill as the one they both need to work on more, they feel that they are best at listening. The data from the questionnaires seem to confirm the self-evaluation of their listening skills. In fact, the results from the questionnaires indicate that these two participants are using effective writing techniques.

Table 9. Survey of writing strategies

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
27. When writing, do you try to pick a topic that will allow you to use what you know rather than one that will force you to use what you don't know?	3	4
28. Do you develop an outline before you start writing?	4	5
29. Do you write a draft first and review it before turning in the final version?	4	5
30. Do you try to use the vocabulary and grammar you already know rather than look up most of the words in a dictionary?	5	4
31. Do you make sure that you have a correct model for the type of writing you are going to do, for example, the appropriate form for an invitation or the correct form to address people?	4	5
Total scores	20	23

Kate once more emphasized that to write well she reads more. She tries to improve her writing by practice writing as frequently as she can. She sometimes sets a goal for herself that she has to write one piece of writing every week. She reported that she looks for prompts and situations to practice writing. Besides, Kate goes to the writing center at her school for help. In terms of the writing process, Kate pointed out that she makes an outline before writing, and based on the outline, she writes her first draft. She uses the outline as a guide to organize her ideas and to add subtopics to each heading. Kate indicated that she deliberately tries to read academic materials so that she can produce academic writing. She stressed that pressure and anxiety help her to write better and more quickly. She admitted that she did not use peer correction in writing as she does not think that is a helpful way to learn writing for her. However, surprisingly, she stated that she used that technique with her students because she learned the technique from her professor at her graduate school. To justify the use of such techniques, she mentioned that she wanted the students to know that they could learn from each other. For Kate, accuracy is not as important as the writing process. However, she asserted that while writing she

aimed to focus on both form and meaning. That is, she tries to write meaningful and grammatical sentences. Meaning and form, for Kate, cannot be separated. She added that her problem with writing now is that she still thinks in Chinese while writing, although she has been told she should think in English. She noted that she cannot think in English, but she has to think in her first language first, and then produce English written form. Furthermore, Kate thinks that grammar plays an important role in writing as sentences have to be correct to be meaningful.

Like Kate, Miranda admitted that writing is the most difficult skill for her. She used to go to the learning center to meet with a tutor to help her with her writing. She read each sentence she wrote to the tutor and the tutor would correct the sentence if there was a mistakes. Having completed her PhD, Miranda still occasionally makes mistakes about grammar or usages of words, so she is taking a composition writing class to improve her writing skill. In order to write better, Miranda believes she has to keep practice writing every day. To write well, to Miranda, one has to write and rewrite. She emphasized the role of practice in writing by saying that one has to practice and practice again to make progress in writing, as writing, like language learning, is a long and time-consuming process. It takes time, effort, and energy to learn to write quickly, as Miranda stressed. She also makes an outline before writing. After writing, she asks "a native speaker of English, a real American (not any nonnative speaker even when that person may be very good at English)" to help her correct her writing. She suggested that one needs to write every day to improve his or her writing ability.

Strategies for Improving Pronunciation Ability in English

The results from the questionnaires tend to show that both participants have used effective strategies to improve their pronunciation. Nonetheless, Miranda seems to have a special

emphasis on trying to improve her pronunciation, as she reported always using almost all of the strategies presented in the questionnaire. Kate, however, believes pronunciation may not be her first priority, but she does seem to use strategies for improving her pronunciation. A closer look at the interview data can shed more light on this issue.

Table 10. Survey of strategies for learning pronunciation

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never		
	Kate	Miranda
32. Do you pay close attention to sounds, words or phrases produced by native speakers that you have difficulty pronouncing to imitate them to improve your pronunciation?	5	5
33. When listening to native speakers of English pronouncing a word differently from you do, do you try to immediately imitate them to pronounce like them?	4	5
34. Do you consciously pay attention to intonation, stress, and linking words when listening to English?	4	5
35. When encountering a new word when reading, do you ask native speakers?	2	3
36. When encountering a new word when reading, do you look it up in a dictionary to pronounce it properly?	3	5
37. Do you intentionally try to improve certain sounds or words that you have difficulty pronouncing correctly?	3	5
Total scores	21	28

Kate clearly stated that pronunciation is not a big problem for her, and she does not care much about pronunciation. She thinks that pronunciation is not very important, because even though she does not pronounce a word correctly, native speakers can still understand her, and if she cannot pronounce a word, she will use another one instead. In addition, she contended that all nonnative speakers of English have an accent, so she does not try to pronounce as well as native speakers. Despite devaluing the role of pronunciation, Kate does employ some strategies to improve her pronunciation. She imitates native speakers to pronounce commonly used words correctly. Watching TV is a way for her to learn pronunciation. In addition, she also listens to

CDs and repeats the sounds and words she wants to improve her pronunciation. Moreover, Kate admitted that she still has some difficulty with certain sounds such as "r", "l", "ph", "th", and "sh", so she tries to practice speaking words that contain those sounds.

Unlike Kate, Miranda takes pronunciation as a very important factor in learning English, as she believes that if one mispronounces a word, native speakers may not understand what is being communicated. She also thinks that one has to be very motivated to learn to pronounce English correctly. When she first came to the US, she soon recognized that her pronunciation was very different from that of native speakers, so she did her best to improve it. Currently, she believes that compared to some people, she has a better accent, but compared to others, she has a strong accent. She thinks that one has to be sensitive to the pronunciation of native speakers in order to improve their pronunciation. She pays attention to how native speakers pronounce words, and then she practices the words the way she has observed. She also pays close attention to intonation as used by native speakers to imitate it. Besides, she listens carefully to what native speakers talk as a way to improve her pronunciation. Whenever she mispronounces a word and recognizes that native speakers have to ask her again to confirm if that was what she wanted to say, she knew then that she did not pronounce the word very well. She would intentionally work more to pronounce such words correctly by imitating the way native speakers pronounce them. Moreover, Miranda pays attention to "liaison" such as "winner is" and winner's". In other words, she tries to see how words are linked to pronounce them as naturally she can. She also learns to pronounce well through communication with other people. For her, watching TV and listening to the radio facilitate pronunciation learning, but they are passive learning. Miranda believes that learning must be interactive, so that she can get feedback quickly, and she can improve her pronunciation more quickly. Another strategy she uses to improve her pronunciation is to find "a

real native speaker of English to talk to". She strongly believes that talking to nonnative speakers will negatively influence her English pronunciation, and she does not want to learn English that is not standard such as English used by African Americans or nonnative speakers of English. Having put a lot of effort in improving her pronunciation, Miranda stressed that she still has some difficulty with some sounds such as "l", "g", and "t" at the end of the words (final sounds). In addition, she has some problems pronouncing long and short "i" sounds. Miranda once more mentioned that practice is of crucial importance in pronunciation learning. She added that she sometimes practices certain sounds several times a day to pronounce them correctly. Interestingly, Miranda noted that she does not want to ruin other people's opportunities to learn good English, so she tries to learn English as well as she can to erase her heavy accent, and that is part of the reason why her pronunciation is good and she does not a very heavy accent

Overall, Kate concluded that her English learning experience is "ok", not too terrible, but not fantastic. She has to learn, use, and teach English because it is part of her job, and particularly she has to speak it now because she is living in the US. On the contrary, Miranda found her experience of learning English difficult, sometimes frustrating, and unpleasant, because she thinks it takes too much time and effort. In addition, she admitted that she cannot stand ambiguity, and that is why she does not like guessing, because she always wants the exact meaning of a word.

Discussion

It seems that there are some similarities between the participants. One marked similarity is that they are both successful learners of English who have been able to use the language in various communicative situations. In addition, they both reported using a wide range of

strategies to improve their English, and the majority of their reported strategies tend to involve conscious effort and selective attention. They also tend to have clear criteria for choosing what to focus on learning and what to ignore. They are most confident with their listening skills, and both want to possess a listening ability that is as good as that of educated native speakers. Clearly, their objectives for such a high level of mastery seem unrealistic as inferred by Rubin and Thompson (1994). However, these learners have managed to attain a high level of English proficiency after an extended period of time learning English and living in the US. Thus, it might be understood that their goals are not just wishful thinking, but something they may be able to achieve, based on their own judgment and expectation.

However, the results of this study also generally corroborate those of Stevick's (1989) in that the two GLLs investigated tend to have great variation in their motivation to learn English, preferences for language learning in general, and ways to learn each individual language skill and aspect. Whereas Miranda strives to learn English to excel and to be a good model for other learners, Kate simply aims to be able to use the language for satisfactory communication. It is possible to infer that Miranda takes English as a subject for perfection and something to increase her general social status such as being able to speak good and standard English, but Kate treats English as a tool for communication, job advancement, and academic pursuit. Broadly, Miranda could be said to have an integrative kind of motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) to learn English to function as well as native speakers in some respects, Kate, however, tends to have a kind of instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) to learn the language as a tool to fulfill her personal and professional demands. Besides, Kate does not think pronunciation is such "a big problem" in learning English, while Miranda sees pronunciation as a prime concern and a crucial element to differentiate good learners of English from those who speak "lousy English"

although having been in the US for a long time. Moreover, their experiences of learning the language are distinctly different. Although Miranda seems to have a excellent language command compared to most foreign or second language learners, she indicated that her overall impression of English language learning experience is "difficult, unpleasant, and sometimes frustrating." However, Kate reported that her learning experience is "ok, not too terrible, but not fantastic." Probably, Miranda's high expectation might have made her feel such a negative feeling toward her language learning process.

Additionally, Miranda also indicated that she cannot tolerate ambiguity; therefore, she has had a lot of difficult learning English. The issue of tolerance of ambiguity has also been mentioned by Brown (2007), Oxford (1990, 1994), and Rubin and Thompson (1982, 1994). Oxford (1990, 1994) pointed out that learners who are more tolerant of ambiguity used significantly different learning strategies in some instances than did those less tolerant of ambiguity. Such a remark is right for the case of Miranda and Kate. It is likely that Miranda cannot tolerate ambiguity, so she often uses the dictionary to find out the exact meaning of o word she wants to know. Kate, nevertheless, seems to be more tolerant of ambiguity, thus she reported using "guessing intelligently" more often, and she even stated that guessing is one of the most important skill for reading comprehension. Miranda rarely makes guesses as she does not think it works for her personally. Rubin and Thompson (1982, 1994) noted that learners have to learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered in order to become good language learners. Likewise, Brown (2007) even stated, "It is hard to imagine a compartmentalizer - a person who sees everything in black and white with no shades of gray – ever being successful in the overwhelmingly ambiguous process of learning a second language" (p. 127). Miranda's success in learning English as a second language seems to prove that such a strong claim by Brown may

not be always true, as learners can be successful in language learning regardless of their tolerance of ambiguity. It may be true, though, that if learners are not tolerant of ambiguity, they may find the process of learning a second or foreign language somewhat "frustrating" as Miranda have experienced.

It is generally believed that practice makes perfect, and the same may be applied to language learning. However, Lightbown (2006) asserted that "Practice does not make perfect." To explain the claim made by Lightbown, Ellis (2008) wrote.

> This is because practicing a structure in a mechanical way reifies the structure by decontextualizing it and thus does not affect long-term memory or lead to any change in behaviour. To change behaviour (i.e. develop automatic processes) it is necessary to provide practice of actual behaviour itself (p. 480).

DeKeyser (2007) emphasized that "Practice get a raw deal in the field of applied linguistics" (p. 1). He also indicated that although laypeople simply consider practice as a necessary condition for language learning without giving the concept further thought, many applied linguists eschew the term practice, because for some, the term conjures up images of mind-numbing drills in the sweatshops of foreign language, whereas for others, it is equivalent to fun and games to appease students on Friday afternoons. In addition, Dekeyser clearly define practice as "specific activities in the second language engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language" (p. 8). DeKeyser (2007) also indicated the place of practice is second language learning.

> Far from being an outdated concept, then, practice stands at the crossroads where many different questions intersect: questions about the relationship between competence and performance, implicit and explicit learning, production and comprehension, analytic versus synthetic syllabi, accuracy versus fluency, and about individualization of instruction (p. 12).

In the current study, it was found that Miranda and Kate highly value the role of practice in all language areas investigated, and they repeatedly mentioned that in order to do well in any skill or language area, one has to practice over and over again. These learners' perspectives are largely in line with the strategies used by successful language learners proposed by Rubin (1975, 1981) and Stern (1975). Moreover, these learners' perspectives on the role of practice in language learning seem to reflect Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought Model (1976, 1980, 1983, 1993), which generally assumes that declarative knowledge can only become procedural knowledge after the learners have had tremendous practice and a long time of study. Clearly, practice may be deemed as a quintessential factor for language learning success.

Recent research on GLLs conducted by Takeuchi (2003) found that the use of some strategies seems to be closely related to specific stages of language learning. In the same vein, Ringbom (2007) posited that learning strategies at the early stage of language learning differ from those at later stages because learners gradually develop different strategies. Similarly, in this study the participants reported certain strategies they only used in their initial stage of language learning and some strategies they particularly used when they are at a higher level of language proficiency. For example, both learners reported memorizing grammar rules when they began learning English in Taiwan, but later when they could use the language relatively well in the US, they both have asked native speakers to help them with grammar structures or points. Interestingly, Kate and Miranda had the same problem when asking native speakers to help them with grammar. They did not usually get a thorough explanation of the grammar points they wanted to know, as the common explanation they got from native speakers was "that is the way I would say it." It seems safe to infer that although native speakers can help learners to produce correct linguistic forms, they cannot usually explain grammar. Besides, it may also be further

understood that these learners' experiences have provided some evidence to show that the ability to perfectly use English of native speakers of the language does not naturally entail the ability to explain its grammar clearly. As both did not receive grammar instruction in the US during their time studying in the country, it seems asking native speakers to improve their grammar may be a reasonable way to learn grammar. Although learning grammar in real communicative situations may be an authentic way to learn grammar, it may be an inhibitory factor. Miranda reported learning grammar extensively based on what she learned from talking and listening to native speakers, and she used the grammar she learned from daily communication to write. She soon realized that written grammar and word choice are different from those of spoken English, but she has been unable to delineate the differences.

Another problem facing both participants is that they still constantly make mistakes between the two personal pronouns "he" and "she", because as they pointed out, there is only one personal pronoun for both males and females in Chinese. In addition, both indicated that they still have problem pronouncing the final consonant sounds of words because they do not have to pronounce those sounds in their native language. This may suggest that negative transfer can be very powerful even when second language learners may have attained a very high level of proficiency in the target language. As an attempt to bring grammar strategies into view, Oxford and Lee (2007) were able to find a large number of strategies learners use to learn grammar, and one of those is trying to discern the differences between the way proficient people say and compare to their own to improve their grammar. Likewise, both Kate and Miranda tend to observe the way native speakers speak and compare with their own speech to improve their grammar. This strategy is very similar to the idea of noticing-the- gap that was advanced in the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1994, 2001). Ellis (2008) noted that noticing-the-gap

occurs when learners identify how the input to which they are exposed differs from the output that they are able to generate. Moreover, Miranda and Kate also reported looking for grammar rules whenever possible, which is similar to one of the strategies for learning grammar suggested by Rubin and Thompson (1994).

Noticeably, strategies for vocabulary learning constitute the largest number of strategies found in this study, and many of the strategies Miranda and Kate use for other skills and language areas are actually vocabulary learning strategies, so the results of the present study also seem to confirm those of the previous ones such as Naiman et al. (1979), and O'Malley, Chamot, Stwener-Manzanares, Russo, and Kupper (1985). Whereas Naiman et al. found more strategies used for learning vocabulary than other language areas investigated in their study, O'Malley et al. ascertained that learners used learning strategies in vocabulary learning more often than in other language learning activities. This may be the reason why over 15 items in the commonly used Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) are about vocabulary learning strategies. In his study, Takeuchi (2003) found that Japanese EFL good language learners used both verbal and written repetition to learn new words, the two participants in this study also employ these two strategies together with many other more strategies to learn vocabulary.

To improve listening, speaking and pronunciation, both learners have employed social strategies (Oxford, 1990) very frequently. Besides, they seem to use "observation strategies" to learn to listen, speak, and pronounce well. Observation strategies have also been used by the participants to improve their English grammar. The reason for their extensive use of social and observation strategies could be because they are in the English speaking environment where they have easy and frequent access to native speakers of English who can serve as good models to

learn from. Furthermore, the role of the media such as TV, radio, and newspapers or magazines tends to play an important role for these learners to improve their language skills and aspects. The two GLLs are similar to the GLLs in Takeuchi's (2003) study who seemed to listen carefully to the target sounds or words spoken by the models such as native speakers and then imitated them.

Kate and Miranda seem to try to improve their reading skills by both extensive reading and intensive reading. They also tend to have clear criteria and strategies for reading certain kinds of materials. Generally, the strategies they use for reading are likely to be academic skills as well as language learning strategies. To get the general idea of a text, each learner approaches the text in a distinct way, but both set a clear selection criterion to choose to read something carefully: topics they are interested in. That seems to be a useful strategy that may help any learner to read better. Macaro (2001) indicated some ways successful readers employ to overcome the barriers to comprehension of a text, among which is that they do not get anxious when they cannot understand it. Similarly, the participants in this study also seemed to suggest that they do not worry much if they do not understand a reading text as they can rely on other information provided in the text to get the general idea. The participants in this study also reported different strategies for learning at different stages of their learning processes. For instance, when she first learned English, Kate tried to read word- by- word and tried to understand every word she read, but later she did not try to know the meanings of all the words she read, and she started guessing words' meanings based on the surrounding text and skipping unknown words. Such strategies for reading are similar to those found by Hosenfeld (1977) who found that successful foreign language readers either skipped unknown words or inferred their meanings from the surrounding context.

The common strategies both Kate and Miranda employ to write better are to go to writing centers for help and to make an outline before writing. Going to the writing center for help seems to be a strategy that ESL students in the US can generally use, because there is usually a writing center to help students to improve their written assignments, and these GLLs have seemed to make full use of it. Importantly, both have reported that they have gradually learned very much from that strategy. Making an outline before writing may be considered an academic skill that learners have learned during their academic life or in their language learning process. Mu and Carrington (2007) found that Chinese learners of English used extensive reading as a way to improve their writing, and in this study Kate particularly reported reading more to write better. This finding seems to confirm those found by Takeuchi (2003) who found that GLLs in the EFL context of Japan read a lot to improve their writing. It is noticeable that while both participants indicated that they want to be able to listen as well as educated native speakers of English, neither aims to write as well as educated native speakers. Probably, the reason for their more realistic goals for writing is because they still need help a lot with their writing.

Suggestions for Further Research

The present study has been conducted based on previous studies on strategies used by GLLs, and the results seem to mostly be congruent with past research. However, as the study aims to ascertain strategies GLLs employ to learn all four language skills together with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, it may not have investigated strategies the participants use for learning each skill or language aspect in great detail. Therefore, future research may focus on examining strategies GLLs utilize to learn one of the specific skill areas in greater depth so as to have better insights into learners' use of language learning strategies. Particularly, research on strategies for grammar learning is urgently needed, as Oxford and Lee (2007) noted that

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grammar strategies still remain unexplored. Moreover, like many previous studies on GLLs, this study is mainly qualitative in nature; therefore, it may be interesting to conduct a study using a quantitative approach with a large number of participants to determine if there is a general pattern of GLLs as suggested by Stevick (1989). The advantages to a quantitative may enable researchers to make generalizations about strategies used by GLLs.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the study has indicated that GLLs utilize some common strategies to improve their English, but each of the participants also employ their own special strategies depending on their learning styles, preferences, and motivation. ESL and EFL classroom teachers may find the strategies reported by Kate and Miranda interesting for them to introduce to their students and to discuss about the strategies that may be suitable for their learning situations, contexts, motivation, and learning styles or preferences. Admittedly, there is no successful strategy for all language skill areas or all learners. However, it may be helpful to let learners try using some strategies that GLLs have used to decide for themselves if the strategies work for them or not.

Moreover, both participants emphasize the role of practice in all skill areas, and past research such as Rubin (1975, 1981) and Naiman et al. (1978) has also suggested that practice is one of the strategies GLLs use. Therefore, language teachers may provide their learners with more opportunities for meaningful and creative practice that simulate real- life situations to motivate their learners as well as to give them enough practice to achieve the language proficiency that desire. It may important for classroom teachers and learners to know that in order for successful language learners to achieve the language proficiency they possess, they

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have had extensive practice, and they seem to believe that practice is the sine qua non of language learning success. Therefore, practice should be the backbone of classroom activities where learners are allowed to creatively apply what they have learned in meaningful and relevant situations so that they may hopefully be able to use the language more confidently, comfortably, and effectively. Practice makes perfect if the activity is personally meaningful to the learners.

Furthermore, although the two GLLs investigated in this study have learned English and lived in the US for quite a long time, and their English proficiency is relatively high, they still have clear objectives for each of the language skills. Similarly, language teachers may help their students to set clear goals for each language skill that they wish to achieve. Such goals may serve as a tangible guide for them to focus on attaining their desired proficiency level. Finally, the results of the present study may hopefully provide some food for thought for second and foreign language teachers and researchers who are interested in the issue of strategies of GLLs.

Conclusion

Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, and Campion (1983) postulated that a successful learner is in fact a learning theorist (cited in Gu, 2003). As GLLs are living examples of those who have been able to achieve a very high level of proficiency in a second or foreign language, it is logical and reasonable to learn from them. The results of the study show that the two GLLs are not only able to describe clearly the strategies they use but also suggest their own theories about successful language learning through their beliefs and language learning experience.

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SLA research study interview questionnaires

(partially adapted from Naiman et al. , 1978)

You have been invited to take part in this research study as you have been considered very successful language learners. I would like to talk to you about your language learning experiences and the ways or techniques you have you to achieve the English language proficiency you possess now.

Your name will be kept confidential and you have the right to terminate the study any time you want. First you will be asked about your background information and then you will be invited to tell me the strategies you have you to improve particular language skills.

Our interview, if you do not mind, will be recorded for my own data analysis.

Biographical information

Could you tell me about your background information? Where were you born? What your first language is? Do you think you are a good language learner in your native language? How many languages can you speak? (If more than 2 languages, can you rank the language use can speak from the best to the worst?)What is the first foreign language you learnt? When and where did you begin to learn English? Why did you choose to learn it? How did you learn it? How was the teacher? The learning environment, materials used, and friends? What does learning a new language sound to you, interesting and fun or boring and hard? Do you ever want to learn another foreign language and why?

Language learning strategies

General opinions

What do you think are the factors that have contributed to your success in learning English as a foreign language?

What language skills do you think are most important in language learning? Why?

What skills did you learn first when you began learning English? Why? Did you like it? Why or why not?

Which language skill do you think you are the most proficient? And which skill do you need to work more on?

What do you think the role of your first language plays in English language learning for you?

Reading strategies

What did you do to read well in English? Did you read in English outside class? What sources did you use to improve reading outside class? Did you have any difficulty reading in English at

first? How did you overcome it? When given a new reading text, how are you going to read it? Are you going to read from the beginning to the end or are you going to read it in another way? When do you skim (read quickly to get the main points) a text and when do you scan (read carefully to understand more detail) it? Which way of reading do you do more often and what kind of material do you use for each way of reading? What factors do you think affect reading comprehension?

What do you think are the crucial factors that affect reading comprehension? What do you think is the role of reading comprehension in language learning?

Writing strategies

What did you do to improve your English writing skills? When and where and to whom did you used to write in English? Did you have any problems writing in English? How did you overcome them? Has anyone helped you to revise your writing? How did you revise it? What do you think about peer and self revision (revising with friends or revising by oneself? What do you think is the influence of your native language writing ability on your English writing? How did you plan your writing before you write? What steps did you take when writing? What do you think are the necessary skills and knowledge to write well in English?

Listening strategies

How did you learn listening? What have you done to do well in listening? What sources of listening did you have access to? Did you face any challenges while learning listening? How did you overcome it? When and where did you use to listen to English? What does a person need to do or know if he or she wants to be a successful listener, in your opinion? Can you suggest a good way to improve listening?

Speaking strategies (commonly referred to as communication strategies CSs)

How did you learn speaking? What have you consciously done to improve your speaking ability? What problems did you have while learning speaking? How did you overcome it? In order to speak English well what does a student need to do in an EFL context?

Learner strategies to improve pronunciation

How did you learn pronunciation? What sources did you use to improve your pronunciation? Why? What did you do to improve it? Did you have any difficulty pronouncing English correctly? How did you overcome it? Did you have any particular problem pronouncing any sounds in English? How did you improve it? What special gimmicks or techniques did you use to pronounce English well? What does a student need to do to improve his or her pronunciation?

Grammar learning strategies (or grammar strategies as suggested by Oxford and Lee, 2007)

How did you learn grammar? What did you do to do it well? What was the role of grammar rules in your learning context? How about practice? What did you deliberately do to master English grammar? When learning a new grammar point, what did you use to do to remember it or use it well? Where were the sources for you to learn grammar? What do students need to do to learn to use grammar well both in tests and in real communication?

Vocabulary learning strategies

How did you learn vocabulary? Where did you get new words from? Did you have any difficulty with learning English vocabulary? How did you overcome it? What did you do when see a word that you did not know the meaning while reading and listening to a tape or CD and listening to someone speaking English to you? What did you want to know first about a word you did not know? What aspects of a new word did you want to learn? Where did you get those aspects of the word you wanted to learn? Did you analyze the part of speech of a word when you first saw it? Did you find guessing a word' meaning an easy or successful way for you to get the meaning of the word? What kind of dictionary did you prefer and used? Was it a monolingual or bilingual dictionary? What role did the dictionary play in your vocabulary learning experience? How often did you use it? When and why did you use it? What did you think about it? What could it tell you and what could not it tell it? What are the criteria you would look for in a dictionary for English language learners? What were the common ways or techniques did you use to learn and remember new words? When and where did you use to learn new words? What kinds of words did you decide to learn and what did you decide not to learn and why? Did you ever learn words by connecting them with synonyms or antonyms? Why or why not? Did you keep a vocabulary notebook? Did you use written or verbal repetition to learn new words? Why or why not? How did you learn the spelling of a new word? Did you ever use mental images or visual cues (such as associating the image or picture of something to help you remember a word easily)? Did you try to associate a new word with other known words with the close similar sound (minimal pairs) (such as book, hook, look, and shook)? Did you connect a new word with some place so that you could remember it easily?

Overall feelings

What does the whole process of learning English mean to you now as a successful EFL learner? Which skill or aspect of the English language do you think you are best at and which do you think you still need to work on more? Why? How are you doing to improve it? Could you identify some prominent advantages of learning English in an English speaking country, the USA?

Language learning strategies survey

(adapted from Rubin and Thompson, 1994)

Please read the questions below and circle the number which most accurately describes your response.

5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
1. When you study grammar, do you look for a pattern or rule and refer to what you already know about this particular structure?	5	4	3	2	1
2. When you complete grammar drills, do you always strive for 100% mastery?	5	4	3	2	1
3. In studying grammar, do you use your knowledge of your own and other foreign languages to try to make sense of the new language?	5	4	3	2	1
4. Do you try to use the sentence patterns of the language you are studying?	5	4	3	2	1
5. When you don't know or can't tell a structure you need, do you use one you know or a combination of simpler structures instead?	5	4	3	2	1
5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
6. Do you try to remember words by using them in context, i.e., in a conversation or in writing?	5	4	3	2	1
7. Do you try to organize the words that you have to learn into meaningful groups?	5	4	3	2	1
8. Do you check yourself after you finished studying a list or group of words?	5	4	3	2	1
9. Do you associate new words with those you already know?	5	4	3	2	1
10. Do you periodically review the vocabulary you studied earlier?	5	4	3	2	1
5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
11. If you have a dialogue to memorize for acting out in class, do you rehearse the situation in your head to make sure you can do it?	5	4	3	2	1
12. If you have a dialogue for acting out in class, do you rehearse it with another student in your class to make sure that you can do it?	5	4	3	2	1
13. When you are in a store or restaurant in your country, do you try to imagine what you would say in the foreign language under these circumstances?	5	4	3	2	1
14. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you try to say it in another way?	5	4	3	2	1

15. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you say something else instead?	5	4	3	2	1
16. When you don't know how to say something in a foreign language, do you ask your conversation partner for help?	5	4	3	2	1
17. Do you take every opportunity to practice speaking with native speakers of the language?	5	4	3	2	1
5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
18. Do you try to guess if you don't fully understand what is being said?	5	4	3	2	1
19. Do you use your knowledge of the world in understanding a conversation, a movie, or radio/ TV broadcast?	5	4	3	2	1
20. If you don't understand, do you keep listening because you may get a clue as to what was meant?	5	4	3	2	1
21. When you don't understand, do you pinpoint for your conversation partner what exactly you did not understand?	5	4	3	2	1
22. When you don't understand completely, do you summarize what you have understood and ask your conversation partner for verification?	5	4	3	2	1
5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
23. Do you use your knowledge of the biological sequence of events in the passage to figure out unclear portions of the text?	5	4	3	2	1
24. Do you use your knowledge of the subject matter to figure out unclear portions of the text?	5	4	3	2	1
25. Do you use your knowledge of grammar to figure out unclear sentences or parts of sentences?	5	4	3	2	1
26. Do you rely on words that look similar to words in your native or other language you know to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text?	5	4	3	2	1
27. Do you rely on context to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in the text?	5	4	3	2	1
28. Do you consider the context when you look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary?	5	4	3	2	1
29. Do you read the whole text first to get the big picture?	5	4	3	2	1
30. Do you ask yourself questions in order to monitor your understanding of the text?	5	4	3	2	1
31. Do you use contextual clues (title, illustrations, layout, etc.) in order to figure out what the text is about?	5	4	3	2	1
5 = always 4 = usually 3 = occasionally 2 = rarely 1= never					
32. When writing, do you try to pick a topic that will allow you to use what you know rather than one that will force you to use what you don't know?	5	4	3	2	1
33. Do you develop an outline before you start writing?	5	4	3	2	1
34. Do you write a draft first and review it before turning in the final version?	5	4	3	2	1
35. Do you try to use the vocabulary and grammar you already	5	4	3	2	1

know rather than look up most of the words in a dictionary?					
36. Do you make sure that you have a correct model for the type of writing you are going to do, for example, the appropriate form for an invitation or the correct form to address people?	5	4	3	2	1

5 = always   4 = usually   3 = occasionally   2 = rarely   1= never

37. Do you pay close attention to sounds, words or phrases produced by native speakers that you have difficulty pronouncing to imitate them to improve your pronunciation?	5	4	3	2	1
38. When listening to native speakers of English pronouncing a word differently from you do, do you try to immediately imitate them to pronounce like them?	5	4	3	2	1
39. Do you consciously pay attention to intonation, stress, and linking words when listening to English?	5	4	3	2	1
40. When encountering a new word when reading, do you ask native speakers or look it up in a dictionary to pronounce it properly?	5	4	3	2	1
41. Do you intentionally try to improve certain sounds or words that you have difficulty pronouncing correctly?	5	4	3	2	1

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix C

Guide for self-rating

	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening
5 Educated native speaker				
4 Distinguished				
3 Superior				
2 Advanced				
1 Intermediate				
0 Novice				

Notes: ✓ = goal

0 = current level of English proficiency (self-rated)