

HOW SPANISH IS LEARNT MATTERS: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' USE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Dr. Luis Lancho Perea - email: luis.lanchoperea@up.ac.za
Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures - University of Pretoria.

ABSTRACT

This study explored how Spanish is learnt in a South African university by analysing students' self-reports on the use of language learning strategies. A mixed methods design was used in this study. Considering that learning a foreign language poses particular and distinct challenges (as opposed to learning a second language), special attention was paid to the aspects related to the learners' ability to learn and the actions that they undertake to self-regulate their learning. The study found that the most frequently used strategies as perceived by students were compensation and metacognitive strategies. However, the study only found a statistically significant positive correlation between the perceived use of metacognitive strategies and the final grades received in the course for beginners. Students who intended to continue studying Spanish also reported using statistically significantly more metacognitive strategies than those who eventually passed the course for beginners but did not continue.

Keywords: Language learning strategies; foreign language learning; foreign language teaching; metacognitive strategies; mixed methods; Spanish beginners

1. INTRODUCTION

This study was motivated by the researcher's observation that a considerable number of students struggled to complete the Spanish course for beginners, and only a few students continued studying Spanish until the third year. Although reasonable and consistent efforts were made in the past to improve the statistical figures (efforts such as the implementation of new teaching methods, the revision of the assessment criteria, the adoption of new textbooks, more tutoring and consulting hours, as well as the hiring of special tutors), it was found that they made no substantial difference to the pass and throughput rates. This questioned the researcher's initial assumption that students knew reasonably well how to approach the learning of a foreign language (FL) because they had already studied a second language at school "to be able to interact effectively with other South Africans", as mandated by the National Curriculum (Department of Education 2002, 9). This assumption did not take into account all the implications of the fact that students in FL settings do not have as much exposure to the target language as students who study a second language (L2) do.

Though the definitions of a FL and a L2 may overlap in monolingual countries, this does not necessarily occur in multilingual countries like South Africa. Technically speaking, a L2 is a language that "is spoken in the community where the language learning is taking place" (Cohen 2011, 8). This means that a L2 has immediate social and communicative functions within the country where it is

learnt, allowing for opportunities to practise it, whereas the learning and use of a FL is often limited to the classroom setting and it is neither used in the community nor in the country where it is taught (Oxford 1990, 6). Because of this, opportunities for practising a FL, like Spanish in South Africa, are limited and authentic materials and resources are usually not readily available (Rao 2006, 498).

The researcher also observed that students who successfully passed and carried on until the third year were not necessarily high achievers in FL learning. They were just committed students working intelligently and consistently, and who were making use of a variety of learning strategies that they considered appropriate to complete specific language tasks at different points in time. This led the researcher to investigate what the literature says about successful language learning.

Rubin's initial claim (1975, 42) that "if we knew more about what the 'successful learners' did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record" is widely supported in the literature (Naiman et al. 1978, 8, Chamot 2004, 14, Griffiths 2008, 95, Lai 2009, 255). However, it has been debated and criticised by some researchers who have questioned the fundamental assumption of this claim – that passing on the behaviours of successful learners to less successful learners is an achievable process mainly dependent on instruction (Grenfell and Macaro 2007, 12).

Though the researcher acknowledges that other individual variables such as multiple intelligences and learning styles can play a critical role in successful learning, this article limited its scope by focusing on the language learning strategy construct.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

After reviewing the literature, and inspired by the same motives that led Rubin (1975) to write her highly cited article titled *What the 'good language learner' can teach us*, the researcher chose to study the use of language learning strategies (LLS) by students studying Spanish at undergraduate level and its potential contributions towards the enhancement of learning Spanish as a FL among university learners.

Based on the work of Griffiths (2008) that shows that the historical attempt to identify a single type of successful language learner has given way to an understanding of many different types of successful language learners from which multiple lessons can be learnt (Oxford 2011, 262, Oxford, Rubin, et al. 2014, 31), this study attempted to gain a better understanding of the self-reported use of LLS at the beginner level. Three research questions guided the study.

- (1) What is the profile of students that studied Spanish in first year in 2014?
- (2) What LLS do they perceive and report using?
- (3) What factors do they report affecting their perceived use of LLS?

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Since the publication of Rubin's article in 1975, LLS researchers have made important contributions to the field of FL learning. Studies focusing on language learning see learning as a conscious process, and at the heart of these studies lies the concept of "learning to learn". Some of these studies focus on the pivotal role of using LLS, as "language learning involves much more than teacher and learners simply interacting with one another" (Macaro 2001, 1), learning new vocabulary, or developing a full command of grammar rules within a classroom setting. Although research on LLS has provided inconclusive and, in some cases, contradictory results, this study was inspired by research findings that suggest that the use of LLS seem to have the potential to make the learning experience more effective and enjoyable (Oxford, Griffiths, et al. 2014, 11).

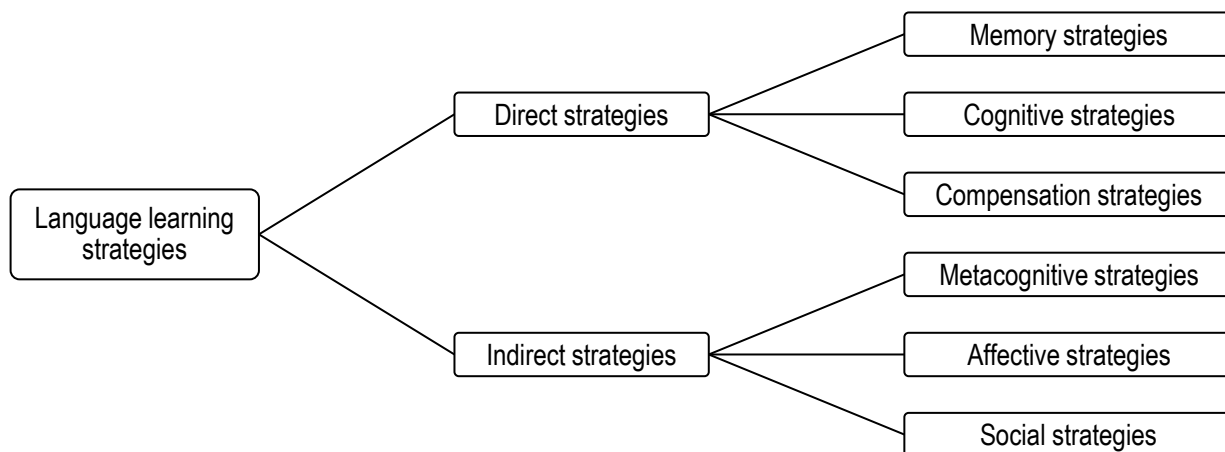
Although Oxford (1990, 8) defined LLS as the use of "specific actions", other scholars have questioned the precise nature of these "specific actions" to be counted as learning strategies, as not all of them are observable and easy to distinguish. Some strategies are behavioural, while others are mental and not directly observable (Ellis 2008, 705). Macaro (2006, 325) does not *define* strategies but *describes* them as having a series of essential features, such as a goal, a learning situation, and a mental action. For him, strategies are "more appropriately described in terms of thinking rather than doing" (Macaro 2006, 327); that is, "more cognitive in nature than behavioural." (Ellis 2008, 705).

However, Griffiths and Oxford (2014, 2) argue that in order to conduct research, it is essential to have a clear understanding and a working definition of the construct being researched. They and other scholars in the field (Oxford, Griffiths, et al. 2014, 11) have agreed on defining learning strategies as "the steps or actions that learners consciously take to improve and regulate their own language learning." One of the key features of this definition is that it seeks to draw attention to what learners do as opposed to focusing on what teachers do, and makes the construct a more clearly defined topic to be researched. Moreover, the element of choice is important because it is what gives a strategy its special character (Cohen 2011, 7). According to Takač (2008, 51), "the element of choice seems to be one of the key features" because it shows a clear understanding that LLS have the potential to intentionally make learning more effective, and by doing so, positively influence the motivational state of the learner. Although the notion of consciousness is still a controversial issue, it is what distinguishes strategies from processes or actions that are not necessarily strategic (Cohen 2011, 7).

When discussing LLS, two taxonomies are cited most commonly among researchers: O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy (1990) and Oxford's taxonomy (1990). The former differentiates and classifies strategies according to their function, namely cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and socio-affective learning strategies (Cohen, 2011, 682). This study chose Oxford's taxonomy because it differentiates between social and affective strategies, and further categorises cognitive strategies into

memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. Oxford’s taxonomy has been regarded by some scholars as a superior classification of strategies because it is more comprehensive and detailed than the other classification models, and also precise and systematic in accounting for the variety of strategies reported by language learners (Chamot 2004, 16-17, Alhaisoni 2012, 116-117, Chang and Liu 2013, 199). It distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies and is further subdivided as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Oxford’s taxonomy
 Source: Oxford (1990, 16)



As described by Oxford (1990), direct strategies are directly involved with the target language and require mental processing. Indirect strategies are used to “manage and support language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language [...] through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy, and other means.” (Oxford 1990, 135,151)

Memory strategies have a highly specific function: they help students to store new information and then retrieve it when needed for communication. They reflect simple principles (such as arranging things in order, making associations, and reviewing) that are personally meaningful to the learners and have significance to them. Memory strategies can be clustered into four strategy sets: creating mental linkages to make the material easier to remember, applying images and sounds to trigger the remembering process, reviewing to increase the chances of remembering, and employing action for those who prefer kinaesthetic or tactile modes of learning (Oxford 1990, 38-40). The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning designed by Oxford (1990, 283), from here onwards referred to as Oxford’s SILL, provides a list of strategies that fall under this category such as “creating associations between new material and what the student already knows” or “using flashcards with the new word on one side and the definition or other information on the other.”

Cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language and vary significantly from each other. They are unified by a common function: manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner, and include repeating, analysing expressions, and summarising. Cognitive strategies can be clustered into four strategy sets: strategies for practising, which are essential for learning; strategies for receiving and sending messages, which involve comprehension and production; strategies for analysing and reasoning, which make evident the existence of a hybrid form of language (called interlanguage) that lies somewhere between the native language and the target language; and strategies for creating structure for input and output, which are necessary for both comprehension and production (Oxford 1990, 43-47). An example of a cognitive strategy is when students find the meaning of a word by dividing the word into parts which they understand separately, or by looking for patterns in the new language (Oxford's SILL).

Compensation strategies enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production, despite limitations or inadequate repertoire of grammar and especially of vocabulary. They can be clustered into two sets: guessing intelligently in listening and reading, and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Learners skilled in such strategies sometimes communicate better than learners who have a larger vocabulary and know more linguistic structures (Oxford 1990, 47-51). An example of a compensation strategy is when students guess the general meaning by using any clue they find, such as clues from the context or situation (Oxford's SILL).

Metacognitive strategies – which involve knowledge of one's own cognitive processes and the ability to control them (White 1999, 38, Lewalter 2003, 179) – can be described as actions that allow learners to regulate their own cognition with the purpose of coordinating their own learning process. They involve functions such as focusing, arranging, planning and evaluating. These strategies are essential for successful language learning and include three sets of strategies: (1) strategies to focus and centre learning in order to converge attention and energy on specific aspects; (2) strategies to arrange and organise learning in an efficient and effective way to get the most out of language learning; and (3) strategies to self-evaluate and self-monitor learning in order to check one's own language performance (Yang 2009, 135, Oxford 1990, 135-138,153). These strategies also contain the aspect of learners' awareness of their own strategy use (Takač 2008, 53). An example of a metacognitive strategy is when students plan specific goals for learning or when they arrange their schedule to study and practice the new language consistently, not just when there is the pressure of a test (Oxford's SILL).

Affective strategies deal with the emotions, attitudes, motivations and values that influence language learning. "The affective side of the learner is probably one of the biggest influences on language learning success or failure" (Oxford 1990, 135-138, 140). Successful learners are often those who know how to regulate their emotions to foster and consolidate learning. Affective strategies can be clustered

into strategies for lowering anxiety, strategies for encouraging oneself, and strategies for measuring emotional temperature. An example of an affective strategy is when students try to relax whenever they feel anxious and encourage themselves to continue trying hard in language learning (Oxford's SILL).

Social strategies consider that “language is a form of social behaviour” and thus that learning a language necessarily involves other people. Social interactions are important in this process and learners gain great benefit from them. Social strategies can be clustered into (1) strategies for asking questions for clarification, verification or correction that help learners get closer to their intended meaning; (2) strategies for cooperating with others; and (3) empathising with others by developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings (Oxford 1990, 144-147). An example of a social strategy is when students work with other students to practice, review, or share information (Oxford's SILL).

4. LEARNING SPANISH IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Spanish is considered a FL (not a L2) in South Africa because it is neither widely nor locally used in the country by its people, their media or educational institutions. Under such circumstances, the learning of Spanish mostly takes place in the classroom as students have limited opportunities outside the classroom to engage in using the target language (Marsh 2012, 1). There are no official figures available on how many people speak Spanish in South Africa. The most reliable information available dates from 2005. According to Rowe and Maree (2005), the Spanish-speaking community residing in South Africa in 2005 consisted of almost 6000 people. In a country with a population of approximately 46.9 million people in 2005 (Statistics South Africa 2005, 9), 6000 native speakers of Spanish represented approximately 0.0128 per cent of the population. This means that, in 2005, the chances of finding a native Spanish speaker to communicate with were 1 in 7815.

In the particular case of the University of Pretoria where this research was conducted, Spanish constitutes a key language course in programmes such as BA Languages, International and Political Studies, and International Relations. However, the majority of students taking the Spanish course for beginners are from other programmes and take it as an elective (non-compulsory) course, one that students freely choose to meet the credit requirements of their degree. In 2014, according to official figures (International Students Division 2015), there were 62275 registered students at the University of Pretoria, from which only 619 (representing one per cent of the total) were registered in a FL course. In that year, it was found that among all the FL courses offered at first-year level, French (57%) was the most studied, followed by Spanish (21%), German (13%), and Portuguese (9%).

5. METHODOLOGY

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the matter being investigated, the entire group of Spanish beginners who started in 2014 were invited to participate in this study. However, only students who had no previous knowledge of Spanish and whose parents were not native speakers of the language were included in the study. This was because the purpose of this research was to investigate the evolution of self-reported use of LLS in students that started as absolute beginners. The study was conducted with 61 students in the first year. A mixed methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011, 71) was used in this research. This design was considered appropriate to follow because it utilised the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell 2009, 203) and provided a more complete picture of the phenomenon being studied (Barbour 2014, 206).

Quantitative data were gathered by the administration of Oxford's SILL (Version 5.1) – an 80-item questionnaire that uses Likert-scaled ratings for each strategy item ranging from 1 to 5, with the poles being “never or almost never” and “always or almost always”. Qualitative data were gathered by semi-structured interviews that were conducted after the administration of the SILL. Students were interviewed individually by the researcher, who was not their lecturer. The questions asked were based on the highest and lowest scoring LLS items of the SILL and these answers provided rich information on the when, the how, the how often, the why, and under what circumstances LLS were used. Students were reminded that their participation in the study was voluntary and that confidentiality was guaranteed. The data were analysed in detail by the researcher to ensure that the interviews and subsequent analysis thereof were thorough and unbiased. The use of complementary research methods and in-depth descriptions of LLS used helped to understand the quantitative findings obtained by Oxford's SILL (Griffiths and Oxford 2014, 3), specifically because there has been an ongoing concern as to the limitations of self-reported instruments used to access learners' mental processing (White, Schramm, and Chamot 2007, 93).

As with many previous LLS studies that have analysed quantitative data generated by Oxford's SILL, this study made use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to generate tabulated reports, charts and plots of distributions, and to perform descriptive statistics and statistical analyses. Data collected by Oxford's SILL were treated as non-parametric and were analysed using non-parametric statistical tests, such as Spearman's correlation coefficient and Mann-Whitney U tests. Qualitative data originating from the interviews were analysed by establishing units of analysis and grouping the units into categories. Relationships were sought and established between emerging categories in order to make speculative inferences and generate theoretical statements derived from the data (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 183-185, Sampieri et al. 2014, 418).

6. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of the findings and subsequent discussion thereof follows the order in which the research questions were introduced because it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher, preserves the coherence of the material, and provides a collective answer to the research questions (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 468).

6.1. What is the profile of students that studied Spanish in first year in 2014?

The students came from different programmes and not necessarily from the BA Languages programme (see Table 1). Females outnumbered males; there were 45 females and 16 males. English was the L1/L2 for all students, Afrikaans was the L1/L2 for 64 per cent of the students, and an African language was the L1/L2 for 17.8 per cent of the students (see Table 2).

Table 1: Academic programmes students came from

Academic programmes	First year 2014
BA Languages	11
International Studies/Relations	5
Other programmes	45
TOTAL	61

Table 2: First or second language spoken

First or second language	First year 2014
English	100%
Afrikaans	64%
An African language	17.8%
A foreign language	17.6%

As for the reasons for learning Spanish, both males and females regarded travelling, working or studying overseas as their primary reasons. However, males regarded “reputation of Spanish” as their secondary reason, whereas females regarded “passion for the language” as their secondary reason.

The mean age of the first-year group was 20 years old. The data showed that 63.9 per cent of the students were in their first year of enrolment at university level. The data also showed that students with two years of enrolment had a higher pass rate for the first-year course (93%) than students with one year of enrolment (61.5%). Analysis of the data using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test found that students with two years of enrolment at university level performed statistically significantly better than students with one year of enrolment ($p < .05$) (see Table 3). A possible explanation is that longer exposure to academic requirements may contribute to the development of metacognitive skills which may have a positive impact on learning performance.

Table 3: Statistical analysis of enrolment at university level and performance in first year (2014)

	Final mark in the course
Mann-Whitney U	162.000
Z	-2.521
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.012
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.011
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.005
Point Probability	.000

All students in the researched group spoke at least two languages. Did those who spoke three or more languages earn better final marks for the first-year Spanish course than those who only spoke two languages? Statistical analysis showed that these two groups performed similarly. The Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant differences between these two groups in either the one or two tailed tests ($p > .05$). Also, contrary to what was expected, students who reported some sort of previous knowledge of Spanish completed the course for beginners with an average final grade lower than the rest (see Table 4). This could be because students who start the course with previous knowledge of Spanish tend to rely primarily on what they already know about the language instead of focusing on developing the metacognitive skills required to learn a foreign language. Students who report previous knowledge usually outperform in the beginning, but underperform in the long run.

Table 4: Average first-year marks (2014) according to previous knowledge of Spanish

Level of previous knowledge of Spanish	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No knowledge	60.89	45	16.598
Basic or intermediate knowledge	56.63	16	22.867

6.2. What language learning strategies do students perceive and report using?

Since successful learners do not necessarily share common characteristics, and taking into account that they differ from each other in strategy choice and their perceptions about frequency of strategy use, the following findings are presented below.

Did students who reported overall high use of LLS earn higher final grades in the Spanish course for beginners compared to other students? Although, on average, students who passed the course for beginners reported higher frequency of strategy use than students who failed, these differences were not found to be statistically significant. When looking closer at the data, it was found that compensation and metacognitive strategies were the perceived strategy categories most frequently used (see Table 5). Oxford's SILL lists eight compensation strategies and 16 metacognitive strategies among its 80 items. The analysis of the responses showed that among the 30 most perceived used strategy items, 10 were metacognitive strategies, but only three were compensation strategies. This showed that between these two categories, the category of metacognitive strategies was the one with the highest number of specific strategy items perceived as highly frequently used.

Table 5: Average reported frequency use of strategy categories in first year (2014)

Strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Compensation	61	3.596	.4527
Metacognitive	61	3.512	.5936
Cognitive	61	3.447	.5185
Social	61	3.308	.6729
Memory	61	3.012	.5673
Affective	61	2.918	.6893
OVERALL	61	3.3314	.44630

Spearman's correlation coefficient test was conducted to analyse correlation between averages of reported perceived frequency use of strategies and final grades in Spanish (see Table 6). A positive correlation was found ($p < .05$) between the final grades in Spanish and the reported perceived use of metacognitive strategies. This finding was consistent with a study conducted by Dreyer and Oxford (1996, 71) who found that among Afrikaans students of English, the reported perceived use of metacognitive strategies seemingly predicted proficiency in English. Though it is not possible to assert that students who report low frequency of strategy use fail and that students who report high frequency use pass, it seems plausible to assert that students who perceive and report higher frequency of metacognitive strategy use are likely to earn higher grades in the course for beginners.

Table 6: Spearman's correlation coefficient test between averages of reported perceived frequency use of strategies and final marks in Spanish in first year (2014)

	Correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Memory	-.023	.858	61
Cognitive	.142	.275	61
Compensation	.030	.819	61
Metacognitive	.267*	.037	61
Affective	-.182	.161	61
Social	.119	.363	61

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

The data also showed that students who reported previous experience in learning another FL (other than Spanish) received grades, on average, slightly higher in the course for beginners than those who reported no previous experience in learning a FL (see Table 7).

Table 7: Academic achievement and previous experience in learning a FL in first year (2014)

Previous experience in learning a FL	Number of students	Average grade	Std. Deviation
Yes	23	64.78	17.323
No	38	56.74	18.491
Total	61	59.77	18.340

Taking into account the above results, it seems that previous experience in learning a FL acts, to some extent, as an “advance organiser”, which can be described as a tool to bridge the gap between established knowledge and new knowledge (Ausubel 2000, 11). Previous FL learning experience seems to play a mediating role by bridging the gap between what students already know (how to learn a FL) and what they are about to learn (Spanish) and, in doing so, enables students to learn more actively and expeditiously (Yang 2014, 349). It was also found that first-year students who decided to continue studying Spanish reported in the first year that they were using metacognitive strategies statistically significantly more than those who eventually passed the first year course but opted not to continue (see Table 8). This finding could suggest that the academic self-esteem and commitment to continue learning Spanish of those who decided to continue was reinforced in their first year by successfully using metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.

Table 8: Test for statistically significant differences between students who continued and did not continue studying Spanish at the end of 2014

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Mann-Whitney U	351.500	306.500	345.500	277.500	363.000	338.500
Wilcoxon W	1212.500	1167.500	555.500	1138.500	573.000	1199.500
Z	-.900	-1.591	-.998	-2.039	-.724	-1.100
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.368	.112	.318	.041	.469	.271
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.373	.113	.323	.041	.474	.275

What factors do students report affecting their perceived use of language learning strategies?

Multiple factors have been identified that affect strategy choice and perceived use of strategies (1990, 13). However, based on the data provided by the students and the analysis thereof, and taking into account the order in which students mentioned the factors, it was found that students’ choice and perceived frequency of strategy use were influenced by the advice provided by the lecturer, specifically in the way students approached texts in the target language. For instance, they were advised by their lecturer that it was unnecessary to know every single word in order to process information. They reported that they came to realise that texts could be deconstructed by identifying keywords as well as key linguistic structures, and then reconstructed to provide enough meaning to answer specific comprehension questions.

The lecturer's way of teaching was also reported to affect the perceived use of the cognitive strategy of note-taking and the metacognitive strategy of organising and reorganising content knowledge in the language learning notebook. Nevertheless, the lecturer's way of teaching was not affecting all students in the same way (Ellis 2008:711). The qualitative data showed that the impact of a lecturer that did not use the whiteboard for explanations in class was not the same on all students. In some cases, it caused students to report a decrease in the frequency use of taking notes, but in other cases, it forced them to listen carefully in order to take notes.

The lecturer's attitude towards the diverse array of Hispanic cultures was also reported as influencing the perceived frequency use of social strategies. Though the students were not specifically asked to do so, during the qualitative interviews, they compared their native Spanish lecturers to their non-native (but proficient) Spanish lecturers. Some students mentioned during these interviews that they were capable of perceiving the extent to which a lecturer appreciated, loved or engaged with Hispanic cultures in general, and in particular with their home country. Taking into account that the goal for students is to develop communicative competence and considering Canale's (1983) inclusion of the sociolinguistic domain, which is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use (Council of Europe 2001, 118), the researcher believes that having a native speaker as a lecturer gives the students the opportunity to further develop intercultural understanding and become more aware of others' thoughts and, in doing so, enables students to empathise with others – a key component of Oxford's definition of social strategies (Oxford 1990, 145).

The analysis also showed a clear distinction between those who intended to continue studying Spanish and those who did not. Those who intended to continue reported that they created and engaged in a variety of activities outside the classroom to immerse themselves in the language and, in doing so, counterbalanced the lack of exposure to Spanish. These activities included going home and rewriting the notes they had taken in class; listening to radio over the Internet; singing songs (with lyrics) in Spanish; watching movies with subtitles in Spanish; reading Spanish newspapers on the Internet; setting their cell phones to Spanish; and using Spanish to send messages to each other or more proficient Spanish speakers. This showed that they were proactive and seemed to be more skilful in arranging and planning their language learning process (Oxford 1990, 135). Those who did not intend to continue studying Spanish reported that they were mainly focusing their work on the activities suggested in the textbook and not doing much to engage in activities related to the language outside the classroom. This different behaviour outside the classroom could be explained not only by the level of motivation to learn Spanish, but could also reveal the reasons why students registered for the course. The fact that some students reported that their main goal was to meet the first-year elective

credit requirement and not necessarily to carry on learning Spanish until the third year, seems to show that their motivation was more instrumental and not necessarily to learn the language per se.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found a statistically significant positive correlation between the perceived use of metacognitive strategies and the final grades received in the course for beginners, which leads to the conclusion that focus should not only be placed on the lecturers' efficiency to teach, but also on the students' efficacy to understand what it takes to learn and regulate their learning process, a key feature of metacognitive strategies. However, further research needs to be conducted to determine whether this positive correlation shows an actual cause-effect relationship between these two variables. This study has also shown that there are certain actions that seem to play a positive role in FL learning, irrespective of the types of students that put them into practice. These actions involve active participation by students in their learning and self-regulation thereof, and are described in the literature within the domain of metacognitive strategies.

The lecturer's way of teaching was reported to affect students' perceived use of certain strategies, however not all students were affected in the same way. The fact that learners can perform equally well, but approach learning differently is consistent with the understanding that there are different types of successful language learners, from which multiple lessons can be learnt (Oxford 2011, 262, Oxford, Rubin, et al. 2014, 31).

The fact that some students were capable of perceiving differences between lecturers who were and were not native Spanish speakers highlights the importance of the social dimension of language. Being fluent and highly proficient in the target language was not sufficient to make students passionate about a Hispanic culture, or to encourage students to learn about the culture of the places where the target language is spoken. It seems advisable to start the journey of learning a foreign language with lecturers who are native speakers to foster the development of intercultural understanding and enable students to empathise with others.

In order to try to reduce the dropout rate of the course and increase the pass rate at first year level, more time and effort should be invested in encouraging student-centred learning approaches instead of solely focusing on teacher-centred approaches. Students need to be encouraged to think about their learning process with the intention to understand the way they learn in order to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning by themselves from the beginning of their first year. Training in the use of metacognitive strategies in FL learning should be introduced to all first-year students to increase the likelihood of successful completion of the first-year Spanish course. For

instance, students should be made aware of managing the intervals between reviewing previous work. One such management method is structured reviewing, which involves “reviewing in carefully spaced intervals, at first close together and then more widely spaced apart” (Oxford 1990, 42) in order to optimise retention. Students should also be provided with suggestions concerning how they can learn and practice the target language in non-formal settings outside the classroom. They need to realise that long-lasting learning takes place not only inside the classroom, but also outside of it when they practise what they have learnt in class.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of the study was the possibility that students did not report accurately (when answering Oxford’s SILL) or comprehensively (when answering the questions in the interviews). The researcher was fully aware that LLS research depends on the learners' ability and willingness to describe the actions they consciously take to improve and regulate their own language learning (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995:5)

Taking into account that strategies were not always observable, the researcher worked with the information that was obtainable which, despite the limitations, provided useful data for analysis. This study acknowledges that Oxford’s SILL only quantifies the perceived use of LLS and does not say much about the motivations and quality of strategy use (Ellis 2008:706). For this reason, follow-up interviews were conducted in order to better understand the quantitative data generated by the administration of Oxford’s SILL.

A brief explanation of what LLS were and how they were classified always preceded the administration of the questionnaire to decrease the possibility of responding incorrectly to Oxford’s SILL. This was done carefully to minimise the impact on students’ self-reporting. However, the potential risk that the participants were subject to “self-reporting social-desirability biases in responses, over-subjectivity, inability to verbalise clearly, and low self-awareness” (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995:2) was always present in the study.

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