

An exploratory study of students' learning strategies in a first year university Italian language course



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***Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to investigate the strategies for written language retention, being used by first year university students undertaking a course in second languages. In attempting to gain an indication of strategy usage, building on the work by Oxford (1993) and others, students from two groups with different levels of proficiency in the second language were surveyed on the frequency with which they used a range of learning strategies. Analysis of the data revealed little difference between the groups. Generally most strategies were used and a small number were not used on a regular basis. Findings indicate that there are some learning strategies that students could use to their benefit more often and this could perhaps be encouraged through more specific strategy training in the classroom.*

***Keywords:** First-year student experience * Language learning strategies * Higher education*

Introduction

It is beneficial for students in the initial stages of their studies to set goals and develop personal learning techniques. It is widely acknowledged that such practices encourage learner autonomy and develop self-directed learning potential for students. The current study was developed with this in mind and extends on the literature on strategy use in second language acquisition by focussing on the university environment. This project was influenced to a large extent by the work of Oxford (1990), whose work provides an extensive reference for second language teachers. The subjects of this study are students who are in the first year of study of a second language at Swinburne University of Technology in Australia. They are divided into two distinctive groups: absolute beginners in the study of Italian as a second language and students who have had at least four years of study of the language prior to their university studies. The absolute beginners' group attended either day or evening classes, with the evening classes having a slightly greater number of older students than the day group. The age range of the students in general is diverse: the majority are students who have in the previous year completed their Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), their final year of secondary education.

The aim of this study was to conduct an investigation into the strategies students use in written language retention. The groups were not given specific strategy training before the

questionnaire was delivered, other than reference to an introductory booklet produced by a staff member and made available for purchase from the university bookshop. This is the first project in a longitudinal study which will survey future first year students who will be given specific strategy training in second language acquisition. The collective data will provide a comprehensive appraisal over time of the importance of learning strategies.

Literature review

Previous research into language learning processes has been considerable, with studies taking a variety of approaches depending on their focus. Oxford (1993) provides a useful point of reference in her review of second language (L2) strategies citing six areas of concern by which studies have been motivated. These are (1) characteristics of good language learners, (2) effectiveness and orchestration of L2 learning strategies, (3) less skilled L2 learners, (4) factors influencing choice of L2 strategies, (5) L2 strategy training and (6) problems in classifying strategies. One concern about identifying typologies is that they begin to define boundaries for research which may limit the way the teaching and learning context is reviewed. Oxford's (1993) notes on studies relating to (2) effectiveness and orchestration of L2 learning strategies, are of most interest to the language learning situation in this study. She reports that "...the use of appropriate language learning strategies leads to improved proficiency..." (p.178) citing studies by Cohen (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford and Crookall (1989), amongst others. In addition the finding that successful language learners in general use more and better learning strategies than do poorer learners has been reported in early studies by Hosenfeld (1977), Ramirez (1986), Ruben (1975), and Stern (1983). Not surprisingly, earlier studies have also found that successful language learners combine strategies that work effectively together, in a methodical fashion (Chamot and Kupper 1989; Vann and Abraham 1989). Oxford (1993) further observes that cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies "...are often used together, supporting each other..." (p. 179)

More recently, a study by Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) concentrated on approaches to the task of vocabulary learning. They found that in suggesting language learning strategies to students and advising that they spend more time on lexical acquisition, they cautioned that teachers should "...be careful not to consider all strategies as universally valid or useful to all learners, or to assume falsely that strategies used by successful students will undoubtedly be helpful to less successful ones" (p.190). In this regard, other factors such as the quality rather than the quantity of strategy use and groupings of strategies rather than a particular strategy might influence the learning outcome. This issue is reiterated by Vance (1999) who found that not all language learners use their strategies effectively or in the same way. In addition, she raises the issue of how to include training on learning strategies in a language program and whether or not to integrate it with the curriculum work or to keep it as a separate activity as a better approach. She later suggests that integration is a better approach (p. 16) than a separate strategies session, but requires greater teaching resources.

We were particularly interested in this study to acquire student feedback on their use of language learning strategies. Since our aim was to establish a baseline for the level of usage of language learning strategies, it was decided to develop a survey to gauge frequency of usage.

Methodology

This study was designed to ascertain the extent to which students from two groups were applying language learning strategies. It was decided that the most appropriate design was a

survey using a Likert scale to gather data on the relative frequency distribution (Anderson, Sweeney, Williams, Harrison & Rickard, 1991) of students' responses. The results of this first study could then form a baseline of data from which later research could be compared.

Survey

The survey was designed using eighteen (18) items (appendix 1) that each described a language learning strategy. The survey included items based on those used by Peters (1995) and others based on the teacher's experience. A Likert scale was used to distribute the students responses between five options, relating to how often they practised that strategy (always/quite often/ sometimes/rarely/never). For each item the more often the strategy was practised the more likely students would benefit. Data on student gender and age range was also collected.

Participants

First year students enrolled in two subjects were involved with completing the survey. The investigator included reference to the research project in the Course of Study material distributed to students at the start of semester. Throughout the semester passing reference was made to the use of strategies in second language learning. Two weeks before the end of semester students were reminded that at the end of semester they would be invited to complete the survey. The survey was administered in the last week of semester and students participated voluntarily. The survey took students about 15 minutes to complete.

The first group were students enrolled in HAA 184 Advanced Italian 1A, and the second group were the students enrolled in the subject HAA 181 Italy and its Language 1, in either a day or evening class. Students in the Advanced subject group had studied Italian before to the equivalent of Year 12 (end of high school level).

Data presentation and discussion

The frequencies were tabulated into five forms representing the Advanced subject group, the Day group, the Evening group, the Day /Evening group combined and the Aggregated total grouping with all students included. This would allow both within and between group comparisons

The frequency distributions were totalled and percentages calculated to indicate the frequency with which each of the options was selected for each item, within each group, and also the frequency with which each option was selected in total for the group. The following five tables indicate the frequency distributions of item responses by group and for data aggregated across groups.

Group 1: HAA184 Advanced group

The twelve students in the Advanced group had all studied Italian before to the equivalent of Year 12 in high school. Eleven of the twelve students commenced their study at the university straight from high school. Overall, over half (51.9%) of all responses of this group fell into the 'Always' or 'Quite often' categories and taking the 'Sometimes' category into account this figure rose to 78.8% (see Table 1). This means that the language learning strategies surveyed are generally being used very widely by this group. There were however, a range of strategies that students from this group indicated were 'Rarely' or 'Never' used by a small number of students.

In particular, the strategies that students indicated were least practised were those where the frequency of 'Rarely' or 'Never' responses in questions 1, 2 and 11 were respectively 5/12, 8/12 and 10/12. These questions were:

1. On meeting a new word or phrase, I repeat it until I know it by heart.
2. I make vocabulary lists of new words I have learnt.
11. When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates to a word I know well in my own language.

Strategies with high frequencies that students indicated were ‘Always’ practised included responses to questions 6, 12 and 17 where frequencies were 9/12, 6/12 and 8/12 respectively. These questions were:

6. When checking an Italian word in a dictionary, I read through all the examples of the different meanings of the word.
12. When I am given a written passage in Italian, I try to understand the general message of the passage before I begin to look up meanings of new words.
17. It is useful to have my teacher make corrections on my written work.

In addition to the questions where 21% of responses were ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ the area with opportunity for further coaching on the value of using language learning strategies is indicated by the 26.9% of ‘Sometimes’ responses. The items where there were 6 or more responses of ‘Sometimes’ were questions 1, 5, 9 and 13:

1. On meeting a new word or phrase, I repeat it until I know it by heart.
5. When writing Italian sentences I use the words, phrases and structures that I have learned to create expressions that are new to me.
9. In order to remember an Italian word or expression, I connect it in my memory to an Italian word I know well.
13. I check a dictionary to discover the small differences in the meaning of Italian words.

N = 12

11 less than 20yrs

1 51-60yrs

3 male

9 female

Q No	Always	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1		1	6	3	2
2		1	3	6	2
3	1	3	5		3
4		9	1	2	
5		4	6	1	1
6	9	2	1		
7	1	4	5	1	1
8	4	5	2	1	
9		2	6	3	1
10	2	2	5	3	
11		1	1	7	3
12	6	5	1		
13	2	1	7	2	
14	2	8	1	1	
15	1	6	2	3	
16	4	4	4		
17	8	3	1		
18	4	7	1		
Total	44 20.4	68 31.5	58 26.9	33 15.3	13 6

Table 1: Group1 HAA184 Advanced Group

Group2: HAA181 Day/Evening group combined

The non-advanced students were those without any earlier Italian language study. Sixteen were in the 'day' class and nineteen in the 'evening' class.

In this group, 54.8% of all responses of this group were in the 'Always' or 'Quite often' categories and taking the 'Sometimes' category into account this figure rose to 81.9% (see Table 2). This means that the language learning strategies surveyed are generally being used very conscientiously by this group. There were however, a range of strategies that students from this group indicated were 'Rarely' or 'Never' used by a small number of students.

In particular, the strategies that students indicated were least practised were those where the frequency of 'Rarely' or 'Never' responses in questions 10, 11, 13 and 14 were respectively 10/35, 24/35, 10/35 and 11/35. These questions were:

- 10. I try to better my Italian by reading material in Italian.**
- 11. When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates to a word I know well in my own language.**
- 13. I check a dictionary to discover the small differences in the meaning of Italian words.**
- 14. I read the appropriate materials in Italian for the class before attending class.**

Strategies with high frequencies that students indicated were 'Always' practised included responses to questions 8, 17 and 18 where frequencies were 22/35, 23/35 and 18/35 respectively. These questions were:

- 8. I attempt to keep clear notes when I am in class or if I am studying by myself.**
- 17. It is useful to have my teacher make corrections on my written work.**
- 18. As I read, I look over the passage to get an overall meaning of the content.**

In addition to the questions where 18.1% of responses were 'Rarely' or 'Never' the area with opportunity for further coaching on the value of using language learning strategies is indicated by the 27.1% of 'Sometimes' responses. The items where there were 15 or more responses of 'Sometimes' were questions 1, 9 and 10:

- 1. On meeting a new word or phrase, I repeat it until I know it by heart.**
- 1. In order to remember an Italian word or expression, I connect it in my memory to an Italian word I know well.**
- 10. I try to better my Italian by reading material in Italian.**

N = 35

17 less than 20yrs

11 21-25yrs

5 26-30yrs

1 31-40yrs

1 41-50yrs

7 male

28 female

Q No	Always	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1		11	19	5	
2	8	11	9	6	1
3	7	12	9	5	2
4	2	16	12	4	1
5	2	14	12	7	
6	13	10	7	3	2
7	9	16	8	2	
8	22	8	4	1	
9	1	10	15	9	
10	1	6	18	9	1
11	1	3	2	22	2
12	16	17	2		
13	4	12	9	5	5
14	2	8	14	9	2
15	8	15	8	4	
16	6	11	13	5	
17	23	8	3	1	
18	18	14	2	1	
Total	143	202	171	98	16
%	22.7	32.1	27.1	15.6	2.5

Table 2 : Group 2 HAA181 Day/Evening Group combined

Comparison of Groups 1 & 2

A comparison of results from the ‘Advanced’ and ‘Day/evening’ group showed some minor differences (see Table 3). The responses of the ‘Day/evening’ group indicated that 81.9% of all responses were in the ‘Always/quite often/sometimes’ range compared with 78.8% of the ‘Advanced group’s responses. Interestingly, the ‘Advanced’ group also showed a fairly high percentage of ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ responses, with 21.3% compared with 18.1% for the ‘Day/evening’ group. This indicates that both groups are using the language learning strategies surveyed at a fairly high rate. In addition, there is room for both groups to take up to more than 25% more activity on these learning strategies, indicated by 26.9% (Advanced group) and 27.1% (Day/evening group) of ‘Sometimes’ responses.

Furthermore, there was one survey item in particular that was common to both groups that fell in the high response rates for ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’. This was item 11 as follows:

11. When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates to a word I know well in my own language.

All items with higher rates of ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ responses offer an opportunity for the teaching staff to promote these strategies, and in particular the strategy indicated by item 11.

	Always	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Group1 Total (216 responses)	44	68	58	33	13
%	20.4	31.5	26.9	15.3	6
Group 2 Total (630 responses)	143	202	171	98	16
%	22.7	32.1	27.1	15.6	2.5

Table 3 : Summary of comparison between Group 1 and Group 2

Group1: HAA184 Advanced Group/Group 2: HAA181 Day/Evening Group combined

The total number of students across both groups was 47. It is interesting to see the combined profile of the total student population (see Table 4).

In the combined group, 54.1% of all responses of this group were in the ‘Always’ or ‘Quite often’ categories and taking the ‘Sometimes’ category into account this figure rose to 81.1%. This means that the language learning strategies surveyed are generally being used very conscientiously by the whole group. There were however, a range of strategies that students from this group indicated were ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ used by a number of students. In particular, the strategies that students indicated were least practised were those where the frequency of ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ responses in questions 2, 9, 10 and 11 were respectively 15/47, 13/47, 13/47 and 34/47. These questions were:

- 2. I make vocabulary lists of new words I have learnt.**
- 9. In order to remember an Italian word or expression, I connect it in my memory to an Italian word I know well.**
- 10. I try to better my Italian by reading material in Italian.**
- 11. When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates to a word I know well in my own language.**

Clearly, the learning strategy described in question 11 was very rarely used.

N = 47

28 less than 20yrs

11 21-25yrs

5 26-30yrs

1 31-40yrs

1 41-50yrs

1 51-60yrs

10 male

37 female

Q No	Always	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1		12	25	8	2
2	8	12	12	12	3
3	8	15	14	5	5
4	2	25	13	6	1
5	2	18	18	8	1
6	22	12	8	3	2
7	10	20	13	3	1
8	26	13	6	2	
9	1	12	21	12	1
10	3	8	23	12	1
11	1	4	8	29	5
12	22	22	3		
13	6	13	16	7	5
14	4	16	15	10	2
15	9	21	10	7	
16	10	15	17	5	
17	31	11	4	1	
18	22	21	3	1	
Total	187	270	229	131	29
%	22.1	32	27	15.5	3.4

Table 4: Aggregated data (all students)

Discussion of results

This study was aiming to collect data on frequency of usage of a range of written language learning strategies, for first year (university) students of Italian. Whilst previous studies have not approached research in this way, it was clear that our results concurred with those of Vance (1999) in that students did not select or apply language learning strategies in the same way. In addition the data presented here, provides an example of the “orchestration” of second language learning strategies (Oxford, 1993) reported by students of Italian. Whilst there are indicators for teachers of Italian, of some of the under-utilised strategies, the authors are aware of the cost implications posed by Vance (1999), in providing student training either separate from content or integrated into the curriculum. Linking the patterns of learning strategies over time, to the students’ test results would extend the study further and enable closer comparison with the work of Chamot and Kupper 1989; Vann and Abraham (1989). The learning strategy that was particularly under-utilised, “*When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates it to a word I know well in my language*” (Survey item 11), was considered to be a reflection of adult language learners’ tendency to ‘translate’ new words into their first language, rather than to link them to visual cues (pictures) which is a more popular and effective recall strategy for children.

Future directions and conclusions

The findings of this baseline study with first year university Italian language students offer a range of considerations for further investigation. Investigation of a qualitative nature would

enable the students the opportunity to explain how and why they adopt certain strategies and not others and how they value learning strategies for retention of new vocabulary. Such an extension might also explore the notion (Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999) that not all strategies are necessarily universally valid or useful to all learners. The broad issue of the extent to which students are coached on learning strategies is central to a university system where teaching resources are under extreme pressure. Providing guidance to university students on learning strategies which assist them to self-manage their learning and achieve their potential need further attention. More particularly, the findings of this study provide some excellent indicators to teaching staff on where to direct their efforts in coaching first year language students on learning strategies. The incorporation of learning strategy advice into the students' semester-based program is worthy of consideration. Learning strategies with weakest response rates in this study can help to focus attention in this regard. Further, regular study of the first year and perhaps later year students would be beneficial in indicating any changes in results of response patterns. This study has also provided an opportunity for reflection on student orientation practices and the need for professional development activities for staff. In an environment of scarce resources, coaching students on learning strategies we suggest, is becoming as important as curriculum content.

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Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

10. I try to better my Italian by reading material in Italian.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

11. When learning a new Italian word or phrase, I think of a picture that relates it to a word I know well in my language.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

12. When I am given a written passage in Italian, I try to understand the general message of the passage before I begin to look up meanings of new words.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

13. I check a dictionary to discover the small differences in the meaning of Italian words.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

14. I read the appropriate materials in Italian for the class before attending class.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

15. When I read in Italian, I examine carefully the passage for key words.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

16. I try to check the accuracy of my work myself.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

17. It is useful to have my teacher make corrections on my written work.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never

18. As I read, I look over the passage to get an overall meaning of the context.

Always Quite often Sometimes Rarely Never