

Multilingualism in an English-medium university in Turkey:
Language learning strategy choice based on naturalistic versus instructed
language acquisition

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This presentation derives from research conducted at Bogazici University (BU), which is an English-medium university in Istanbul with a sizeable population of international students. BU, one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey, was established as an American university in 1863. It later became a state university in 1971, yet the medium of instruction remained English. Students admitted to BU have to score at least 213 on the computerized TOEFL. A score short of this cut off point means that the student has to first study English in the university's intensive English program for one or two semesters in preparation for pursuing his/her university studies in English. The program builds up the student's academic proficiency in English (e.g., reading textbooks and articles, listening to lectures and taking down notes, writing reports and term papers). Concurrently, these students have to learn some Turkish in order to live and interact with

the wider community, the kind of Turkish that requires knowledge of basic conversational skills.

Thus, we have a case of multilingualism at BU. In addition to their native language, international students learn English through formal intensive instruction in a classroom setting, with a clear academic aim, while they acquire Turkish naturalistically, i.e., in an informal manner and in survival/social contexts.

Given that the students' goals for learning English are to master academic English and that their goals for learning Turkish are to achieve survival/social proficiency in Turkish, with the former characterizing tutored learning and the latter naturalistic acquisition, this study was designed to find out if and how language learning strategies differed for each of the languages being acquired, especially with regard to the type of language proficiency being aimed at. That is, are there any differences in the choice of language learning strategy based on language exposure conditions and, if so, do these differences correlate with the learners' goals to acquire the languages in question.

The key concept of language proficiency used was based on Cummins' (1981) model of the distinction between Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). Cummins views proficiency as consisting of BICS, which are essential conversational skills used in interpersonal relations or in informal situations. BICS is generally context embedded and less cognitively demanding in that linguistic and extra-linguistic content provide relatively easy access to meaning.

By contrast, CALP, the other component of proficiency, refers to the language of academic content, which is often context reduced and more cognitively demanding.

The other key concept, that of language learning strategies, was based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies, which are direct or indirect actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations. Whereas direct learning strategies involve the target language, requiring different ways of mentally processing a given set of linguistic data, indirect strategies support and manage language learning without involving the target language directly. Direct strategies consist of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, comprise metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which operationalizes Oxford's taxonomy in the form of a survey instrument to measure a host of language learning strategies, was used in the study. SILL defines each type of strategy, direct or indirect, clearly. For example, in the case of direct strategies, one aspect of a memory strategy is creating mental linkages; examples of a cognitive strategy are practicing, analyzing, or reasoning; a representation of a compensation strategy is guessing intelligently. In the case of indirect strategies, one type of metacognitive strategy is exemplified in arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning; one kind of affective strategy has to do with lowering one's anxiety and encouraging oneself; one sort of social strategy involves asking questions and cooperating with others.

The SILL was administered at the end of the academic year so that students would have had extended exposure to both languages. There was a one-week interval between the administration of the SILL for English and that for Turkish in order for the responses for one language not to interfere with those given for the other.

The 25 participants, 60% of whom were male and 40% female, were selected out of an original pool of more than 300 subjects, based on a number of chiefly linguistic concerns. Care was taken not to include subjects of Turkic origin in the study to ensure they did not speak a dialect in their home country. Moreover, anyone who had had formal Turkish instruction prior to arriving in Turkey or who had formal Turkish instruction while resident in Turkey was excluded from the study. Finally, it was seen to that all participants had TOEFL scores under 213, which made enrolment in the BU intensive English program mandatory.

In terms of their native languages, 36% of the participants spoke Russian, 20% Crimean, 12% Albanian, 8% Chinese, 8% Mongolian, 8% Bulgarian, 4% German, and 4% Swedish.

Because of the limited number of participants, a parametric data analysis could not be performed. Instead nonparametric tests were applied. The data were analyzed using the SPSS, version 10.0. The responses to the SILL items for English and also for Turkish were entered into the data analysis program. When the total SILL performances in

English and Turkish were compared, the mean of the total scores on the SILL for English in relation to Turkish was higher, yet this difference was not statistically significant.

In general, the participants turned out to be high strategy users in terms of their compensation (3.52), metacognitive (3.36), and cognitive (3.25) strategy use in the context of learning English. In the case of Turkish, they were high strategy users in terms of their compensation (3.59) and social (3.45) strategy use.

In particular, when inter-comparisons along with nonparametric correlational analyses were conducted between the parallel sections of the SILL for English and for Turkish, the results showed that in the domain of indirect strategies the use of metacognitive strategies in learning English was significantly higher than that of Turkish ($p < .01$, $p = .001$). In the same context, the use of social strategies in learning Turkish was significantly higher than that of English ($p < .05$, $p = .02$).

These results demonstrate that although students use all kinds of strategies in learning both languages, the most commonly operationalized direct strategies are essentially the same with both English and Turkish learning, compensation being the one with the highest frequency. The main difference in strategy choice occurs in the realm of indirect strategies. Whereas in English learning students make more use of metacognitive strategies, in learning Turkish they use social strategies more often.

The findings of the present study suggest that language learners activate direct strategies regardless of the context in which language learning takes place for the simple reason that direct strategies involve the target language *per se*. On the other hand, it is clear that there is a link between the type of learning (tutored versus untutored) and the kind of indirect strategy preferred. The role of metacognitive strategies in tutored learning is significantly higher in learning English than in learning Turkish because of the fact that metacognitive strategies support language learning mainly in the classroom, i.e., in context-reduced situations involving CALP. By contrast, the role of social strategies in untutored (naturalistic) acquisition becomes quite important because these strategies enable target language learning as part of the learner's daily life interactions with its native speakers, i.e., in context-embedded situations involving BICS.

Overall, this study points to the need for certain pedagogic criteria to be taken into consideration in strategy training programs for adult L2 learners. First, it would be wise to focus on fostering compensation and cognition in tutored learning settings aiming at the development of CALP. Likewise, metacognition should be given the emphasis it deserves in such settings. However, given that social strategies play a significant role in untutored acquisition in naturalistic settings, language pedagogy should help support the development of the learner's proficiency in the local language by focusing on BICS building through the implementation of authentic and natural communicative situations in the classroom, with a view to enhancing social strategy use within the normally formalistic classroom atmosphere.

References

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