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LESS PROFICIENT VS. MORE PROFICIENT L2 LEARNERS' PREFERENCES FOR COMPENSATION STRATEGIES: L1-BASED, L2-BASED, AND NON-LINGUISTIC

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Abstract
This study addressed high- and low-proficiency learners' preferences for two compensation strategies: guessing and compensating for missing knowledge. To this end, the TOEFL and a compensation strategy questionnaire were administered to 229 EFL learners. The results showed there was a simple pattern in guessing strategy use in that high- proficiency learners drew more frequently on guessing strategies. However, a curvilinear pattern emerged as to the strategies of overcoming limitations. More proficient learners manifested less preference for these strategies but used them more effectively. By contrast, less proficient learners took recourse to L1-based and avoidance strategies to overcome limitations.
Key words: compensation strategies, language proficiency, guessing the meaning, compensating for missing knowledge

1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical Foundations of Compensation Strategies

The theoretical antecedents of communication strategies can be traced back to interlanguage studies of learner errors in the early 1970s. Trying to account for categories of errors mad by L2 learners, Selinker (1972) invoked the term strategies of communication in his regard of the errors emanating from the learner's inadequate grasp of the L2 system in the face of the challenge of expressing meaning in spontaneous speech.

Against this backdrop, various classifications of communication strategies were laid out in the in the 1980s (Faerch and Kasper, 1984; Poulisse, 1987; Tarone, 1997, 1981). Despite taking seemingly different approaches to communication strategies, these classifications reflect, by and large, similar premises. Tarone attaches weight to the social aspects of communication and hence construes communication strategies as social interaction. In Tarone's classification, communication strategies fall into three overall types: (1) L2-based strategies (e.g., approximation, word coinage, and circumlocution), (2) L1-based strategies (e.g., translation, language switch, appeal for assistance,

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and mimes), and (3) avoidance (e.g., word avoidance and topic avoidance). In the classification proposed by Faerch and Kasper, it is purported to adopt an alternative approach by placing communication strategies in their psychological problem-solving perspective. Faerch and Kasper divide communication strategies into two broad categories: (1) achievement (including, inter alia, Tarone's L1-based and L2-based strategies), and (2) avoidance (beings similar to Tarone's type of strategies, but under the rubric of formal and functional avoidance). There was still another classification in the 1980s based on Poulisse and her colleagues' experimental study of Dutch learners of English (Poulisse, 1987; Poulisse Bongaerts, and Kellerman, 1987; Poulisse and Schils, 1989). Poulisse terms communication strategies "conceptual" and "linguistic." Entailing the analysis and manipulation of the intended concept, the former has two subtypes: (1) holistic (covering Faerch and Kasper's achievement strategies of approximation and exemplification) and analytic (somewhat related to Tarone's L2-based strategy of circumlocution). The latter, i.e. linguistic strategies incorporate Tarone's L1- and L2-based strategies.

In the 1990s and afterward the notion of compensation strategies largely replaced communication strategies and gained currency through the work of Oxford and her colleagues (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1993, 1995; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Oxford, Ehraman, and Lavine, 1991; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, and Sumrall, 1993a, 1993b) and other researchers (Bedell, 1993; Davis and Abas, 1991; Douglas, 1992; Noguchi, 1991; Oh, 1992; Phillips, 1991; Si-Qing, 1990; Watanabe, 1990). The notion achieved a status within the broader framework of language learning strategies and thereby it began to be explored from many vantage points: its nature, its frequency of use, its relation with other learning strategies, its use in various cultures and linguistic settings, and the relationship of its use with the proficiency level, gender, motivation, and learning style of learners.

1.2. Compensation Strategy Use and L2 Proficiency

A large bulk of research on communication strategies in the 1990s and the early 2000s (e.g., Bremner, 1999; Park, 1997; Tajeddin, 2001) has employed Oxford's (1990) SILL. Park (1997) found that compensation strategies were significantly correlated with language proficiency measured by the TOEFL as a standardized proficiency test, rather than subject self-reporting. However, strategy use followed a complex pattern in that the rate of strategy use in the process of L2 learning was not totally compatible with its weight for leading to success on language proficiency. Bremner (1999) used the 50-item SILL to survey strategy use, including the use of compensation strategies, written tasks, and discrete-item tests. He found a significant positive correlation between compensation strategy use and language

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proficiency. Bremner's study is significant on account that it is one of those rare studies (MacIntyre, 1994; Green and Oxford, 1995) investigating the mutual relationship between the two variables, i.e. Bremner regarded strategy use and language proficiency as both dependent and independent variables. Nevertheless, he did not find sufficient evidence to resolve the issue of the direction of causality.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

As many as 950 EFL learners studying at three language centers participated in the initial phase of the study. They were divided into three groups with reference to their performance on the TOEFL as the measure of language proficiency. As the focus of the study was on the compensation strategy preferences of low- and high-proficiency learners, the participants falling within the low-level range (TOEFL scores, 400 and below) and those falling within the high-level range (TOEFL scores, 550 and above) were selected, and the participants in the middle of the range (TOEFL scores, 401-549) were not taken into account. The subjects were comprised of 72 males and 157 females. The average age of the participants was about 23.

2.2. Instruments

The instruments employed to collect data were a modified version of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (the 80-item version) and a sample version of the ETS TOEFL. The SILL is a questionnaire for the self-reporting preferences for six categories of language learning strategies. The compensation strategy section of the modified SILL consisted of 9 items: L2-based (items 1, 2, 3, 7), L1-based (item 6), avoidance (items 8, 9), and non-linguistic (items 4, 5). The participants responded to each item in the SILL on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Never" to "always."

The TOEFL was administered to select the participants falling into low and high groups and to find the relationship between the proficiency level and compensation strategy use. The TOEFL used in this study was an official sample test published in 1998 by ETS. It consisted of three sections of three sections: (1) Listening Comprehension (50 items), (2) Structure and Written Expression (40 items), and (3) Reading Comprehension (50 items). TOEFL scores of 400 and below were considered as low and TOEFL scores 500 and above as high.

2.3. Data Collection

The TOEFL was administered according to the ETS guidelines. The participants had the amount of time recommended by ETS to take the 140-item test. All efforts were made to ensure that the participants would not

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spend the time allocated for one section of the TOEFL on any other section. Next, strategy questionnaires were distributed among the participants, who were asked to complete them at home and return them within a week.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data from the TOEFL were used to divide the participants into low and high groups. The data from the questionnaire were subjected to various analyses to calculate the means for the use of total strategies and each strategy item. The one-way ANOVA was employed to address the effect of proficiency on strategy use.

3. Results

In order to assess the degree of strategy use, means were calculated in the total sample and across proficiency levels. With regard to strategy use in the total sample (Table 1), participant used compensation strategies at the medium level (M=3.19). The most preferred strategies were "guessing intelligently" (M=4.12, high) and "using circumlocution."(M=3.78, high). The least preferred ones were "switching to the mother tongue" (M=2.51) and "predicting the upcoming message" (M=2.85). In terms of strategy categories, the means show that the most preferred strategies were L2-based, and least-preferred ones were a mixture of non-linguistic and L2-based strategies.

3.1. Strategy Use by Proficiency

Although the high group (M=3.22) reported slightly more frequently use of compensation strategies that did the low group (M=3.18), the difference was not statistically significant (F=.214, df=1, p<.644). Table 2 shows mean performance in the two groups.

The one-way ANOVA was run to measure variation in strategy use by proficiency. Although proficiency fell short of having any significant effect on total strategy use the analysis of variance applied to individual strategies showed that there was a significant effect as to each compensation strategy except for the two paralinguistic strategies of "using mime or gesture" and "getting help."

The significant effect of proficiency on strategy use, however, followed a complex pattern in that higher proficiency had both positive and negative effects on the rate of strategy use. This is captured below.

1. Guessing intelligently H>L
2. Not looking up every word H>L
3. Predicting the oncoming message H>L
4. Switching to the mother tongue L>H

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5. Using a circumlocution, etc. H>L
6. Using a general sound, etc. L>H
7. Avoiding communication L>H

The data show that increased proficiency resulted in the significantly higher use of L2-based strategies and discouraged the use of L1-based and avoidance strategies. In other words, the low-proficiency group manifested significantly more preference for L1-based and avoidance strategies.

4. Discussion

In this study, the data bear evidence to the lack of any significant variation in total strategy use by proficiency. This is contrary to a number of studies (e.g., Green and Oxford, 1995), which showed significant relationship between proficiency and the compensation category of strategies.

The study of strategy use at the level of individual items also indicates that there is progression from L1- and avoidance-based strategies to L2-based and guessing strategies. This arises from proficient learners' movement beyond the threshold level to capitalize on linguistic clues to more guesses and to use general L2-based resources to compensate for deficiency in a particular area.

Sex	total	Var1	Var2	Var3	Var4	Var5	Var6	Var7	Var8	Var9
Total	3.19	4.12	3.06	2.85	2.95	3.35	2.51	3.78	3.08	3.03
M	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229
N	.525	.955	1.209	1.114	1.209	1.072	1.279	1.029	1.187	1.254
SD										

Table 1: The mean use of compensatory strategies in the total sample

Total										
M	3.19	4.12	3.06	2.85	2.95	3.35	2.51	3.78	3.08	3.03
N	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229	229
SD	.525	.955	1.209	1.114	1.209	1.072	1.279	1.029	1.187	1.254
group	total	Var0033	Var0034	Var0035	Var0036	Var0037	Var0038	Var0039	Var0040	Var0041
Low										
M	3.17	3.98	2.74	2.62	2.93	3.40	2.75	3.68	3.25	3.24
N	157	157	157	157	157	157	157	157	157	157
SD	.556	1.022	1.167	1.094	1.267	1.120	1.367	1.051	1.160	1.287
High										
M	3.22	4.42	3.76	3.35	2.99	3.24	1.97	4.00	2.71	2.58
N	72	72	72	72	72	72	72	72	72	72
SD	.450	.707	.986	.995	1.081	.957	.855	.949	1.168	1.058

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Table 2: The mean use of compensatory strategies in low and high groups

Source	Type lll Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	.475a	1	.158	.571	.635
Intercept	1984.202	1	1984.202	7150.655	.000
group	.059	1	.259	.214	.644
Error	62.434	225	.277		
Total	2395.654	229			
Corrected Total	62.909	228			

a. R Squared = .008 (Adjusted R Squared = .006)

Table 3: One-way ANOVA for the effect of language proficiency on compensatory strategy use

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