L2 SKILLS AND THE USE OF COMPENSATION STRATEGIES: THE CASE OF ADULT LEARNERS

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Resumen

El siguiente artículo se basa en el análisis de las estrategias de compensación utilizadas por dos grupos de alumnos de inglés de nivel intermedio de la Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Moratalaz (Madrid) en el curso 2009/2010. El análisis pretende describir hasta qué punto los alumnos adultos utilizan estrategias de compensación adecuadas ante problemas de comunicación que surgen con frecuencia en cualquiera de las cuatro destrezas, y propone distintas actuaciones a adoptar en la clase de inglés derivadas de dicho análisis.

   Palabras clave: estrategias de aprendizaje, estrategias de compensación, aprendizaje de adultos

Abstract

The following article is based on the analysis of the compensation strategies used by two groups of intermediate students of English language at the Official School of Languages of Moratalaz (Madrid) in the academic year 2009/2010. Our analysis tries to describe to what extent adult learners make use of suitable learning strategies in the four skills when coming across frequent communication problems. In the light of the results obtained, some actions to put into practice in the English class are suggested.

   Key words: learning strategies, compensation strategies, adult learning

Background

The Official Schools of Languages provide an educational context for language learning within the frame of *Enseñanzas de regimen especial*. The Official Schools of Languages are state institutions which involve language learning schools and universities. One of their most characteristic features is their orientation towards adult education: the students must be 16 years or older in order to sign up for the courses[1], and most classes are made up by heterogeneous groups regarding age, cultural level or socioeconomic class.

   When asked about their reasons to learn English, the students provide multiple answers related to work, studies, travelling and culture. Most of them show a significant interest on the target language/culture and no hurry to finish their course on the assigned time. In some cases, the current social demands (needs of official certificates, job interviews …) join the different personal motivations to make these students put into practice the lifelong learning, making up heterogeneous groups regarding age but homogeneous regarding interest and motivation. University students, unemployed people, professionals of different areas and a significant number of educators make up a typical EOI[2] class.

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[1] They can sign up for the courses if they are 14 years old and do not study English at school. This circumstance is very unlikely in the case of English courses.

[2] Abbreviation of *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* in Spanish.

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The age factor

Age determines considerably the way we learn. For language teachers, age determines the choice of effective teaching methods and the creation of the appropriate environment for our learners. In the case of adult learners, creating a satisfactory environment and providing the learners with a positive reinforcement is crucial: adults are more motivated than younger students but, as we will analyze later on, they do not have a good self-concept as language learners and firmly believe that "the earlier we learn a language, the better". This perception is also supported by research on age-related factors and language learning. Since most of the EOI students have all way passed the so called "critical period" related to language learning, we, as teachers, should consider to what extent the ability to learn languages declines and/or changes as students get older, as Van Patten explains: "if you learn languages after puberty you can't learn a language like a child does" (2003:92).This assumption has been reinforced with studies which point out the problems adults experience specially when acquiring the sound system. These studies also suggest the early learning in an informal setting as the best way to acquire the phonological development above mentioned. Muñoz (2008:198) points out: "an early start in naturalistic L2 acquisition has been considered successful because of its association to native likeness". The social factors connected to age have also been considered important: "child L2 learners engage in activities and behaviors that are absolute conductive to acquisition; adolescents and adults do not" (Van Patten, 2003:93).

Other studies, however, report the opposite and some authors consider adults good foreign language learners. Despite their difficulties in the acquisition of the sound system, they learn faster in the early stages and are usually highly motivated. This is why some researchers support language learning beyond the critical period: "the age of the adult learner is not a major factor in language acquisition" (Schleppegrell, 1987).

Despite the different opinions about the impact of age when learning a second language we should consider the features which are common to all adult students. Spratt, Pulverness and Williams (2006:53) remark the following positive characteristics that maturity confers: «Adults [are] able to keep still for longer periods, can concentrate for longer periods, learn in more abstract ways, [are] usually able to control and plan their own behavior, pay attention to form and meaning in language [and] have experience of life». However, the following features might interfere negatively with foreign language learning: Adults «[are] not so willing to make mistakes or take risks and [are] aware of themselves and/or their actions». Being willing to take risks favors learning and helps students put into practice what they have learnt.

We should take into consideration then the features determined by age in order to plan and organize our teaching with activities and tasks which favour our students' way of learning. As teachers of adult students we also need to be aware of how they have learnt previously: adults have definite ideas about the best way of learning and some of them might not favour communicative language teaching; classes with a significant grammatical component might be, for example, more to their liking.

Adult learners and language learning strategies

Different researchers have studied the strategies carried out by good language learners. There are numerous definitions but all of them point out their significance in the language learning process. Following Robin's words, "language learning strategies contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly" (1975:23). She also suggested that language learning strategies include "any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage,

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retrieval and use of information" (p.19).As for the classifications they differ as much as the definitions. Most researchers divide language strategies into two groups: strategies more directly connected with mental processes and strategies more directly connected with languages. Bialystok (1978), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) have created well-known classifications of language learning strategies. For our analysis, we will follow one of the most commonly used classifications, Rebecca Oxford's. In her taxonomy, strategies are divided into two main groups: direct and indirect. Indirect language learning strategies, -metacognitive, affective and social- do not directly involve the target language. Direct strategies require the mental processing of the language. Memory and cognitive strategies are included in the group of direct language learning strategies as well as compensation strategies which are the main focus of our study. These latter as defined as the strategies "needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language" (Oxford 1990:71). Guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing are the two compensation strategies described in Oxford's taxonomy.

The choice of learning strategies depends mainly on the learner. According to research, good language learners use learning strategies more effectively. Strategic use is also determined by the learner's language level: "better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning" (Oxford and Nyikos 1989:291) It can be said then that learners use different strategies depending on their language proficiency.

It is our objective to focus on compensation strategies to analyse **whether the strategies used by intermediate learners are useful to overcome gaps in their language knowledge** or, as Gregersen and others point out (2001), **their choice of strategies might hold them back in their foreign language acquisition process.** Since the EOI students are all adults and, as we have seen, adult students are not willing to make mistakes or take risks, we could infer that their use of compensation strategies might hold them back in their foreign language acquisition process by, for example, using Spanish to overcome breakdowns in communication, abandoning a conversation or refusing to finish a task. We will call the first ones "forward strategies" and the second ones "backward strategies". They correspond respectively to the terms *achievement* and *avoidance strategies* used by Oxford.

Analysis: use of compensation strategies by adult language learners

The analysis was carried out on the first week of the academic year 2009-2010 at the EOI Moratalaz (Madrid). Students start the intermediate level of English language and could be placed within the range A2+ -B1. The teacher hands out a questionnaire[3] and explains what the analysis is for. Since some of the words /expressions might be difficult to understand, each section is explained in detail so they have a complete understanding of the questionnaire before they start answering the questions. Students should provide their answers in English though Spanish is allowed if they are trying to put complex ideas into words and if they find they do not have the appropriate syntactic structures / vocabulary to explain them. The questionnaire is divided into two sections, the first one (first page) has to do with the students' language learning background and their own image as language learners. The second section requires information about language strategies, and 10 out of the 12 questions focus on the use of compensation strategies (those enabling students to make up for limited knowledge) when reading, speaking, writing and listening in L2.

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[3] See appendix

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Results

55 students filled out the questionnaire. There are 33 female students (60%) and 22 male students (40%).Their mother tongue is Spanish in all cases. As for their ages, this chart represents their age range and their percentage within the group:

age range	number of students	percentage
15-20	13	23,63%
21-30	14	25,45%
31-40	8	14,54%
41-50	14	25,45%
Over 50	6	10,90%

*Your perception of yourself as a learner***:** *Rate yourself on a scale from one to three to indicate how successful you think you are at English (listening, speaking, reading, writing) 1= very good, 2= good, 3= poor.* (One student does not answer this part)

	1=very good	2=good	3=poor
Listening	1 out of 55 (1.81%)	21 out of 54 (38.18%)	32 out of 54(58.18%)
Speaking	1 out of 55 (1.81%)	12 out of 55 (21.81%)	41 out of 55 (74.54%)
Reading	7 out of 54 (12.72%)	39 out of 54 (70.90%)	8 out of 55 (14.54%)
Writing	7 out of 54 (12.72%)	29 out of 55 (52.72%)	18 out of 55 (32.72%)

As we can see, the percentages related to listening and speaking get the highest proportion, so the students have a worse perception as learners when they reflect upon the oral skills. Reading is the skill which offers the most positive perception, since very few students rate themselves as poor readers. As for writing, one third of the group sees themselves as poor writers, though in this case the percentage of good and very good writers provides us with more positive perceptions. We expected to find a different insight in receptive skills versus productive skills but that difference is not shown in the percentages obtained.

Within each skill we will analyse the percentage of students who use forward strategies and those who use backward strategies, adding the most common strategies described in the questionnaires. In some cases, there are not applicable answers or no answers at all; in those cases it will also be indicated.

Listening strategies

1. *If in the middle of a listening comprehension I don't understand unfamiliar English words, I ....*
   - Forward strategies: 47 students (85.45%). Most of them point out *trying to guess the meaning out of the context /surrounding words*. Other strategies suggested are the following: *I keep listening, ask the teacher, think about what they are saying, try to guess or think about the general idea, writing something similar and then check.*
   - Backward strategies: 5 students (9.09%). They *get nervous, lose track of the listening, get stuck or get lost*.
   - Not applicable / do not answer the question: 2 students (3.63%).

2. *If I got lost when listening to a CD in class or during an exam I ...*
   - Forward strategies: 39 students (70.90%) would *continue listening, try to understand the context, try understanding the second time they listen to it, keep listening, try to catch up, try to join words and relate them,* or *try to understand the next paragraph.* Some of them would use affective strategies to compensate the gap*: try to relax, calm down or "don't be afraid when I listen again"*
   - Backward strategies: 12 students (21.81%) would *ask for repetitions, feel nervous, wouldn't know what to do, would ignore part of the questions in the listening, wouldn't be able to do anything.*
   - Not applicable / do not answer the question: 4 students (7.27%).

Oral communication strategies

3. *If I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I ...*

- Forward strategies: 50 students (90.90%) would *use a different word, try to have a fluent conversation, try to find a different word, use gestures* or would *"invent" a word*.

- Backward strategies: 4 students (7.27%) would *get stuck, get lost, get nervous* and /or would *have to ask for help[4]*.

- Not applicable / do not answer the question: 1 student (1.81%).

4. *If I am not sure about an expression I am about to use in a conversation I ...*

- Forward strategies: 34 students (61.81%) would *try to find another expression with the same meaning or a synonym, use the expression anyway, use a different expression* or *describe the term with different words*.

- Backward strategies: 19 students (34.54%) would *not use the word* (avoidance), or would *need to ask the teacher or a classmate to make sure the expression is the correct one*.

- Not applicable / do not answer the question: 2 students (3.63%)

5. *My partner does not pronounce clearly so I ....*

- Forward strategies: 50 students (90.90%) would *try to help their partner -usually by correcting him/her, would ask for repetition, would keep listening would ask him/her to speak slower,* or *would correct his /her pronunciation and try to understand what is being said using the context*.

- Backward strategies: 2 students (3.63%) state that they *would not be able to understand anything*.

- Not applicable / do not answer the question: 3students (5.45%).

Reading strategies

6. *When I read a text in English and I don't understand some of the words I ...*

- Forward strategies: 55 students (100%) would *continue reading, use the context to understand the word, read again, or look up the meaning of the word in the dictionary*.

- Backward strategies: none.

7. *When I read a text in English and I don`t understand what it is about I ...*

- Forward strategies: 53 students (96.36%) would *read the text again, look up the words in the dictionary, get the general idea, try to guess the general meaning, divide the text into sections, read again, try to do their best when answering the comprehension questions* or *try to relax* (we can observe the use of an affective strategy –trying to relax- used as if it were a compensation one).

- Backward strategies: 2 students (3.63%) would *give up or acknowledge they are lost*.

Writing strategies

8. *If I can't think of an English word I need for a written assignment I ...*

- Forward strategies: 45 students (81.81%) would *change this word, think of another similar word, try to change the initial idea* or *would look up the word in the dictionary, on internet or in a different assignment*.

- Backward strategies: none.

- Other strategies / do not answer the question: 10 students (18.18%).

9. *When I need to use a pattern I have never studied before, I ...*

- Forward strategies: 26 students (47.27%) would *use a similar one -synonym; use the Internet or look up the pattern in a grammar book; ask the teacher;* they would use a significant number of direct strategies, mainly metacognitive or affective: *try to relax and try it then, think about it, try to remember, study, try to use it, try to concentrate*.

- Backward strategies: 16 students (29.09%) would *need help to perform the task, use a pattern they have studied before, get lost, would not use it, or use Spanish expressions and then translate them[5]*.

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[4] We include "ask the teacher" and "ask about the meaning of a word" as backward strategies since students interrupt the flow of the conversations, need somebody else to solve the communication breakdown, and are not able to solve the problem autonomously.

- Not applicable / do not answer the question: 13 students (23.63%)

10. *When I don`t know how to start a composition because of lack of ideas I ...*

- Forward strategies: 29 students (52.72%) would *improvise, write a first draft and then improve it, write some words related to the composition and start writing then, read the instructions again,* and then they would use metacognitive or affective strategies to compensate the problem: *try to be relaxed and think about other ideas for a moment, think for several minutes and start again, try to order their ideas first, remember previous writings.*

- Backward strategies: 20 students (36.36%) would *write the composition in Spanish and then in English, would abandon the writing and start to write later on or would try to find information in Spanish.*

- Not applicable / do not answer the question: 6 students (10.90%).

Conclusions

The questionnaire shows a negative perception of the learners in relation to their oral skills (58.18% and 74.54% rate their competence as poor in listening and speaking respectively). Taking into consideration this perception and their condition as adults (unwilling to take risks /make mistakes) we would expect more strategies which could hold them back in their learning ("backward strategies"). However, as we can see in the results the percentages do not reflect that perception in most cases: only within writing and speaking and just in the sections referred to expressions or patterns they have not used before can we find the significant presence of "backward strategies". However, even though we can positively grade the use of "forward strategies" in most cases, we consider students depend significantly on the teacher or on the reference material (grammar books, dictionaries, the Internet). This might be related to their proficiency and the fact that they do not feel autonomous enough to take risks in the use of some expressions. However, to disregard the age as a decisive factor, it could be interesting to know if younger students would take those risks.

In order to improve the most significant negative percentages about the use of compensation strategies we could suggest activities which increase risk taking based on spontaneous information: *cooperative stories in groups*, where each member of the group writes a sentence under a time limit; *activities promoting fluency instead of accuracy*: in a small group they create a short story introducing the characters shown by the teacher in a flashcard. They improvise their part of the plot and also connect their ideas with the information provided by the previous classmate; *activities involving speed*: dubbing a scene of a film or organizing vocabulary competitions within time limits; *workshop on language learning strategies:* brainstorming the classmates' ideas about learning strategies so they can get familiar with other effective ways of learning.

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[5] "Translating" is considered a backward strategy since it avoids taking risks in L2.

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APPENDIX

LEARNING STRATEGIES (1)
In this questionnaire you will find questions and statements about learning English. Please write the response / answer about yourself. Do not answer how you think you should be as a learner, or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements.

ABOUT YOU
1. Your gender: male / female
2. Your mother tongue: _____
3. How many years have you studied English?
4. Which of the following best describes your position?
Secondary School: ____
Higher Education:
Undergraduate ____
Postgraduate ____
Teacher / Lecturer / Language Instructor:
Non-Education Area: ___
5.- How old are you?
15-20   21-30   31-40   41-50   Over 50

YOUR PERCEPTION OF YOURSELF AS A LEARNER
Rate yourself on a scale from one to three to indicate how successful you think you are at English (listening, speaking, reading, writing) 1= very good, 2= good, 3= poor.

Listening ___   Speaking ___   Reading ___   Writing ___

LEARNING STRATEGIES (2)
Listening strategies
1.-If in the middle of a listening comprehension I don´t understand unfamiliar English words, I ....
2.- If I get lost when listening to a CD in class or during an exam I ...
3.- Before the listening comprehension starts I ...

Oral communication strategies
4.- If I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I ...
5.-If I am not sure about an expression I am about to use in a conversation I ....
6.-My partner does not pronounce clearly so I ....

Reading strategies
7.- When I read a text in English and I don´t understand some of the words I ...
8.- When I read a text in English and I don´t understand what it is about I ...
9.- When I am given a text for a reading comprehension on an exam I ...

Writing strategies
10.- If I can't think of an English word I need for a written assignment I ...
11.- When I need to use a pattern I have never studied before, I ...
12.- When I don`t know how to start a composition because of lack of ideas I ...

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