

# **Investigation into Learning Strategies Used by Effective and Ineffective EFL Learners in Korea**

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## **I. Introduction**

Since the trailblazing research on the 'good language learner' studies (Naiman et al., 1978), research on language learning strategies has burgeoned in several specific areas. Among the areas is whether effective language learners use more and different learning strategies than ineffective language learners. In theory, it has been assumed that effective language learners use more learning strategies than ineffective language learners in quantity and that the former use different learning strategies than the latter in quality.

However, these theoretical assumptions are still waiting to be tested empirically after more than 30 years of the good language learner studies. In quantitative studies, the studies to date have shown generally low correlation between strategy use and L2 proficiency (Griffiths, 2003; Nisbet et al., 2005; Phakiti, 2003). In qualitative studies, effective learners have not always used different learning strategies than ineffective learners, depending on different learners in different learning contexts (Gan et al., 2004; O'Malley et al., 1989; Vandergrift, 1997).

The purposes of this study were to investigate whether effective learners use quantitatively more learning strategies than ineffective learners in learning English, to investigate whether effective learners use qualitatively different learning strategies than ineffective learners in listening to English, and to attempt to explain the quantitative results by incorporating a quantitative study into a qualitative one. For these purposes, the following research questions were addressed to guide this study:

1. Do effective learners use quantitatively more learning strategies than ineffective learners in learning English in general?
2. Do effective learners use qualitatively different learning strategies than ineffective learners in listening to English passages in particular?

## **II. Methodology: Quantitative Study**

### **1. Participants**

The participants were 164 university students who took the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in the fall semester of 2006 and agreed to participate in this study. The students consisted of 64 juniors and 100 seniors, with 87 male students and 77 female students.

### **2. Instrument**

### **a. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)**

Oxford (1990) developed a spearheading questionnaire of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to measure the participants' quantitative use of language learning strategies. It consists of six strategy categories: memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information; cognitive strategies for comprehending and producing a language; compensation strategies for overcoming a knowledge gap, metacognitive strategies for coordinating learning, affective strategies for regulating emotions, and social strategies for cooperative learning with others.

### **b. Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)**

The participants' English proficiency was determined by the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) developed by the Chauncey Group International (2002). The internal consistency reliability of TOEIC was reported 0.96, and the standard error of measurement was  $\pm 25$  scale points in each section. The criterion validity of TOEIC measured by the relationship between the TOEIC test scores and the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) was reported .74 (The Chauncey Group International, 2002).

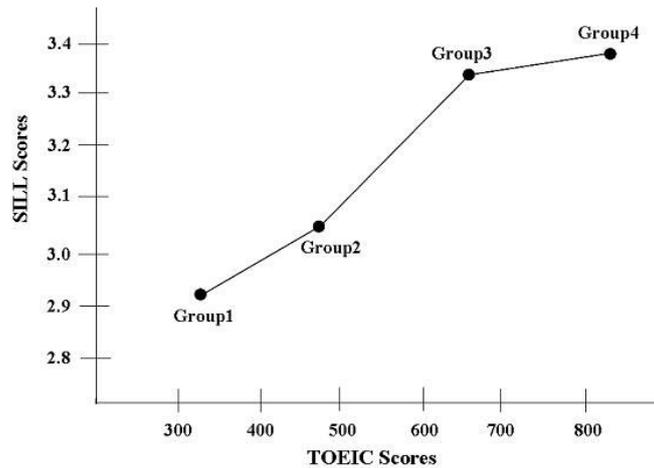
## **III. Findings**

In order to answer Research Question 1, the participants were divided into four subgroups on the basis of their TOEIC scores: the least effective group comparable to FSI level 1 (Group 1), the less effective group comparable to FSI level 1+ (Group 2), the effective group comparable to FSI level 2 (Group 3), and the most effective group comparable to FSI level 2+ (Group 4). The TOEIC scores of each group are shown in Table 1, followed by the schematic relation of the SILL scores to the TOEIC scores in Figure 1. ANOVA result showed that relatively more effective learners (Group 3 and Group 4) used significantly more learning strategies than relatively less effective learners (Group 1 and Group 2) [ $F(3, 156) = 6.94; p < .001$ ], with the significant correlation of .335 between the SILL scores and the TOEIC scores ( $p < .01$ ).

**[Table 1] Mean Scores of Listening Comprehension and Strategy Use by Groups**

	Group 1 (n = 53) M (SD)	Group 2 (n = 66) M (SD)	Group 3 (n = 34) M (SD)	Group 4 (n = 11) M (SD)	Total (N = 164) M (SD)
TOEIC Scores	341 (46.4)	488 (56.7)	669 (44.6)	837 (52.2)	502 (156)
SILL Scores	2.91 (0.42)	3.04 (0.51)	3.33 (0.43)	3.38 (.58)	3.08 (.49)

**[Figure 1] The Relationship between Learning Strategy Use and L2 Proficiency**



#### IV. Methodology: Qualitative Study

##### 1. Participants

The participants in the qualitative study were selected from the participants in the quantitative study who agreed to participate in the qualitative study as well. They were in the humanities consisting of four effective learners and four ineffective learners, as determined by the TOEIC scores. The TOEIC scores of effective learners were ranged between 710 and 820 (the FSI level 2 or 2+) in total scores and between 365-440 in listening comprehension scores, whereas the TOEIC of ineffective learners were ranged between 285 and 375 (the FSI level 1) in total scores and 155-195 in listening comprehension scores (The Chauncey Group International, 2002). A Mann-Whitney test showed that both the TOEIC total scores and the TOEIC listening comprehension scores of effective learners were significantly higher than those of ineffective learners ( $p < .05$ ).

##### 2. Instrument

Two passages with one relatively shorter and the other relatively longer were chosen to investigate whether effective learners use qualitatively different learning strategies than ineffective learners in listening to English passages. The shorter passage was excerpted from the practice version of the TOEIC test (Si-sa, 1994). It was about “Lead Poisoning” and consisted of a total of 8 sentences and 112 words with 14 words per each sentence. The longer passage was excerpted from the practice version of the TOEFL test (Educational Testing Service, 1998). It was about “Prehistoric People of the Desert” and consisted of 14 sentences and 194 words with about 14 words per each sentence.

##### 3. Data Collection

The data consisted of two different sessions: the training session and the main session. In the first week of the think-aloud training session designed to help the participants understand the think-aloud procedure, the author asked each participant to think aloud in answering three simple math questions, describing two pictures, and listening to an English passage excerpted from the practice version of TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 1998). After this training procedure which continued for about 60 minutes, all the participants were told to visit the author’s office for the main study at the time set for each participant in one week. In the

second week of the main session, the data were collected through the following three stages as per the recommendation of O'Malley et al. (1989) and Vandergrift (1997): the pre-collection stage to relieve the students' anxiety by having a light conversation, the in-collection stage to collect the data, and the post-collection stage to report any missing data.

## **V. Findings**

The findings of the qualitative study were described with the focus on the three categories of learning strategies: Metacognitive strategies such as attention and monitoring; cognitive strategies including prediction, parsing/translation, inferencing, and elaboration; and affective strategies such as anxiety/confidence.

### **1. Metacognitive Strategies**

#### **a. Attention**

Attention is a fundamental step to perceiving and retaining information on a text. Effective learners paid close attention to what they listened to without being interfered with unexpected noise around the interview site. For instance, E3 did not notice the intermittent noise coming from the construction site nearby while he was listening to the English passages. In addition, effective learners were able to direct their attention to important listening points.

(Interviewer: What do you do when you could not listen to a sentence?)

E1: I direct my attention to the sentence I am about to hear rather than thinking of what I could not listen to previously.

The reverse was true for ineffective learners. That is, ineffective learners did not pay attention to their listening stimuli as well as effective learners did, often wandering aimlessly from their listening comprehension and giving up their listening task easily. This was true especially in a difficult sentence, as in these examples:

I1: Hmm, area and I? I could not comprehend what I listened to because it spoke too fast and because I thought of eating rice cakes with my friends after this interview.

I2: The sentence was too long and hard to understand, and I gave up further listening.

#### **b. Monitoring**

Monitoring is a strategy pertaining to checking one's understanding and misunderstanding while listening and tracking the sources of it. Both effective learners and ineffective learners checked their understanding on the basis of variables including linguistic knowledge and background knowledge about the passages. In addition, both groups of learners were able to articulate their comprehension problems while dealing with the passages.

### **2. Cognitive Strategies**

#### **a. Prediction**

A psychological theory of listening contends that listeners are assumed to be active in predicting and revising what they hear based on various types of cues. This assumption was confirmed by both effective and ineffective learners. However, what differentiated the two groups of learners was the accurateness of predictions.

### **b. Parsing/translation**

Parsing is concerned with breaking down a sentence into smaller units such as words and phrases when necessary, and translation occurs when thinking of the meaning of L2 words in L1. In general, effective learners comprehended a whole sentence at a time and broke down a sentence into smaller units when the tasks were challenging:

E1: Since I've heard this type of sentence several times, I comprehended the whole sentence at a time. (Interviewer: What did you do to comprehend the sentence?) I just comprehended the sentence without doing anything.

On the contrary, ineffective learners listened to words, and often translated the words into Korean while listening. Even though some ineffective learners wanted to listen to beyond a word level, they couldn't because they failed to process the meaning of words or phrases they heard automatically. When they think of the meaning of the words and phrases in Korean while they are listening, they can't attend to the next words and phrases, ending up with the misunderstanding of what they listen to, as reported in I1 and I3.

I1: I try to listen to a whole sentence. However, when I focus on the first part of a sentence and think of the meaning of it in Korean, I miss the next part.

I3: When I hear a word, I try to think of the meaning of it in Korean. The problem is that while I am thinking of the meaning of the word in Korean, speech which I do not attend to keeps flowing. Then, I hear another word and think of the meaning of it in Korean again, [while speech keeps flowing. When this process is repeated,] I end up with storing up scattered words failing to connect them meaningfully.

Interestingly, three out of the four ineffective listeners complained of their shortage of memory ability because they did not remember what they understood while they were listening. This might be because they focused on words rather than meaning in listening comprehension or because they had limited cognitive ability left to remember what they heard.

### **c. Inferencing**

Inferencing is a strategy used by listeners to guess difficult words or fill in missing information. In general, this strategy was used more by ineffective listeners than effective listeners because the former encountered more unfamiliar words, phrases, and sentences than effective listeners. However, effective listeners used inferencing to their advantage, whereas ineffective listeners did not take advantage of it, guessing wildly based on a few words they could listen.

### **d. Elaboration**

Elaboration in listening comprehension pertains to relating listening stimuli to existing knowledge in long-term memory. Both effective and ineffective listeners used elaboration, as reported by E1, E4, and I4. However, compared with E1 and E4 who made use of elaboration to comprehend a text, I4 misused it and composed a different story.

## **3. Affective Strategies**

### **a. Anxiety/Confidence**

Anxiety plays an important role in L2 listening because when listeners are apprehensive or worried too much, their cognitive system and affective system do not function normally and

interfere with listening comprehension. When asked to answer how they feel when they are listening, all the four effective listeners answered that they were a little bit worried, but not too much. They also reported that when they are worried in a test situation, they use listening strategies such as trying to relax and improving attention.

Compared with effective listeners, two ineffective listeners answered 'a little bit worried' and the other two answered 'worried much.' The ineffective listeners used various listening strategies to deal with anxiety such as trying to improve attention, stretch and take a deep breath, and close eyes and relax.

It should be noted that anxiety was intricately intertwined with confidence because the anxiety of those two ineffective listeners who answered 'worried much' was lack of confidence in listening comprehension. One of the two worried listeners, I2 was not confident throughout the listening task. For instance, she reported that 'I can't comprehend unfamiliar words. I comprehend only the words that I know such as "ground." This is a short sentence. Nevertheless, my comprehension is wrong, isn't it?' In contrast, E3 showed confidence in this task. He reported that 'even though I didn't comprehend this sentence, I think I can comprehend it if I could listen to it one more time.'

## **VI. Discussion**

The finding of the quantitative study was that the correlation of students' use of English learning strategies to English proficiency was, in general, statistically significant but low ( $r=.335$ ). The significant correlation between learning strategy use and L2 proficiency provides new insight into the conflicting findings (Mullins, 1992; Nisbet et al., 2005; Park, 1997; Phakiti, 2003). For instance, Nisbet et al. (2005) reported the correlation between these two variables as .109 which is very low, whereas Park (1997) reported as .34.

The low correlation of learning strategies to English proficiency can be attributed to several points. First, there are lots of variables, which account for L2 acquisition, other than learning strategies such as linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, motivation, and acculturation (Ellis, 1994; Horwitz, 2008). So, there will be limitation for one variable to account for L2 proficiency. Second, since observed scores consist of true scores and error scores, the scores measured by the SILL and TOEIC might not be consistent and trustworthy. However, previous studies to date have reported high reliability and validity of the instruments (Green & Oxford, 1995; The Chauncey Group International, 2002). Third, learning strategies are supposed to be used to attain goals or solve problems. Even though effective learners used more learning strategies than ineffective learners to attain goals, effective learners would not use learning strategies when problems did not occur in performing tasks which were not challenging enough to use specific strategies. Fourth, the low correlation might be due to high proficient learners' automaticity of learning strategies and failure to report the strategies they used subconsciously (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). This assumption, however, was rejected because the relation of learning strategy use to L2 proficiency was linear rather than curvilinear, adding further evidence to this controversial relation (Park, 1997; Phillips, 1991). The fifth reason might be that the use of English learning strategies in quantity alone could not account for English proficiency because effective English learners might use learning strategies differently from ineffective learners in quality (Vandergrift, 1999; Vann & Abraham, 1990).

All the five speculations above might cause the low correlation of learning strategy use to L2 proficiency one way or another. Among the five, the fifth speculation was related to the findings of the follow-up qualitative study in which both effective learners and ineffective learners actively used listening strategies to enhance listening comprehension such as metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and affective strategies. However, effective learners used these strategies more appropriately than ineffective learners due to other variables which work interactively with listening strategies in performing tasks. In this regard, learning strategies might be multidimensional even though they were categorized into a unidimensional construct of strategic competence in the current literature of learning strategies (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Oxford, 1990).

In metacognitive strategies, contrary to previous findings (Phakiti, 2003; Vandergrift, 1997), both effective and ineffective learners actively used monitoring strategies in order to check their listening comprehension drawing on linguistic and background knowledge. However, a conspicuous difference between the groups of learners was found in attention to listening. That is, effective learners paid and directed attention to listening stimuli, whereas ineffective learners were often interfered with unexpected noise and wandered from their listening comprehension (O'Malley et al., 1989). Ineffective learners' attention problem might result from their helplessness in the comprehension of the passages after trying hard to listen to the passage, but in vain.

In cognitive strategies, both effective learners and ineffective learners actively employed listening strategies in order to make sense of the oral passages, but effective learners used these strategies to their benefits. For instance, both effective learners and ineffective learners used cognitive strategies such as prediction, inferencing, and elaboration. What differentiated the two groups of learners, however, was that effective learners used these strategies more successfully than ineffective learners did. That is, effective learners predicted the next passage, guessed unfamiliar words out of context, and used their background knowledge accurately, whereas ineffective learners used these listening strategies inaccurately and wildly (O'Malley et al., 1989; Vandergrift, 1997). This might be because ineffective learners, compared with effective learners, were lacking linguistic knowledge and had problems recognizing words, phrases, and sentences which, in turn, made them draw too much on the background knowledge about the passages to compensate for the lack of linguistic knowledge. Caution should be exercised because even though ineffective or novice learners embedded in extracting meaning of individual words, they used interactive strategies utilizing both word-based bottom-up strategies and schema-based top-down strategies. However, compared with ineffective learners, effective learners took advantage of their listening strategies in performing their tasks due to linguistic, cognitive, and affective variables which intricately interacted with listening strategies and influenced listening comprehension.

In addition, both effective and ineffective learners tried to comprehend a whole sentence and parsed a sentence into smaller chunks when a sentence was long and hard to understand. It was the size of these units that differentiated effective learners from ineffective learners. That is, effective learners segmented sentences into bigger units than ineffective learners did, a finding also noted by previous studies (O'Malley et al., 1989; Vandergrift, 1997). Compared with effective learners who were able to process textual units such as words, phrases, and sentences automatically, ineffective learners had problems in processing these textual units, tended to fixate their attention to words, and translated the words into L1 in a controlled way.

This caused their cognitive processing capacity and memory ability about what they had heard to be limited.

In affective strategies, both groups of learners felt anxiety in listening comprehension, especially in a test situation, and shared similar listening strategies such as ‘trying to relax’ in order to relieve their anxiety. In the extent of anxiety level, however, ineffective learners were, in general, more worried about listening comprehension than effective learners. In addition, it was found that the anxiety level was reversely related to the confidence level because effective learners were more confident and less worried in their listening comprehension than ineffective listeners (Gan et al., 2004). It is noteworthy that when L2 learners are worried too much and have low confidence in performing listening tasks, their cognitive system and affective system do not function normally and block their comprehension tasks. Accordingly, the low anxiety level combined with the high confidence level held by effective learners might aid better in the listening comprehension tasks than their counterparts who were more worried and less confident in the tasks.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Even though several important findings were made in this study, this study is not immune to criticism in generalization because it was undertaken with limited numbers of participants learning English in Korea and because there are various data collection methods such as observation, diaries, and retrospective interviews other than self-report data. Thus, more studies should be conducted among different learners in different learning contexts using different data collection methods to replicate the findings of this study and to shed further light on the strategy differences used by effective and ineffective learners. This study as well as future studies on learning strategies will contribute to more effective second language learning and teaching, which in turn will lead to a more complete science of learning strategies in the domain of L2 acquisition.

### **About the Presenter**

**Gi-Pyo Park** received his Ph.D. degree at the University of Texas at Austin. Since then, he has undertaken research on learning strategies, teaching listening, speaking, and reading skills, and language testing.