

# The Influences of Language Anxiety on the Use of Learning Strategies\*

Namkyu Park  
(Konyang University)

**Park, Namkyu. 2007. The Influences of Language Anxiety on the Use of Learning Strategies.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 15(3), 309-328. This study investigated whether there were any significant differences between Korean EFL learners' actual use of learning strategies and their beliefs in the effectiveness of the strategy use. This study was also conducted to see if more successful learners were different from their counterparts in the ways they used social learning strategies. A total of 58 university students participated in this study. Data were collected by Oxford's SILL (1990) and follow-up in-depth interviews. Descriptive and inferential statistics and analytic inductive method were used to analyze the data. This study found that the subjects employed learning strategies significantly less than they believed they should. The follow-up in-depth interviews revealed that it was language anxiety that was responsible for the gap: Less successful learners felt more anticipated language anxiety, carrying their unpleasant experiences with unfriendly native speakers of English to the next communication. The findings of this study indicate that more attention should be paid to socio-affective sides of language learning and that language teaching practices and materials should be more authentic, reflecting the real world as it is.

**Key Words:** learning strategies, anticipated language anxiety, learner beliefs, socio-affective sides of language learning, authenticity

## 1. Introduction

There seems to be no question that foreign language learners should be equipped with appropriate learning strategies in order to learn a

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\* I would like to thank the anonymous *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal* reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments.

target language more effectively and efficiently because language learning is an intentional and strategic effort (Chamot & O'Malley, 1996; MacIntyre, 1994). Language learning strategies are steps that are intentionally taken by the language learner to acquire, store, and retrieve information on a target language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Any study concerning language learning strategies is based on the following two assumptions or justifications. On the one hand, language learners need to be autonomous, and it is the appropriate use of language learning strategies that enables the learners to achieve learner autonomy (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). On the other hand, the use of effective language learning strategies facilitates language learning (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; Chamot & O'Malley, 1996; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1993).

Many learning strategy studies (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; MacAro, 2002; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; Oxford & Green, 1995; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Wenden, 1991) have found or acknowledged that successful language learners used learning strategies more frequently and more effectively than less successful learners. It was also reported that less successful language learners often choose strategies ineffectively or they do not know how to put the strategies together to make language learning more effective and efficient (Galloway & Labarca, 1991; Vann & Abraham, 1990). Chamot and Kupper (1989) found that, unlike less successful language learners, successful language learners select learning strategies that work well together in a highly orchestrated way. As a result of the previous studies on learning strategies, we now know more of the effectiveness of learning strategies. Nevertheless, many aspects of language learning strategies still remain to be either further investigated or even studied for the first time for us to have a better understanding of learning strategies.

Acknowledging the facilitative role of learning strategies in language learning, many researchers have directed their attention to factors that greatly influence the learners' choices of learning strategies. One of

those factors is learner beliefs about learning strategies and language learning in general. Just as everybody has opinions, language learners also hold their opinions or beliefs about language learning. Language learners' beliefs, right or wrong, undoubtedly have a strong impact on their learning behaviors and their ultimate success in language learning (Kern, 1995; Ellis, 1994; McCargar, 1993; Nunan, 1993; Lutz, 1990; Horwitz, 1987). It is not difficult to imagine that learners have beliefs about learning strategies and that their beliefs about learning strategies would affect not only their use of learning strategies and but also their attitudes towards the strategy instruction (Wenden, 1987). In the cognitive psychology paradigm, learning strategies are cognitive skills (Chamot & O'Malley, 1996). Just as any new information is acquired through cognitive processes such as perception, attention, encoding, and retrieval, so are learning strategies. Language learners who have a negative perception of learning strategies would not allow themselves to go through those cognitive processes appropriately. A positive attitude towards learning strategies must be a precondition to the use of learning strategies. Despite the important aspects of learner beliefs about language learning in general and learning strategies, only a limited number of formal studies have been conducted on language learners' beliefs (Ellis, 1994). Because of the lack of studies on learner beliefs, there are many more aspects to be explored for us to have better knowledge about learner beliefs.

Few studies have reported if the language learner uses learning strategies in accordance with their beliefs on the value of learning strategies. Based on the findings of the previous studies on learner beliefs about language learning and according to our hypothesis, it seems probable that language learners will probably use learning strategies more frequently when they believe that the use of the strategies is beneficial for their language learning. However, we are not sure if it is in fact the case or not. Contrary to our assumptions, the learner beliefs on learning strategies may not be proportionally realized into their actual strategy use.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Korean EFL learners' beliefs on the value of learning strategies were manifested in their actual strategy use. This study was also conducted to see if there was any difference between more successful Korean EFL learners and their less successful counterparts in their use of and beliefs about learning strategies.

## 2. Research Design

### 2.1 Subjects

A total of 58 Korean undergraduate students attending a local university participated in this study. Thirty of them were male and the rest female. The subjects' overall language proficiency levels ranged roughly from high-beginning to low-advanced, based on their self-rated English language proficiency, TOEIC scores, and academic grades on English listening and speaking courses. According to their self-rated English language proficiency, the average level of English proficiency of all the subjects was 5.2, 1 being novice proficiency and 9 being native-like English proficiency. The average TOEIC score was 510, and the average academic grade on English listening and speaking courses was 3.1/4.5.

A total of 10 students from the initial study participated in the follow-up in-depth interview study. Five of them were classified as more successful language learners and the rest as their less successful counterparts, based on the information from the biographical questionnaire. According to their self-rated English language proficiency levels, the mean score of more successful learners' English proficiency levels was 7.1, while that of less successful learners' English language proficiency levels was 3.1. The average TOEIC score of the more successful was 750, and that of the less successful was 395. The average academic grade on English listening and speaking courses of the more successful was 4.1/4.5 and that of the less successful was 2.3/4.5.

## 2.2 Data Collection

Two paper-and-pencil research instruments were used for this study. One of them was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Version 7.0, devised by Oxford (1990), for speakers of other languages learning English as a foreign/second language. The SILL divides language learning strategies into six groups, each of which contains a host of sub-strategies. The six groups of learning strategies are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, social strategies, and affective strategies. The psychometric quality of the SILL, in terms of reliability, validity, and utility, has been tested and well established by many studies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The current writer slightly modified the original questionnaire to find the subjects' beliefs on the value of each learning strategy. Explained in Korean by the current writer, this 5-point Likert scale SILL, 1 being 'Always' and 5 being 'Never,' asks respondents to indicate how often they use such learning strategies as "I actively seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers of English." The SILL also asks the respondents to mark their beliefs in the value of each item of the strategies, 1 being 'Very effective' and 5 being 'Very ineffective.' The other instrument was a biographical questionnaire to identify the subjects' gender, TOEIC score, academic grades on conversational English, and self-rated English language proficiency levels.

For the follow-up study, semi-structured but open-ended interviews were utilized to identify why there were differences between the learners' actual learning strategy use and their beliefs in the value of those strategies that they used. The follow-up interview was conducted also to see how more successful learners were different from their counterparts in how they deal with social strategies when they communicated with native speakers of English. I adopted Mishler's (1986) alternative interview method that formulates interview questions as texts and responses as stories. Second language learning researchers have long used interviews as a research instrument to collect in-depth

data in language learning research (Young, 1995). Interview items were predetermined, but both the interviewer and the interviewees could ask and answer additional questions. The interview was done in Korean, and each interview took about an hour. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for later analysis.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the central tendency of the strategy use. Inferential statistics were used to determine P value, and unpaired-samples t-tests were conducted. A confidence interval for differences was established at 95%, thus creating p value at 0.05.

Analytic inductive method was used to analyze data from the follow-up interviews. The sole purpose of the method was to identify and categorize recurring patterns of research data, which is a core requirement for generalizing any qualitative research findings. The basic idea of the analytic inductive method is the same as any statistical analysis in that the identification and categorization of frequently recurring patterns of the data in the analytic inductive method are essentially the same as the determination and calculation of the central tendency of scores in statistical analysis.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

This study revealed, first, that Korean EFL learners believed they should have used learning strategies more frequently than they actually did. Second, less frequent use of learning strategies stemmed from language anxiety experienced by Korean EFL learners regarding interpersonal communication with native speakers of English. Finally, less successful learners felt more anticipated language anxiety, carrying their unpleasant experiences with unfriendly native speakers of English to the next communication with other native speakers of English.

### 3.1 The Difference between Reality and Belief

As shown in Table 1, extremely significant differences were found between Korean EFL learners' actual strategy use and their beliefs in the value of the strategy used. That is to say, Korean EFL learners employed learning strategies much less than they believed they should. The significant gap between the learner's actual use of the strategies and their belief in the value of the strategy use is not limited to any specific group of the learners but shown in all the subjects participating in this study. Female, male, more successful, and less successful language learners all showed differences between their actual strategy use and their beliefs on the effectiveness of learning strategies. It is also noticeable that the mean differences between the groups in reality are somewhat more fluctuated than those in belief.

**Table 1. The differences between reality and belief**

Groups	Reality (Mean)	Belief (Mean)	Mean Difference
All learners	2.94	2.08	-0.8600
Males	2.86	2.11	-0.7553
Females	3.04	2.05	-0.9915
Successful	2.55	1.78	-0.7695
Less successful	3.25	2.09	-1.1517

The unpaired t-tests found, as in Table 2, that the mean differences between the reality and the belief are considered either extremely significant for both female learners and less successful learners or very significant for both male learners and more successful learners.

**Table 2. The results of unpaired t-tests**

Subjects	The 95% CI	t	P value	SD
All learners	-1.2832 to -0.4360	4.5276	0.0011	F = 1.5882 P = 0.3120
Males	-1.2143 to -0.2962	3.6655	0.0043	F = 1.9833 P = 0.2352
Females	-1.4016 to -0.5815	5.3875	0.0003	F = 1.2492 P = 0.4065
Successful	-1.2465 to -0.2924	3.5937	0.0049	F = 1.0539 P = 0.4777
Less successful	-1.4896 to -0.8138	7.5934	0.0001	F = 1.4390 P = 0.3497

This finding is somewhat opposite to our general assumption that language learners would use learning strategies more frequently if they believed that the use of learning strategies is beneficial for their language learning. According to the findings of previous studies on the effect of learner beliefs on language learning, it seems to be true that learner beliefs surely affect, to some extent, the process of language learning in general. However, that is not the case when it comes to the effect of learner beliefs on the use of learning strategies.

According to the results of the current study, we cannot draw a clear conclusion on the relationship between the learner's actual strategy use and their beliefs on the effectiveness of learning strategies. A closer look at the results of this study makes the matter even more complicated. On the one hand, the learners used learning strategies more frequently when they believed the use of learning strategies was beneficial for them. This is seen from the difference between more successful learners and their counterparts. The mean score of less successful learners in belief was 2.09, and their mean score of the use of learning strategies was 3.25. In contrast, the mean score of more successful learners in belief was 1.78, and their mean score of the use of learning strategies was 2.55. On the other hand, the learners did not necessarily use learning strategies more frequently even if they believed the use of learning strategies was effective for better English language learning. The male subjects, whose mean score in belief was 2.11, used



learning strategies less frequently than the female subjects whose mean score in belief was 2.05. The males' mean score in the actual use of learning strategies was 2.86, while the females' mean score in the actual use of learning strategies was 3.04. In the end, this study revealed conflicting results in relation to our general assumption that the more the language learners believe in the effectiveness of learning strategies, the more frequently they will use learning strategies. The findings of this study illustrate that learner beliefs are, obviously, not the only affective factor in the use of learning strategies by Korean EFL learners. The results of this study call for further study to find out what other factors there are, affecting the language learner to use learning strategies more or less frequently.

Many factors are known to affect foreign language learning in general. Those factors include language proficiency, motivation, gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, type of task, age and learning stage, learning style, and tolerance of ambiguity. Research reports that more proficient and more motivated language learners usually employ more strategies than less proficient and less motivated language learners; female language learners usually employ strategies more frequently than male language learners; attitudes and beliefs reportedly have profound impact on the use of learning strategies, with negative attitudes and beliefs on language learning often causing poor strategy use or lack of orchestration of learning strategies (Oxford, 1994). Among those affecting factors, language anxiety has been reported to be one of the most negative affective factors that consistently impede language learners from utilizing effective learning strategies (Cohen, 1995; MacIntyre, 1994; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Daly, 1991). Numerous studies on language anxiety have reported the negative relationship between language anxiety and L2 learning and performance (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996; Ehrman, 1996; MacIntyre, 1995; Young, 1992; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Campbell & Ortiz, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Daly, 1991).

### **3.2 Language Anxiety Responsible for the Differences**

The follow-up interviews of this study revealed that language anxiety was a major negative factor that prevented the subjects from employing or attempting to employ learning strategies even though they wanted to use learning strategies more frequently than they actually did. This is shown in the difference between more successful learners and their counterparts. Less successful learners were distinct from their counterparts in the following ways. Less successful learners felt more anticipated language anxiety, carrying their unpleasant experiences with unfriendly native speakers of English to the next communication with other native speakers of English.

This study found that there were systematically patterned differences between more successful learners and less successful learners in how they experience more or less language anxiety in relation to social learning strategies. First, less successful learners put more emphasis on language form in their communication, while more successful learners put more emphasis on overall meaning in their communication. This was because less successful learners thought they should speak grammatically correct English all the time. They believed they were constantly judged by their English correctness. Thus, less successful learners felt greater anxiety whenever they could not express themselves fully in a grammatically correct way. Meanwhile, more successful learners believed that fluency was more important than accuracy. They believed that it was acceptable to make grammatical errors as long as they clearly communicated their intended meaning.

The second difference comes from how the two groups of learners react to their experiences with unfriendly native English speakers. Less successful learners often take their unpleasant experiences with unfriendly native English speakers on a group level. In other words, they often generalize native English speakers' attitudes toward the learners, based on their unpleasant English language learning experiences with unfriendly native English speakers. That way they carry their unpleasant feelings from their experiences with unfriendly native English speakers to the next communication with other native

English speakers. As a result of that, they feel language anxiety even before they are involved in social communicative interactions with native speakers of English. Unlike less successful learners, more successful learners view the same kind of experiences on an individual basis, and therefore they rarely carry their unpleasant feelings to the next communication with other native English speakers. It is noticeable that even less successful learners felt less language anxiety once they found the native speakers of English to be kind and considerate toward the learners.

Language anxiety has been known to be closely related with the use of learning strategies in that foreign language learners using learning strategies, social learning strategies in particular, are inevitably affected by surroundings such as time, space, and people. Many researchers have tried to understand the intricate nature of language anxiety and the way language anxiety affects foreign or second (L2) learning and performance (Ganschow et al, 1994; Horwitz, 1990; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Madsen et al, 1991). The importance of studying language anxiety cannot be emphasized too much in that emotions may be the most fundamental element in L2 learning (Brown, 1991): language learning must take place through intellectual or mental processes, but the mental states seem to be often governed by emotions rather than the other way around. Despite the recent increase in language anxiety research and findings on the relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning, researchers could not provide adequate explanation on how language anxiety is constructed and how it affects L2 learning processes and performance (MacIntyre, 1995; Horwitz & Young, 1991).

Some researchers (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996; Sparks & Ganschow, 1995) have claimed that language anxiety, along with other affective variables, is no more than a side effect that is produced by L2 learners who have difficulties in coding their native language. According to their hypothesis, Linguistic Coding Difference Hypothesis, individual differences in second or foreign language learning stem mainly from language aptitude rather than low motivation, poor attitude, or high anxiety. They assert that the more competent L2 learners are in their

native language, the more likely the learners are to succeed in second language learning. In another attempt to provide an explanation for language anxiety, some researchers such as Schinke-Llano & Vicars (1993) and Krashen (1982) have asserted that so-called 'lowered affective filter' on the part of the L2 learner is one of the essential components for successful L2 learning. Researchers have often categorized the second language learner's personality into introverted or extroverted; inhibited or uninhibited; field-dependent or field-independent. The L2 learner whose personality is introverted, inhibited, and field-dependent has been said to feel greater language anxiety than the L2 learner whose personality is extroverted, uninhibited, and field-independent. It seems that these studies disregarded that people's psychological states often change according to different social situations. It is more plausible that people's affective states are constructed socially rather than inherently, for the most part (MacIntyre, 1995; Peirce, 1995). However highly motivated, extroverted, and uninhibited language learners may be, there must be some particular social circumstances that language learners are not willing to be involved in social interactions with native speakers of a target language (Cumming & Gill, 1992). The current study also readdressed the point made above in that less successful learners felt more or less language anxiety, depending on the attitude of native speakers of English. The relationship between L2 learners and native speakers of a target language must play a crucial role in shaping communicative social interactions between the two parties. It is not hard to imagine that any second language learning would unavoidably be affected by social context surrounding L2 learning. That being the case, we should try to understand the L2 learning process in connection with the language learning context that constantly shapes the L2 learner's affective variables such as anxiety and motivation. After all, the language learner's affective variables need to be understood with reference to the larger language learning context, that is, the social world, since the language learner's affective states are constructed mostly socially rather than inherently within the language learner (MacIntyre, 1995).

As indicated above, socio-affective strategies of second language learning cannot be fully understood until we understand the social relationship between language learners and native speakers of a target language. The field of language learning strategy research should have made more efforts to better understand social and affective aspects of second language learning. Based on our better understanding of the social and affective sides of language learning, we should reconceptualize second language learning that places more emphasis on social and affective aspects of second language learning (Oxford, 1994; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Language learning is not just a cognitive activity. It unavoidably involves emotions. Learning strategy researchers should reconceptualize social and affective strategies in relation to broader social context such as the relationship between native and non-native speakers of a target language. In addition, affective sides of language learning should always be studied together with social sides of language learning because they are inseparably related to one another.

#### **4. Implications**

It is generally through communicative social interactions that language learners achieve their communicative competence in a target language. Nevertheless, attention to socio-affective aspects of language learning by second language researchers and practitioners has been minimal, and some researchers have even discredited the importance of social and affective aspects of language learning, putting more emphasis on cognitive aspects of language learning. Language learning is obviously not only a cognitive activity. Any language problems related to cognitive aspects of language learning may be said to be marginal in that language learners already have themselves involved in learning processes, and therefore the problems could readily be adjusted with help from language teachers. In contrast, any problems that language learners might have in socio-affective aspects of language learning may be said to be overwhelming in that language learners having problems in socio-affective characteristics of language learning might completely

withdraw themselves from language learning processes. At best, they might marginally involve themselves in language learning processes just as less successful learners who felt a considerable amount of language anxiety passively involved themselves in communicative social interactions with native speakers of English or others. According to the report on anxiety (CNN, 1998), a high level of stress hormones can block the retrieval of information stored in long-term memory.

More serious and in-depth attention should be paid to the socio-affective aspects of second/foreign language learning. The degree of attention to or emphasis on the social-affective traits of language learning can pervasively affect outcomes of language instruction that are intended to facilitate the learners' communicative competence.

In addition, language instruction should be more realistic and authentic in that it should reflect the real world the learners have to live in. According to less successful learners, they have expected native English speakers, especially European Americans, to be friendly and cooperative for their language learning. Obviously, it is not the case that every native English speaker is friendly and cooperative toward English language learners. According to the interviews of this study, less successful learners get easily disappointed and their feelings get hurt when their expectations are not met by native English speakers' attitudes towards them. They often generalize about native English speakers, based on their unpleasant learning experiences with unfriendly native English speakers, which makes them feel anticipated language anxiety in communicative social interactions with other native English speakers. Therefore, their use of social learning strategies decreases, and in turn their communicative competence level stays at a lower level. The field of second language acquisition has long acknowledged that there is a big gap between the language classroom and the real world in that L2 learners experience great difficulty efficiently applying what they have learned in the language classroom to communicative social interactions with native speakers of a target language in the real world. As a result of failure to apply classroom learning to real-life situations, the language learners are left alone in the real world, not knowing how

to carry out what they have learned language learning and use it in real communicative social interactions with different kinds of native speakers. Inadequately or completely unprepared to cope with real world communication with native speakers, the learners have to face the real world by themselves. In the course of doing that, the learners inevitably get either encouraged or discouraged by their language experience with different kinds of native speakers of a target language in the real world.

Looking at any of the textbooks or materials used in EFL classrooms, we can easily find out that almost all native speakers of English are portrayed as people who are kind enough to be willing to help the learners, just enough to treat the learners equally, and friendly enough to be approached by the learners. Looking at the real world, the picture is much more complex because there are actually all different kinds of native speakers of English. Some of them are very much like those who are described in the books, some of them are totally different from those described in the books, and others fall somewhere in between the extremes.

Second language acquisition theory and practice have distorted the picture of the real world, intentionally or unintentionally, by having neglected or failed to educate the learners about the real world as it is, to prepare them for the real world, and to have them extend their language learning and use it in the real world. People the learners have to interact with are those in the real world, not those in an imaginary world. Nobody will dispute that language is learned, used, and understood always in relation to its social context because we cannot imagine any language, spoken or written, that can be utilized outside a social context. That being the case, no further explanation is needed for why language instruction has to be realistic and authentic.

## 5. Conclusion

This study revealed that Korean EFL learners believed they should have used learning strategies more frequently than they actually did. It was also found that the less frequent use of learning strategies

stemmed from language anxiety experienced by the learners in the course of socially interacting with native English speakers. Finally, this study showed that less successful learners felt more anticipated language anxiety, carrying their unpleasant experiences with unfriendly native speakers of English to the next communication with other native speakers of English.

The findings of this study indicate that language teaching practices and materials should be authentic, reflecting the real world as it is. This will better help the learners cope with language learning and use in the real world. Empowerment of the learners must be one of many features that should be realized in the course of English language teaching.

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Namkyu Park  
Department of English as a Foreign Language  
Global Communication College, Konyang University  
119 Daehakro, Nonsan, Chungnam 320-711, Korea  
Phone: 82-41-730-5362  
E-mail: np@konyang.ac.kr

Received: 1 Aug, 2007  
Revised: 10 Sept, 2007  
Accepted: 14 Sept, 2007