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Learning Strategies and Age

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Abstract

Language learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to enhance the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information but also specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.

Over the last thirty years significant research findings within the field of language learning and teaching have verified that not only teachers and teaching, but also learners play a significant role in language acquisition. More emphasis has been put on the learner, the way they process new information and the strategies and techniques they employ to organize, internalize and utilize new knowledge. This paper looks into correlation between language learning strategies and age.

Key words: language learning strategies, age factor, strategy training, assessment tools, Oxford, O'Malley, SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning)

Introduction

Language learning strategies are one of the central factors in determining the ways in which learners acquire a new language and to what extent their performance is successful.

Over the last thirty years significant research findings within the field of language learning and teaching have verified that not only teachers and teaching, but also learners play a significant role in language acquisition. More emphasis has been put on the learner, the way they process new information and the strategies and techniques they employ to organize, internalize and utilize new knowledge.

Researchers have tried to investigate the way different variables affect the use of language learning strategies and in this paper the focus will be on the age factor. Despite a popular belief ‘the younger the better’ when it comes to language learning, research which does not fully support the critical period hypothesis in second language acquisition has been undertaken in many countries. Among other topics, the researchers have been interested in the issue of whether adult foreign or second language (L2) learners use similar learning strategies as young L2 learners. Therefore, strategy training has become an important part of planning a language course.

This paper will review the theoretical background of language learning strategies and present major taxonomies of learning strategies provided by researchers such as Oxford, Rubin and O’Malley. Also, it will discuss the importance of strategy training and some studies of the effects of this kind of training. There are many variables affecting language learning strategy choice and this paper looks into one of them specifically – the age of language learners.

In the second part of the paper, the research carried out among two different age groups will demonstrate the differences in language learning strategies use by twelve- and seventeen-year-old students.

In the last section of the paper, a brief conclusion is provided based on the results of this research, but also in relation to the findings of the previous studies in the area of language learning strategies.

1. Learning Strategies

In learning a new language or, in fact, learning in general, it is not unusual for some people to go about it in an easy and successful way. However, others may face quite a number of obstacles on their way of acquiring new knowledge. The answer to the question “why is that so” can partly be given by investigating learning strategies.

When it comes to language, some researchers as O’Malley and Chamot name these strategies “learning strategies” while Oxford uses the term “language learning strategies”. It should as well be mentioned that there is a difference between a second and a foreign language. According to Oxford (2003) a second language is the language studied in an environment where that language is used as the main vehicle of everyday communication and plenty of input is provided. A foreign language is studied in the setting where it is not the primary vehicle for daily conversation and in that case the input is restricted.

Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are defined by numerous researchers. Oxford (1990) expanded the definition of learning strategies as being operations employed by the learner to enhance the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information by adding that learning strategies are also “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990: 8).

Wenden (1987) says that learning strategies are different operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning. Also, Williams & Burden (1997) indicated that students, when involved in a learning task, use several resources in different ways to finish or solve the task. By consciously choosing and using strategies according to one’s learning style and appropriate for a certain task, these strategies become a helpful mechanism for conscious and planned self-regulation of learning.

The language learning strategies are not a modern invention; they have been in use for thousands of years. Today they are used by students, along with other techniques, to develop communicative competence, which is the main goal, according to Oxford (1990). These strategies allow learners to become more self-directed and independent but also expand the role of teachers who assist learners in overcoming obstacles in communication and try to provide them tools to take responsibility for their own learning.

Although a vast amount of research results suggest that learning strategies, when used appropriately, influence language achievement which leads to an overall gain in second language proficiency, there is no fixed pattern of strategy use for either successful or unsuccessful results. So, the use of different sorts and combinations of strategies will depend on the kind of learner and the environment in which learning takes place, the language task and context. (Oxford, 1990)

Zare (2012) points out that a lot of initial studies on language learning strategies focused on determining what the “good” language learner is. With the increase of the understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) during the 1970s, it was evident to both teachers and researchers that there is not one single method of successful language teaching. For some learners, SLA seemed to be successful regardless of methods or teaching techniques. In trying to describe “good” language learners regarding individual differences, researchers (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Rubin and Thompson, 1994) expressed their beliefs that good language learners take responsibility for their own learning, organize information about language, are creative and not afraid to experiment with grammar and words and practice using the language inside and outside the classroom. Also, it is important to mention that these learners are not disheartened when they do not understand every word in a text of a conversation, they use contextual cues, make intelligent guesses and when they make errors, they learn from them. They use memory strategies and linguistic knowledge, including the one of their first language (L1) and learn different styles of speech and writing in order to vary their language to match the formality of the situation (Zare, 2012)

2. Classifications of Language Learning Strategies

3.1. Rubin’s (1987) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

One of the pioneers in the field of learning strategies, Rubin (1975) defined learning strategies as the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge. She identified two kinds of learning strategies: those which contribute directly to L2 learning, and those which are indirectly involved with language learning. Rubin also distinguished three types of strategies that learners use to learn a language either directly or indirectly:

1. Learning Strategies

2. Communication Strategies
3. Social Strategies.

1. Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are of two main types – Cognitive Learning Strategies and Metacognitive Learning Strategies, and they contribute directly to the language system of the language learner.

Cognitive strategies represent steps or measures taken in learning or problem-solving that involves direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials (Rubin, 1987). Six major cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to language learning are identified by Rubin as:

- Clarification / Verification
- Guessing / Inductive Inferencing
- Deductive Reasoning
- Practice
- Memorization
- Monitoring.

Metacognitive strategies are used to oversee, control or self-direct language learning and involve different procedures such as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

2. Communication Strategies

According to Rubin, communication strategies are not so much directly related to language learning because their emphasis is on the process of interaction through conversation and providing information or clarifying what the speaker intended. Communication strategies are used by speakers in situations of difficulties regarding their communication and conversation or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker.

3. Social Strategies

Rubin described social strategies as activities in which learners are exposed to the opportunities that can help them practice their knowledge. Even though these strategies offer exposure to the target language, they contribute to learning indirectly since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language (Rubin, 1987: 15-30).

3.2. O'Malley's (1985) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley divides learning strategies into three categories depending on the level or type of processing involved:

1. Metacognitive Strategies
2. Cognitive Strategies
3. Social/affective Strategies

1. Metacognitive Strategies

These strategies are higher order executive skills that are applicable to a variety of learning tasks. Among the processes that could be categorized as metacognitive strategies are:

- I. Selective attention for special aspects of a task;
- II. Planning and organizing for either written or spoken discourse;
- III. Monitoring one's attention to a task, monitoring comprehension for information to be remembered, or production while it is occurring; and
- IV. Evaluating and checking comprehension of a language activity, or language production after an activity has been completed. (O'Malley and Chamot, 1999: 44-47)

2. Cognitive Strategies

They operate directly on incoming information and manipulate it in a way that enhances learning. They are more limited to specific learning tasks and include typical strategies such as:

- I. Rehearsal or repetition of certain words;
- II. Organization, grouping and classifying words or concepts according to their syntactic or semantic attributes;
- III. Inferencing, i.e. guessing meaning of unknown words in a text, predicting outcomes or completing missing parts;
- IV. Summarizing or synthesizing new information;
- V. Deduction, or applying rules;
- VI. Using imagery to understand and remember;
- VII. Transfer of known linguistic information; and

VIII. Elaboration, i.e. integrating new ideas with known information (O'Malley and Chamot, 1999: 44-45, 49)

3. Social/affective Strategies

Social/affective strategies are closely related to social-mediating activity and interacting with others. They are considered applicable to a wide variety of tasks. The main socioaffective strategies include:

- I. Cooperation, or working with peers to accomplish a common goal;
- II. Questioning for clarification or eliciting additional information, rephrasing or examples;
- III. Self-talk, for establishing mental control and assuring oneself that mental activity will be successful (O'Malley and Chamot, 1999: 45-46)

3.3. Oxford's (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Often cited and probably the most influential taxonomy in the field is provided by Oxford (1990). Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, direct and indirect strategies, which are further subdivided into six classes.

A) Direct strategies

Direct strategies “require mental processing of the language, but the three groups of direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes. “ (Oxford, 1990: 37)

Memory strategies are mental processes for internalizing new information and for retrieving them when needed. These strategies consist of four sets that include: Creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action. . (Oxford, 1990: 38)

Cognitive strategies have a common function of transforming the learner's target language. They include: Practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output. (Oxford, 1990: 43)

Compensation strategies enable learners to understand the language and use it in speaking or writing despite knowledge limitations. There are ten strategies that are divided into two sets: Guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. According to Oxford's (1990), compensation strategies are employed by learners when facing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing. (Oxford, 1990: 47-48)

B) Indirect strategies

Indirect strategies provide support for language learning without directly involving the target language. They are divided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Metacognitive strategies provide a way for learners to control their own learning processes. They include three types of strategic behaviour: Centering your learning, Arranging and planning your learning and evaluating your learning. They are essential for successful language learning and can help by overviewing and linking with already known material, paying attention, organizing, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring and self evaluating. (Oxford, 1990: 136)

Affective strategies assist students to manage their emotions, motivation, values and attitudes associated with learning. Language learners can gain control over these factors through three processes: by lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking emotional temperature. (Oxford, 1990: 140)

Social strategies facilitate language learning through communication with others. Language is a form of social behaviour and learning it involves other people. That is why it is extremely important to employ appropriate social strategies. There are three sets of social strategies, i. e. asking questions, cooperating and empathizing with others. (Oxford, 1990: 144-145)

Oxford illustrated over sixty strategies and this effort provided a basis for an instrument, The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), designed to obtain information concerning strategy use of language learners in learning a second language. Even though Oxford's classification system is defined plainly, she highlights that the present understanding of learning strategies is still in its primary stages, and "it is only a proposal to be tested through practical classroom use and through research". (Oxford, 1990: 16)

4. The Assessment of Learning Strategies

There are many assessment tools for determining the strategies used by L2 learners. The most common ones are interviews, surveys, observations, learner journals, with each of them having its advantages and disadvantages.

Dörnyei (2005) explains that learning strategy use and self-regulated learning are typically measured by self-report questionnaires. It is assumed that strategy use and strategic

learning are related to an underlying aptitude and due to that the items in these instruments ask participants to generalize their actions in different situations.

When talking about strategies assessment, Dörnyei (2005) describes four questionnaires: The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), which is currently the best known instrument in educational psychology; Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which is the most often used questionnaire in L2 studies; Cohen and Chi's Language Strategy Use Inventory and Index, which is a new attempt to measure the strategy use and Tseng, Dörnyei; and Schmitt's Self-Regulatory Capacity in Vocabulary Learning scale, which presents a new approach to assess strategic learning.

4.1. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

The purpose of the SILL is to establish how frequently various L2 learning strategies are used, including those which directly relate to the learning materials (direct or primary strategies) and those which indirectly enhance learning (indirect or support strategies).

Originally SILL was developed for the purpose of the Language Skill Change Project. This project is used to assess the changes in language skills after the learner has completed their language training. In addition to its research use in the Language Skill Change Project, the SILL has been used with many other individuals and groups. In this way students can assess their own use of L2 strategies and determine whether these strategies are suitable to their learning goals and requirements. Also, instructors and teachers can use the SILL to heighten the awareness of learning strategies of students and to assess the appropriateness of these strategies, by individual or by class. In that way they can plan and present instruction to teach the improved use of strategies. Moreover, counsellors can use SILL results to counsel students who are having trouble in language classes. It can also be useful for curriculum designers and language program administrators who can refer to SILL results while doing long-term planning which integrates learning strategies. Finally, researchers can continue to employ the SILL as a research tool in universities, schools, businesses, the military and other settings. (Oxford, 1986)

Versions of SILL have been used with foreign language learners in high schools and universities around the world, as well as with the adult learners of English as a SL or FL. Items in the Inventory are based on the author's strategy system, and there are some

additional items adapted from surveys and strategy lists by other authors (O'Malley, Chamot, Rubin). Version 5.1 has 80 items, while Version 7.0 has 50 items. (Oxford, 1990)

5. Strategy training

Oxford (1990) argues that in order for students to learn more effectively, it is important to carry out training in language learning strategies, i.e. strategy training.

Strategy training tackles not only language learning strategies, but also deals with feelings and beliefs about taking on more responsibility for one's learning. That means that learners have to change or adjust the beliefs they previously had about learning in order to efficiently use the strategies they have just learnt. Also, strategy training can cover other aspects of language learning, for example the language functions used inside and outside classroom, the importance of individual efforts and group work, balance between accuracy and fluency, overcoming anxiety of making mistakes, difference between learning and acquisition etc.

Learners' role is to learn how to learn, while teachers need to learn how to facilitate that process. Humans learn by default; however, there is a conscious skill in learning and strategy use that needs to be sharpened through training, which is particularly important when it comes to acquiring a new language. Explicit training is advocated because strategy training should not be abstract and theoretical but highly practical and useful. Research shows that learners who have been instructed in strategy use generally learn better and that certain techniques for such training are better than others.

Oxford points out two issues that should be considered before conducting strategy training: instructor's knowledge of language learning strategies and their attitude about role changes.

The more one knows about language learning strategies, the better trainer one will be. However, it is not important to be an expert in order to provide effective training for students. What is also important is thinking through one's assumptions about the roles of students and teachers because when learners start to take more responsibility for their learning, these roles might experience a change.

There are three ways in which language learning strategies can be taught.

The first one is awareness training, which is also called consciousness-raising or familiarization training. In this kind of training, participants become aware of the general idea

of learning strategies and how they can help them accomplish language tasks. However, here they do not use these strategies in actual tasks. This type of training is often an introduction into the field of learning strategies so it should be interesting and motivating.

The second type of training is one-time strategy training which involves learning and practicing one or more strategies with actual language tasks and it gives the learner information of the value of the strategy, when and how to use or evaluate it. This kind of training is appropriate for learners who need targeted strategies that can be taught in one or few sessions.

The third way is long-term strategy training which involves learning and practicing strategies with actual language tasks. In this case students learn the significance of particular strategies and the same information as in the previous type. The difference is that this training is more prolonged, covers a greater number of strategies and is likely to be more efficient than one-time training. (Oxford, 1990)

5.2. Studies of the effects of strategy instruction

Griffiths (2004) summarizes a few studies that investigated the effects of strategy instruction. The research in the field is led by the belief that language learning strategies can be taught and that learners can benefit from the instruction. Taking this belief as a starting point, many researchers have tried to demonstrate the pedagogical applications of findings from strategy training studies.

One of such studies researched the effects of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies training on reading comprehension in the classroom. It was conducted by Tang and Moore (1992). Their conclusion was that, while cognitive strategy instruction (title discussion, pre-teaching vocabulary) improved comprehension scores, the performance was not maintained after these activities were withdrawn. Metacognitive strategy instruction (selfmonitoring strategies), on the other hand, proved that comprehension ability was improved and it was maintained even after these activities have ended.

Similarly, O'Malley *et al.* (1985) discovered that higher level students are more able to practice metacognitive control over their learning than lower level ones.

On the other hand, there was also a research carried out by O'Malley (1987) and his colleagues where they randomly assigned 75 students to one of three instructional groups in which they were instructed in (a) metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective strategies, (b)

cognitive and socioaffective strategies, or (c) no strategy instruction (control group) for listening, speaking and vocabulary acquisition skills. It is interesting that they discovered that the control group for vocabulary achieved slightly better results than other two groups.

O'Malley explains that this was probably due to the persistence of familiar strategies among certain students, who were not willing to adopt the strategies presented in training (1987).

All in all, results regarding the effectiveness of strategy training remain unclear. However, the topic continues to attract the attention of contemporary educators and researchers who want to put in use the potential which language learning strategies seem to have to improve an individual's language acquisition ability. (Griffiths, 2004)

6. Variables Affecting Language Learning Strategies

Sadeghi and Khombi (2012) point out that many studies in the field of language learning strategies have tried to investigate how different factors influence the choice and use of language learning strategies. They mention Oxford who shows the following variables as relevant: target language, level of language learning or proficiency, degree of metacognitive awareness, sex, affective variables (attitudes, motivation, goals), personality traits, personality types, learning style, career orientation or field of specialization, nationality, aptitude, teaching methods, task requirements, strategy training, and age. Many of these factors, for example language learning level, nationality, field of specialization, and language teaching methods have been proven to be related to the use of specific language learning strategies. However, variables such as motivation and sex have still not been researched enough to lead to firm conclusions, as well as the issue of age.

6.1. The Age Factor

Learners' age has been one of the crucial issues in the area of second language (L2) acquisition. Muñoz (2010) argues that the effects of age have been predominantly researched in natural settings where the immigrants' level of proficiency in the target language has been examined on the basis of their age of arrival in the L2 community. The results of comparing younger and older starters have consistently shown the advantage for those who arrived early in life over those who arrived at an older age.

These results have been thought to provide positive evidence for the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Brown (2007) defines CPH as “a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire” (p. 57). He claims that “critical point for second language acquisition occurs around puberty, beyond which people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a second language”(p. 58).

However, Medved Krajnović (2010) explains there has also been a lot of research that shows that individuals who initiated a second language acquisition after puberty can achieve a high level of language and communicative competence in that language (Bongaerts 1999). After carrying out a research, Harley (1986) concluded that the successfulness in acquiring a language depends on a number of factors (motivation, exposure to and active usage of the language etc.). Based on the results and experiences of the Croatian project where early language learning was being researched in elementary schools (Vilke and Vrhovac 1993, Mihaljević Djigunović and Vilke 2000), conclusions can be drawn that not only age but intensity and continuity of the program, teacher role and motivation proved relevant for language acquisition. Therefore, it can be said that it is sensitive period, and not critical period (Long 1990) that should be taken into account when discussing language acquisition.

The influence of age on L2 acquisition in a foreign language environment has not been researched to a great extent and findings have not appeared to be so consistent. Nevertheless, the advantages of an early start observed in a natural setting have been influential for educational decisions concerning the optimum time for students to start foreign language learning in schools (Muñoz, 2010).

Stefánsson (2013) indicates that since the early 1990s, studies have shown positive results of older beginners achieving high level of L2 proficiency. He provides examples of a number of research in favour of older beginners and their achievements. All in all, there is evidence that favour “the younger the better” principle and also studies that show the ability of older students exceeding the younger. It has also been discussed whether it is better over the long run to start learning L2 at an early age. Stefánsson further explains how Krashen et al. (1979) explore this subject further and show the short-term and long-term results in L2 acquisition. They claim that, where time and exposure are held constant, adults go through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children; older children acquire faster than younger children (again, in early stages of syntactic and morphological development where time and exposure are held constant) and learners who are exposed to

second languages early in and during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults. (Stefánsson, 2013)

Griffiths (2003) notes that the evidence regarding the effects of age on language learning may still be ambiguous, but it is a common belief that children are superior to adults as language learners. She supports this by summarizing certain studies, such as Oyama (1976) and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) who agree with this hypothesis. There are a few well-known case studies (Burling, 1981; Schmidt, 1983) that also support the idea that adults can find it difficult to acquire a new language. Other studies (for instance Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen and Hargreaves, 1974; Swain, 1981) proved in favour of adult learners. (Griffiths, 2003)

6.2. Age and Language Learning Strategies

Dörnyei (2005) writes about the interdependence of the learner's age and the aptitude. He proposes a question whether language aptitude changes with age either in a positive or in a negative direction. If language aptitude is indeed a trait, it should be relatively stable. However, age is a central factor in an individual's language learning capacity— as evidenced by the literature on the sensitive period hypothesis addressing age-related changes in SLA— and therefore it is likely to be assumed that some of the age-related variation is mediated through aptitude changes that occur over time. (Dörnyei, 2005)

Gürsoy (2010) discusses that children can learn a foreign or second language in various situations depending on the amount and type of exposure. In EFL environments, in most cases teachers are the ones responsible for providing learning opportunities and exposure for their students. They also need to help their learners to facilitate the learning process, which can be done by learning about students' current strategies and teaching new ones. Strategy use improves performance of the learners and leads them to regulate their own learning. Therefore, it is essential to identify learner strategies in different age groups.

In the investigation of the strategy use it is vital to understand the differences between children and adults. Even though children are often enthusiastic and talkative they also tend to lose concentration and motivation easily. They have limited world knowledge and experience and are at the earlier stages of their cognitive development because they do not have access to metalanguage, like older learners do. Due to these differences, children may possibly use different strategies from adults. (Gürsoy, 2010) It was found that young children make use of strategies in a task-specific manner, these strategies being rather simple, while older children

and adults employ generalized and more complex strategies, in a more flexible manner (Ellis, 1994).

As quoted in Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006), Skehan (1998) differentiates two systems of processes in the development of language proficiency; the rule-based analytic procedural system, and a formulaic, exemplar-based declarative system. In the first one, storage and powerful generative rules operate together to compute well-formed sentences, whereas in the second one, a pivotal role is carried out by a large memory system with some rules operating on chunks. It has been inferred that young learners rely more on memory-based processes, whereas adult learners practice rule-based learning.

7. The Research

7.1. Objectives

There are two aims of the research in this paper:

1. to investigate the strategies that Croatian students use when learning English (what the most frequently used and least frequently used strategies among Croatian EFL learners are)
2. to compare the learning strategies used between elementary and secondary school students

7.2. Participants

A total of 46 students participated in this research: 21 students aged 12-13 from Nikola Hribar elementary school in Velika Gorica (Group A) and 25 students aged 17-18 years from General High School in Velika Gorica (Group B). The students of the Group A attend 7th grade, while the students in the Group B are high-school graduates.

7.3. Data Collection Instrument

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners, 50 items¹) is a self-report questionnaire which was used to assess the frequency of use of language learning strategies of the subjects of this study. Each item describes a language learning strategy and learners are asked to respond to the SILL items by indicating how often they employ these strategies. The SILL uses five Likert-type responses for each strategy item ranging from 1 to 5 (i.e. from 'never or almost never true of me' to 'always true of me'). In this study, learners were asked to respond to each item based on their own perception of language learning strategy use. Once completed, the SILL data provides a composite score for each category of strategy. A reporting scale can be used to tell teachers and students which groups of strategies they use the most in learning English: (1) 'High Usage' (3.5–5.0), (2) 'Medium Usage' (2.5–3.4), and (3) 'Low Usage' (1.0–2.4). Scale ranges were developed by Oxford (1990).

When it comes to validity and reliability of the instrument, Fazeli (2012) claims SILL has been used extensively by the researchers in many countries. Therefore, its reliability has been checked in different contexts, and high validity, reliability and utility have been reported. In addition, he cites Oxford who claims that SILL reliabilities have been high, and also that reliability using Cronbach alpha ranges from .93 to .95 depending on the type of the survey taken (in learner's own language or in target language) (Green & Oxford, 1995). Regarding validity, all types are very high. Moreover, factor analysis of SILL is confirmed by many studies and the author points out that Ellis (1994) believes Oxford's taxonomy to be the most comprehensive currently available. (Fazeli, 2012)

7.4. Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaires were administered to all participants by their English teachers during the English class from 12th to 18th of December, 2013 (first term) in schools in Velika Gorica. Teachers provided a brief explanation of the purpose of the research and the students were told that their responses to the questionnaires are anonymous so they would in no way affect their grades. Also, the teachers went through the instructions at the beginning of the questionnaire so that the participants could understand what was expected of them. The questionnaire consisted of the background questionnaire (Appendix 1) and The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. In the former students were asked to provide details pertaining to their age, mother tongue and years of learning English. They were as well asked

¹ Taken from <http://richarddpetty.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/sill-english.pdf>

to assess themselves as learners; the students were asked to rate their proficiency in the English language (four options from Excellent to Poor) in comparison with other students in their class and compared with native speakers. After that, they were asked to rate how important it is to them to become proficient in the English language. To answer this question they could circle certain reasons for learning the language or provide their own reason.

Having filled in the first part, the SILL was analyzed statement by statement by the teachers so that there would be no misinterpretation.

7.5. Results and Discussion

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 21.0 was used to analyze the collected data, following the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 Brief Guide. Means were calculated in order to investigate the use of language learning strategies among different groups.

7.5.1. The background questionnaire analysis

We first analyzed the background questionnaire (Appendix A). All of the participants stated that Croatian was both their mother tongue and the language they spoke at home. When it comes to their English learning period, Group A, i.e. the younger group of students, have been learning English for seven years (from the first grade) and most of the students in the Group B have been learning English for nine years (there is an exception of 5 students who stated they have learnt it for even longer – 11 to 15 years' time).

The following two questions asked the participants to rate their own proficiency in English. In the Question 7 participants rated themselves in comparison with other students in their class. In the Tables 1 and 2 we can see how different groups see their proficiency among their peers:

Table 1. Background questionnaire: Question 7, Group A

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Excellent	6	28.6	28.6	28.6
Valid Good	12	57.1	57.1	85.7
Valid Fair	3	14.3	14.3	100.0
Total	21	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Background questionnaire: Question 7, Group B

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Excellent	5	20.0	20.0	20.0
Good	14	56.0	56.0	76.0
Fair	4	16.0	16.0	92.0
Poor	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	25	100.0	100.0	

As we can see, none of the participants in the Group A considered their proficiency poor. Since the students in the Group B are five to six years older, they might be more self-conscious about their own knowledge but also be more aware that their language proficiency is not quite as good as they might have thought in elementary school. Other options have a rather similar distribution in both groups.

In the Question 8 the participants rated their proficiency compared to native speakers:

Table 3. Background questionnaire: Question 8, Group A

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Excellent	1	4.8	4.8	4.8
Good	16	76.2	76.2	81.0
Fair	3	14.3	14.3	95.2
Poor	1	4.8	4.8	100.0
Total	21	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Background questionnaire: Question 8, Group B

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Excellent	2	8.0	8.0	8.0
Good	9	36.0	36.0	44.0
Fair	12	48.0	48.0	92.0
Poor	2	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	25	100.0	100.0	

The mentioned self-consciousness, or rather, greater awareness is more observable in the Question 8. More precisely, almost half of the participants in the Group B rated their proficiency as fair, compared to native speakers, while more than 75 per cent of the participants in the Group A believe their proficiency is good in comparison with native speakers.

In the following question, participants were asked to decide how important language proficiency was to them. Surprisingly, none of the participants in the Group A voted for the “not important” option (which would be plausible considering previous findings), and 57 per cent thought it was important. In the Group B, eight per cent thought the proficiency in English language was of no importance, while 52 per cent thought it was very important. Most of the students are realistic about this question because nowadays there are quite a lot of professions where high proficiency in English language is required.

Finally, in the last question we wanted to know whether the participants enjoyed language learning. In the Group A 57 per cent gave positive answers, while in the Group B the percentage was somewhat higher – 64 per cent.

After we have gained some insight into the sample, in the following part we will analyze the SILL questionnaire.

7.5.2. The SILL analysis

The version of the SILL used in this research is a 50 item instrument. We tried to determine what types of strategies were most often used within the two groups of participants. The results shown in the table below represent the arithmetic mean of each of the groups of items calculated separately for two age groups and the total mean.

Table 5. SILL analysis

AGE	MEM	COG	COM	MET	AFF	SOC	Overall Strategy Use
Group A (12-13 years)	2.65	2.63	3.25	2.59	2.37	2.54	2.67
Group B (17-18 years)	2.71	3.03	3.33	3.20	2.43	3.32	3.00
Total	2.68	2.85	3.29	2.93	2.40	2.96	2.84

Table 5 presents the means for strategy categories as used and reported by the participants of the study. The results show that the mean strategy use of all strategies was 2.84, which shows that they are medium strategy users. If we look at the results separately for each age group, Group A generally uses fewer strategies than the Group B.

It is displayed in Figures 1 and 2, where SILL sub-scale scores are ranked in the order from the most to the least used. Compensation strategies (COM) are most often used in both groups, and affective strategies (AFF) are the least used group of strategies. In the Group A, other strategies are ranked as follows: memory (MEM), cognitive (COG), metacognitive (MET), social (SOC) strategies. In the Group B, ranking is the same but in reverse – from social to memory strategies.

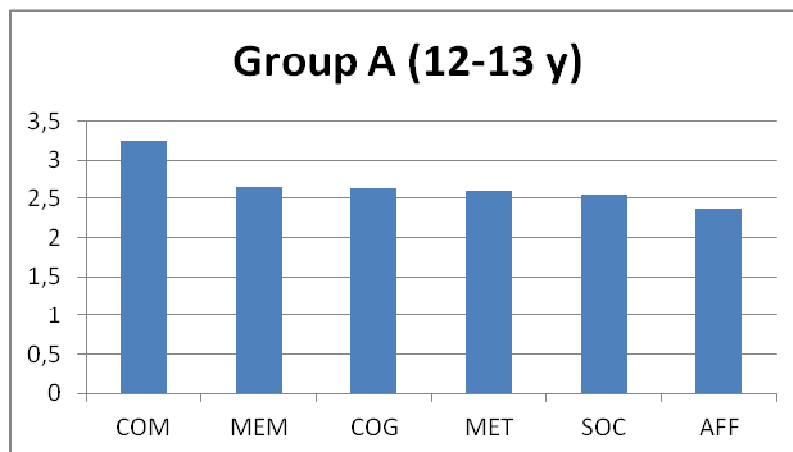


Figure 1. SILL Sub-Scale Score; Group A

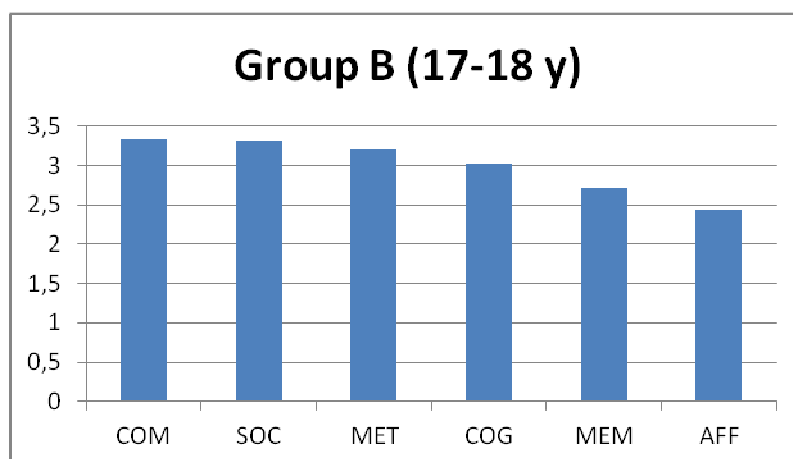


Figure 2. SILL Sub-Scale Score; Group B

Both groups are medium to high users of compensation strategies, which allow learners to use the language despite knowledge gaps. They guess meaning in context, use synonyms and body gestures. Riazi and Rahimi (2005) pointed out that in a number of EFL studies metacognitive and compensation strategies were found to be among the most frequently used strategies and illustrated that with a few studies (Wharton, 2002; Yang, 1994; Oh, 1992; and Green, 1991.).

In secondary education children are more encouraged to work together; the curriculum contains more group work, projects, research etc. It can be explained as a preparation for their further education or a future profession which in most cases require team work. That is why children in elementary school still might not regard social interactions as relevant when it comes to solving problems or achieving certain goals and this might be the reason why they do not use a lot of social strategies.

Among the top three strategies that are most often used within the Group A are one compensation strategy and two metacognitive strategies. The item 29 had the highest mean of 3.90 (“If I can’t think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing”), and items 31 and 32 followed with means 3.52 and 3.48 (“I try to find as many ways as I can to use my SL” and “I pay attention when someone is speaking SL”).

It is interesting that among the top three most used strategies within the Group B were items 29 and 32 as well, they were placed second and third (means 4.00 and 4.12). The most frequently used strategy was a cognitive strategy, item 15, with the mean 4.24 (“I watch SL TV shows spoken in SL or go to movies spoken in SL”). This is not so unexpected since probably most of the participants watch English movies or TV series, but the difference here is that the older group has a greater awareness how they can use this general availability of media in English to their advantage.

When it comes to top three least used strategies, within the group A the lowest mean was calculated for the item 43 (“I write down my feelings in a language learning diary”). The same item ranked third in the Group B. The other two least used strategies in the first group were items 44 (“I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning SL”) and 34 (“I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study SL”), which all fall under the affective and metacognitive group of strategies. The situation is somewhat different in the Group B, where least frequently used strategies are memory strategies: item 7 with the mean 1.72 and item 6 with the mean 1.76. It is probably because in secondary school students are not so much encouraged to memorize (as in learn by heart) new information, but are expected to analyze, deduce, use already known information, predict and so on.

We can conclude that even though both groups most frequently use compensation strategies and least frequently affective strategies, the younger students rely more on their memory and cognition and their a few years older colleagues consider social and metacognitive strategies as more efficient.

Since the SILL is a self-report questionnaire and single source of information, it remains unclear whether the participants actively use the language learning strategies that they claim to use. They may have responded just according to their beliefs and thoughts that they have about their use of learning strategies. Also, this study was conducted on a smaller number of participants from the same area; therefore generalization of the findings should be made with caution. Accordingly, more studies should be undertaken using participants from different learning contexts to clarify the results, e.g. whether or not team work occurs more frequently in secondary-school education, or is it the case that students in elementary school rely greatly on memory strategies for their language learning.

8. Conclusion

Early researchers of language learning strategies investigated various types of strategic behaviours and what makes up a good language learner. In this paper we also introduced more recent studies which tried to classify language learning strategies into taxonomies to determine a type or a style of a learner. There are numerous variables that can positively or negatively affect the use and the result of using the language learning strategies. Some of these variables are: target language, metacognitive awareness, sex, attitudes, motivation, personality types, learning style, aptitude, strategy training, age etc. In order for students to learn more effectively, it is advised to carry out training in language learning strategies. Strategy training covers different aspects of language learning strategies, but also helps to manage feelings and beliefs about language learning.

One of the important aspects that we tried to investigate was how the age factor reflected the use of language learning strategies. We undertook a research to try to shed some light on this question. The sample was not a representative one, but conclusions can still be drawn. We found some similarities regarding the use of strategies by the two groups of elementary and secondary school participants, the most prominent one being the usage of

compensation strategies to solve language problems. What we found was different among the two groups is their perspective when it comes to the role of memory or social interaction.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that learning strategies can be an extremely helpful tool in language learning and acquisition, but only in balanced combination with a number of other factors such as level of language learning or proficiency, age, sex, metacognitive awareness, motivation, personality traits and types, learning style, aptitude, teaching methods, strategy training etc. It is important to incorporate language learning strategies into language teaching methods and make it a skill that every student will be encouraged to use to improve their language learning process.

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Appendix

Background Questionnaire

1. Name _____
2. Date _____
3. Age _____
4. Sex _____
5. Mother tongue _____
6. Language you speak at home _____
7. Language you are now learning _____
8. How long have you been learning the language in #7? _____
9. How do you rate your proficiency in the language in #7, compared with other students in your class?
(Circle one of these options):
Excellent Good Fair Poor
10. How do you rate your proficiency in the language in #7, compared with native speakers?
(Circle one of these options): Excellent Good Fair Poor
11. How important is it for you to become proficient in the language in #7?
(Circle one of these options): Very important Important Not important
12. Do you enjoy language learning? (Circle one of these options): Yes No

Sadržaj

Strategije učenja jezika su radnje koje učenici koriste kako bi unaprijedili usvajanje, pohranu, pristup i korištenje informacija, ali i određene radnje koje učenje čine jednostavnijim, bržim, ugodnijim, učinkovitijim, više usmjerenim na učenika i primjenjivim na nove situacije.

Proteklih trideset godina značajni rezultati istraživanja iz područja učenja i poučavanja jezika potvrdili su da nisu samo učitelji i poučavanje važni za usvajanje jezika, već i sami učenici imaju bitnu ulogu. Naglasak je stavljen na učenike, na način na koji obrađuju nove informacije te strategije i vještine koje koriste kako bi organizirali, usvojili i upotrijebili nova znanja. Ovaj rad istražiti će odnos između strategija učenja jezika i dobi.

Ključne riječi: strategije učenja jezika, faktor dobi, obuka u strategijama učenja, instrumenti za ocjenjivanje, Oxford, O'Malley, SILL (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*)