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Employing a Questionnaire to Assess the Use of Language Learning Strategies

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Questionnaires are among the most efficient and comprehensive ways to assess frequency of language learning strategy use. This article discusses the validity of the most widely employed strategy questionnaire, the ESL/EFL version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Validity of the SILL rests on its link with language performance (course grades, standardized test scores, ratings of proficiency), as well as its relationship to learning styles. Reliability of the SILL is high across many cultural groups. Appropriate uses and limitations of questionnaires for strategy assessment are detailed, along with implications for research and instruction.

One of the most prevalent ways to assess the use of language learning strategies is to use a questionnaire (otherwise known as an inventory or a summative rating scale). The strategy questionnaire most often used around the world at this time is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford, 1986-1990). This article has five purposes: (1) to discuss strategy questionnaires other than the SILL, (2) to describe the SILL's purpose and nature, (3) to provide detailed psychometric results concerning the ESL/EFL (English as a second or foreign language) version of the SILL, (4) to present information on the appropriate uses and limitations of a strategy questionnaire in comparison with other means of strategy assessment, and (5) to provide implications for research and instruction.

Strategy Questionnaires Other than the SILL

To present a context, we turn first to strategy questionnaires other than the SILL. Nearly a dozen have been used in published studies. For example, Bialystok (1981) used a 12-item, structured, untitled rating scale to assess strategy use. The scale asked questions about the extent to which strategies were used on both oral and written tasks in communicative settings (the strategies were functional practice and inferencing or guessing) and in formal classroom settings (the strategies were formal practice and monitoring). Using the scale with students of French in grades 10 and 12 in Canada, Bialystok found that functional practice had a stronger relationship with achievement.
than any of the other strategies, even though monitoring and inferring were used more often. Formal practice with rules and structures was less effective as students advanced to higher levels of learning, but functional practice had no such limitation. Reliability and validity data were absent for this instrument.

Politzer (1983) published an untitled, 1-4-scaled strategy scale including 51 items divided into three groups: general behaviors, classroom behaviors, and interactions outside of class. Using this survey with U.S. university students of French, German, and Spanish, Politzer found that course level influenced strategy use, with higher-level students using more so-called “positive” strategies (i.e., strategies related to communicative language proficiency); and that females used social learning strategies more often than males. No reliability or validity data were given.

Politzer and McGroarty (1985) used a somewhat similar Behavior Questionnaire containing 66 items divided into three groups: individual study behaviors, classroom behaviors, and interactions outside of class. Reliability was marginally acceptable (.51, .61, and .63). The survey was used with students learning intensive ESL in an eight-week course. Improvements in ESL achievement were related to individual strategies, such as asking questions for clarification. Successful strategies for grammar differed from those for listening and speaking. Major academic field had a significant effect on strategy choice, with engineers avoiding strategies that were deemed “positive” for gaining communicative language proficiency; but there was an overlap with nationality, since many engineers were also Asian.

McGroarty (1987) used a 56-item Language Learning Strategy Student Questionnaire with a 0-6 range, divided into the same three groups as in the Politzer and McGroarty study above. No reliability or validity data were published. University students of Spanish, although taught by communicative methods, nevertheless avoided authentic practice strategies and used traditional learning strategies, such as relying heavily on the dictionary.

The Learning Strategies Inventory (Chamot, O'Malley, Kupper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1987) is a 48-item, 1-4-scaled instrument divided into five parts: listening in class, speaking in class, listening and speaking outside of class, writing, and reading. The items reflected a variety of ways of applying a total of 16 strategies. Results showed that students of Russian used more strategies than students of Spanish, while Spanish and Russian students used somewhat different strategies across language levels (beginning and intermediate or advanced). No data were published on reliability or validity.

Padron and Waxman (1988) developed a 14-item, 1-3-scaled instrument to assess reading strategies of Hispanic ESL students in grades 3-5. Seven of the items were expected to be positively related to learning and seven negatively related. Results showed that six of the seven most-used strategies were in the predicted-positive group. However, only two strategies were significantly related to learning outcomes, and these were both in the negative direction; no strategies significantly helped learning to occur. No reliability or validity data were offered.

Bedell (1993) points out a number of additional strategy scales. Huang (1984) and Huang and van Naerssen (1987) used a Strategies Questionnaire for Chinese EFL learners. This instrument includes several scaled items and some yes-no items, as well as free-response questions. Most of the items concern strategies for improving listening and speaking skills. Wangsom, Siriapan, Rattanapruks, Jarunggudan, Singkalawanij, and Vejapraphat (1986) used the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute Learning Strategy Form A (consisting of 42 yes-no statements about students behaviors) for Thai learners of EFL. Kim (1991) designed a Perceptual Learning Strategy Questionnaire, including 18 items. Noguchi’s (1991) Questionnaire for Learners is an instrument with 24 items on a 3-point scale followed by 24 on a 4-point scale, based largely on items from the SILL. Wen and Johnson’s (1991) strategy scale is also adapted from the SILL. Few of the above instruments have any published reliability or validity data. This is the key reason that the SILL was developed. If the psychometric properties of reliability and validity have not been explored, it is impossible to know whether we can put faith in the results of the research. Another reason for developing the SILL is that the preceding instruments do not always systematically represent the wide variety of strategies viewed as important to language learning; often they stop with cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Thus a more comprehensive scale was needed for measuring strategy use among ESL and EFL students.

**The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)**

**Development**

The SILL (Oxford, 1986-1990) was first designed as an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies by students at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California. Two revised versions of the SILL—one for foreign-language learners whose native language is English (80 items) and the other for learners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL, 50 items)—were published in an appendix to Oxford’s (1990b) learning strategy book for language teachers. This article deals only with research done using the 50-item (short) version. For details on the longer version, see Ehman and Oxford (1989, 1990), Nyikos and Oxford (1993), Oxford (1986), Oxford and Ehman (1993), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), and Bedell (1993).

It is estimated that 40 to 50 major studies, including a dozen dissertations and theses, have been done using the SILL. These studies have, by late 1995, involved approximately 10,000 language learners. According to research reports and articles published in the English language within the last ten to fifteen years, the SILL appears to be the only language learning strategy questionnaire that has been extensively checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways.

The SILL uses a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each strategy described: never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and always or almost always true of me. The SILL response
options are based on the widely used and well accepted response options of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory described by Weinstein, Palmer, and Schulte (1987). On the SILL, learners are asked to indicate their response (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) to a strategy description, such as “I try to find patterns in English” or “I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.” In addition to the original English version, the ESL/EFL SILL has been translated and used in the following languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Ukrainian.

Two strategy experts matched the SILL items with agreement at .99 against entries in a comprehensive strategy taxonomy of language learning. This taxonomy was built from a detailed blueprint of a range of over 200 possible strategy types (for complete details see Oxford, 1986).

One important note is that the SILL conceptualizes language-learning strategies in a broad way to include the social and affective sides of the learner as well as the more intellectual (cognitive) and “executive-managerial” (metacognitive). Therefore, when the SILL is related to language performance, the “whole learner,” rather than just the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of the learner, is usually involved. This implies that language learning, as much as or more than almost any other discipline, is an adventure of the whole learner, not just a mental exercise.

In 1989, the SILL was organized according to strategy groups using a factor analysis. This procedure allowed the researcher to divide the instrument into dimensions usually referred to as subscales or factors. Six subscales were developed based on the early factor analyses, with the intent that each subscale would have an adequate number of items to facilitate more in-depth understanding of the learning strategies for ESL/EFL. These subscales included:

1. **Memory strategies**, such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing (9 items).
2. **Cognitive strategies**, such as reasoning, analyzing, summarizing (all reflective of deep processing), as well as general practicing (14 items).
3. **Compensation strategies** (to compensate for limited knowledge), such as guessing meanings from the context in reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known (6 items).
4. **Metacognitive strategies**, such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one’s progress, and monitoring errors (9 items).
5. **Affective (emotional, motivation-related) strategies**, such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward (6 items).
6. **Social strategies**, such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware (6 items).

As shown above, the largest group of items is the cognitive strategies. This stands to reason, because research on learning strategies suggests that cognitive strategies possess the greatest variety, covering strategies related to practice and to the all-important “deep processing” in which learners analyze, synthesize, and transform new information (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

A SILL package includes a short set of directions to the student with a sample item, the 50-item instrument, a scoring worksheet on which students record their answers and calculate their averages for each strategy subscale and their overall average, a summary profile that shows their results and provides examples for self-interpretation, and a strategy graph that allows each learner to graph results from the SILL. A background questionnaire is also available to document age, sex, language experience, motivation, and other information (see Oxford, 1990b).

**Psychometric Qualities of the ESL/EFL SILL**

This section describes the psychometric qualities of the 50-item ESL/EFL SILL. Normally, such quality is established and presented in terms of reliability and validity. (Note that psychometric quality data are also available for the longer form of the SILL that was designed for native English speakers learning foreign languages; see especially Oxford, 1992 and Oxford & Ehrman, 1995.)

**Reliability**

Reliability refers to the degree of precision or accuracy of scores on an instrument. In the case of the SILL, Cronbach alpha, a measure of internal consistency, was chosen as the most appropriate reliability index. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient is used on continuous data such as the Likert-type scale in the SILL.

Though the current ESL/EFL SILL was constructed using six subscales, reliability of the SILL is determined with the whole instrument. This is because the six subscales are strongly correlated with the SILL mean (.66 to .81) and moderately correlated with each other (.35 to .61); see Oxford and Ehrman (1995).

In general, the ESL/EFL SILL reliabilities have been high. With the ESL/EFL SILL, Cronbach alphas have been .94 using the Chinese translation with a sample of 590 Taiwanese university EFL learners (Yang, 1992a); .92 using the Japanese translation with 255 Japanese university and college EFL students (Watanabe, 1990); .91 using the Korean translation with 59 Korean university EFL learners (Oh, 1992); .93 using the researcher-revised Korean translation with 332 Korean university EFL learners (Park, 1994); and .91 using the Puerto Rican Spanish translation with 374 EFL learners on the island of Puerto Rico. (These reliabilities are similar to the range of .91 to .95 found for the 80-item foreign language SILL given in the native language of the respondent; see Bedell, 1993; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989, 1990; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1986; Oxford & Burry, 1993; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Wildner-Bassett, 1992a).
studies, language performance is measured in various ways: general language proficiency tests (Ross-Lee, 1989, 1991; Green & Johnson, 1991; Phillips, 1990, 1991; Park, 1994), oral language proficiency tests (Chang, 1991), ESL proficiency tests (Oxford, 1990), and self-reported proficiency (Cross, 1992). The study of language proficiency in EFL students is further complicated by the fact that proficiency cannot be accurately measured by a single test. A variety of tests are used to measure proficiency, including written and oral language tests, listening and speaking tests, and reading comprehension tests. Each test measures different aspects of proficiency, and the results can be used to determine the student's overall proficiency level.

Validity refers to the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. In the past, several bases have been used for evaluating the validity of a test, including face validity (Chapelle, 1994), content validity (Messick, 1989), construct validity (Chapelle, 1994), and criterion-related validity (Messick, 1989). The current trend is to use construct validity, which is defined as the degree to which the test measures the same construct as the construct it is designed to measure. Construct validity is often measured using factor analysis, which is a statistical technique that identifies the underlying factors that contribute to the test scores. If the test measures the same construct as the construct it is designed to measure, then the factor analysis will show that the test scores are explained by a single factor. This is the case for the SILL, which measures the construct of ESL proficiency.
This is explainable partly because lower-proficiency students might ask more questions, have more turbulent feelings and be more willing to write them down, use very basic strategies like flashcards, or reach out (perhaps in desperation) to many different ways of using English. Takeuchi (1991a, 1991b, 1993a, 1993b) explained some of these findings based on cultural influences.

Watanabe (1990) asked university and college EFL students in Japan to rate from low to high their own proficiency in English. These proficiency self-ratings correlated moderately (average $r = .30$) with SILL strategies ($p < .0005-.001$), except for those in the category of social/affective strategies. This trend indicates that most SILL strategies were used more often by students who rated their language proficiency higher and they were used less often by students who rated their language proficiency lower.

Chang (1991) used the SILL to investigate the learning strategies and English proficiency of 50 mainland Chinese and Taiwanese ESL students at a southeastern university in the U.S. Three measures of proficiency (self-ratings and two standardized tests) showed different statistical effects on strategy use. Students who rated themselves above average in proficiency used more strategies overall than those who rated themselves below average. Neither the scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) nor the Ilym Oral Interview were significantly related to overall strategy use, but students with high scores on the oral interview used significantly more social strategies than those with low scores.

Park (1994) employed the SILL to determine the relationship between strategy use and proficiency among 332 students of EFL at the Korea Maritime University and Inha University. Park divided the subjects into three groups according to their strategy use: low, medium, and high. Then Park calculated TOEFL scores for each group. According to an ANOVA, the TOEFL mean scores of these three groups differed significantly from each other. Post-hoc tests showed that the high strategy use group had a language proficiency score that was significantly higher than that of the medium strategy use group, which in turn had a slightly higher language proficiency score than that of the low strategy use group. Thus, a linear relationship was shown between strategy use and language proficiency. In addition, Park found that the correlation between total TOEFL scores and strategy use was $r = .34$ ($p < .0001$). Cognitive, social, and metacognitive strategies had a slightly higher relationship ($r = .33$, .30, and .28 respectively) to TOEFL scores than did other kinds of strategies (memory, $r = .24$; affective, $r = .23$; compensation, $r = .21$).

Phillips (1990, 1991) found strong relationships between ESL/EFL SILL frequencies and English proficiency levels (measured by the TOEFL) among 141 adult ESL learners in seven western states in the U.S. She found no consistent differences between high-proficiency students and low-proficiency students on entire strategy categories, so she looked at strategies singly. She found that middle scorers on the TOEFL, who thus had moderate proficiency in English, showed significantly higher overall strategy use than did the high-proficiency or the low-proficiency group, when strategy use was defined as the mean number of strategies used frequently and the mean number of strategy categories that had at least one frequently used strategy. The profile of medium-proficiency students using more strategies more often than high-proficiency or low-proficiency students produced a curvilinear pattern. Additionally, Phillips discovered that high TOEFL scorers used such learning strategies as paraphrasing, defining clear goals for learning English, and avoiding verbatim translation significantly more often than low TOEFL scorers. The low TOEFL scorers, many of whom would logically be found among beginning students, reported significantly greater use of such strategies as using flashcards, finding out how to be a better speaker, looking for conversation partners, noticing tension or nervousness, and writing down feelings in a journal.

Green (1991) investigated 213 Spanish-speaking students learning English on the island of Puerto Rico. The English as a Second Language Achievement Test (ESLAT), which was used in the study, is a measure of overall English proficiency (not achievement on a given curriculum). Green found moderate and significant correlations, usually in the upper .30s, between SILL strategy factors and ESLAT proficiency scores, and he discovered the same level of correlations between individual SILL items and proficiency scores. In a later analysis of variance, Green (1992) showed that language level had a statistically significant influence on strategy use, with higher-proficiency students in general using strategies more frequently than lower-proficiency students. With a larger sample of 374 students, Green and Oxford (1995) found that language proficiency level had significant effects on the use of the following kinds of strategies: compensation strategies ($p < .0001$), cognitive strategies ($p < .0001$), metacognitive strategies ($p < .0025$), and social strategies ($p < .008$). Two other categories of strategies, memory and affective strategies, displayed no significant difference by proficiency level. In the four significant categories, higher proficiency was associated with more frequent strategy use. Significant variation occurred by gender, with females using strategies significantly more often than males in this study.

In Mullins' (1991) SILL study, 110 Thai university-level EFL majors showed linkages between strategy use and various measures of English proficiency. For instance, compensation strategy use correlated at $r = .38$ ($p < .0001$) with language placement scores and at $r = .32$ ($p < .006$) with language course grades. A correlation of $r = .24$ ($p < .03$) was found between metacognitive strategy use and language course grades. However, a negative correlation of $r = -.32$ ($p < .005$) was found between affective strategy use and language entrance examination scores, which are different from language placement scores in this particular Thai university. It is possible that students who are very anxious and who resort to affective strategies do less well on the entrance examination.

As shown by Dreyer and Oxford (1996), approximately 45% of the total variance in language proficiency (TOEFL scores) in a South African ESL study was explained by learning strategy use as measured by the SILL. A regression analysis demonstrated that the greatest part of the variance stemmed from metacognitive strategies, with much smaller amounts contributed by affective and social strategies. Canonical correlation showed a highly significant relationship between the parts of the TOEFL and the categories on the SILL ($r = .73$). The sample consisted of 305 Afrikaans first-year university students learning ESL in South Africa (Dreyer, 1992).
What we can learn about construct validity of the SILL based on relationships with language performance.

ESL/EFL SILL strategy use is related, as expected, to language performance in a number of studies, thus providing construct validity evidence for the SILL. (These results agree with earlier research using varied strategy-assessment instruments; for instance, Corrales & Call, 1989; Huang, 1984; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). In many, but not all instances, the relationship is linear, showing that more advanced or more proficient students use strategies more frequently.

Construct Validity in Strategy Use in Foreign versus Second Language Environments

Some existing SILL data indicate that strategy-use patterns often differ between ESL and EFL settings. ESL environments typically show high frequencies of use for at least half of the strategy categories. For example, Oxford, Nyikos, Nyikos, Lezhnev, Eyriye, and Rossi-Le (1989) found high frequencies of use for 60% of the strategies on the SILL as used by 159 ESL learners in the U.S. Rossi-Le (1989) learned that among 147 adult ESL learners in two community colleges in the U.S., high frequencies existed for most of the strategies. Oxford, Talbott, and Halleck (1989), with a sample of 43 ESL learners at a large Northeastern university in the U.S., discovered high levels of strategy use for two-thirds of the strategy categories. Phillips (1990, 1991), studying 141 adult ESL learners in seven western states, noted that half the strategy categories were used at a high level. All four of these ESL studies reflected large amounts of high-frequency strategy use.

In contrast, five EFL studies (Klassen [1994], 228 Taiwanese university students; Noguchi [1991], 174 Japanese junior high students; Oh [1992], 59 Korean university students; Park [1994], 332 Korean university students; Yang [1994], 68 Taiwanese university students) indicated that strategy use in these settings was mostly at a medium level, far different from ESL strategy use in the studies noted earlier. In a study in Puerto Rico, where English was not the major language of daily communication but was nevertheless highly available as input (a hybrid ESL/EFL setting), strategy use among 213 university students learning English was much more like the EFL settings than the ESL environments.

Thus, we can see that a second language environment, which demands daily use of the target language, often calls for (or encourages) more frequent strategy use than a foreign language environment, which does not require continual use of the target language. This is a sound generalization for most language students.

However, career interests can override this generalization. For example, Mullins (1992) found that her 110 Thai university EFL students had a rather high level of strategy use; and these students, unlike most of the ELF students mentioned in other studies, were majoring in English and wanted to use English in their careers. Likewise, Davis and Abas’ (1991) 64 EFL students had mostly high strategy use; and they were already language teachers. Thus, strong language-related career interests can transform the target-language-impoverished EFL setting and make it a thriving home for language learning strategies.

What we can learn about construct validity of the SILL based on relationships with ESL/EFL setting.

In short, unless foreign language students are extremely motivated because of their language-career interests, they will use strategies with less frequency than second-language students. Second-language students have more daily need to use the language, and therefore it is likely that they have greater motivation to use strategies. (Strategy use and motivation have elsewhere been shown to be statistically related by Oxford & Nyikos, 1989.)

Construct Validity in the Relationship Between Strategies and Learning Styles

Strong relationships between learning strategy use and sensory preferences—often viewed as an aspect of learning style—have been posited (Oxford, Ehman, & Lavine, 1991) as partial evidence of the construct validity of the SILL. According to Oxford, Ehman, and Lavine, visual students use strategies involving reading alone in a quiet place or paying attention to blackboards, movies, computer screens, and other forms of visual stimulation. Auditory students are comfortable without visual input and frequently use strategies that encourage conversation in a noisy, social environment with multiple sources of aural stimulation. Kinesthetic students need movement strategies, and tactile students require strategies that involve manipulating real objects in the classroom; both types need to use the strategies of taking frequent breaks.

ESL/EFL SILL data exist supporting the link between learning strategy use and learning styles, thus at the same time strengthening the evidence of construct validity of the SILL. Rossi-Le (1989) found a significant relationship (p < .0005) between learning styles (visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic) and overall strategy use on the ESL/EFL SILL through a MANOVA, and she also found significant predictive relationships through multiple regression.

Rossi-Le’s MANOVA results showed that visual learners preferred visualization strategies (p < .0005). Auditory-style learners used memory strategies more than did other learners (p < .0005). Compared with others, tactile learners demonstrated significant use of strategies for searching for and communicating meaning (p < .006) and self-management/metacognitive strategies (p < .02). Kinesthetic learners did not use general study strategies (p < .003) or self-management/metacognitive strategies (p < .02) as often as others did.

The regression results indicated that a visual learning style predicted using visualization strategies (beta = .33, p < .000005). Being a visual learner, however, negatively predicted using independent strategies (beta = -.22, p < .001), affective strategies (beta = -.23, p < .009), and strategies for searching for and communicating meaning (beta = -.22, p < .008). Having an auditory learning style significantly predicted memory strategies (beta = .38, p < .0008) and self-management or metacognitive strategies (beta = -.20, p < .01) but was a negative predictor of employing authentic language-use strategies (beta = -.20, p < .01). Being a tactile learner significantly predicted employing authentic language-use strategies (beta = .26, p < .001) and strategies for meaning (beta = .32,
.0002) but negatively predicted use of memory strategies (beta = -.16, p < .04). A kinaesthetic learning style predicted infrequent use of general study strategies (beta = -.32, p < .002). Thus, these predictions are low-to-moderate and significant.

What we can learn about construct validity of the SILL based on relationships with learning styles.

Though existing evidence is sparse, the data we have indicate that learning strategy use is related to learning styles. It is as though learning styles are the underlying or internal construct, and learning strategies are the more “outward” manifestation of learning styles.

The relationship is by no means simple, however. Predictions of strategy use according to learning style are sometimes straightforward (e.g., visual learning style predicts visualization strategy use) and sometimes not so straightforward (e.g., auditory learning style predicts metacognitive strategy use). Clearly more information is needed on the links between learning styles and learning strategies.

Construct Validity in the Relationship Between Strategy Use and Gender

In many ESL/EFL strategy studies, results have usually favored females as more frequent users of strategies (for instance, Dreyer, 1992; Ehman & Oxford, 1989; Green, 1991, 1992; Green & Oxford, 1993, 1995; Noguchi, 1991; Oxford, 1993a, 1993b; Oxford, Ehman, & Nyikos, 1988; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993a, 1993b; Yang, 1992b, 1993). In a few studies, females have had a distinctly different pattern of strategy use from that of males (Bedell, 1993; Watanabe, 1990). Some studies, noted by Bedell and by Green and Oxford, have shown that males surpassed females on a certain number of separate strategies but not on whole clusters or groups of strategies.

What we can learn about construct validity of the SILL based on relationships with gender.

Overall, the last decade of studies has shown that females are generally more frequent strategy users than men in a language learning situation. This trend fits in with previous theory and research about females as better, more efficient learners and users of language (native or other) than males; see Oxford (1993a, 1993b) for many biosocial reasons for this difference. Thus, the construct validity of the SILL has additional evidence.

Other Aspects of Validity: Utility, Value Implications, Social Consequences, Interpretation, and Real-World Action

According to Messick (1989) and Chapelle (1994), aspects of general validity (in addition to construct validity) include utility, value implications, social consequences, interpretation, and real-world action.

Utility can be defined as the usefulness of an instrument in real-world settings for making decisions relevant to people’s lives. The SILL has utility, deemed to be a crucial piece of evidence of general validity of the instrument. Utility is demonstrated by the many people around the world who have employed the SILL and by the uses to which they have put it. The most frequent venue of use has been the classroom, where the goal has been chiefly to reveal the relationship between strategy use and language performance. This goal is important because if there is a strong relationship between these two variables, perhaps language performance can be improved by enhancing strategy use.

Related to utility are the value implications and social consequences of the questionnaire. Underlying the SILL is the value of learning strategies as tools for learner self-direction, autonomy, and achievement. Strategies are a means of enhancing learning for each student. Every student uses strategies, but some strategies are more appropriate than others to a given task and to the student’s own learning style (visual, auditory, hands-on; extroverted, introverted; and so on). The social consequences of using the SILL are that learners (and their teachers) become more aware of the strategies each learner typically uses. This awareness helps teachers more effectively design language instruction and enables them to provide relevant strategy instruction. This awareness also helps students seek and experiment with new and more efficient strategies.

Interpretation and real-world action relate to outcomes of testing. Interpretation of the SILL should be limited to “typical” strategies of a given student (or, when aggregated, strategies of a given group) in a variety of situations and tasks. It should not be applied to assess the strategies used for a single activity, such as the very task-bound strategies that Marilyn uses to read aloud in French the first part of Chapter 3 of Madame Bovary.

Real-world actions based on the appropriate interpretation of the SILL include increased theory-building concerning the nature of language learning strategies; assessing strategy use at a given point, to be compared with strategy use later (sometimes after strategy improvement interventions); comparing strategy use with proficiency or achievement; comparing the learning strategies of women and men; making the conceptual linkage between strategy use and learning styles; and individualizing classroom instruction based on the strategy use of different students. So far the utility of the SILL has not included making placements of individuals into language classes on the basis of strategy use results, although such strategy information could conceivably be combined with other kinds of data for making such placements. See the reference list for dozens of studies showing various applications of the SILL.

Appropriate Uses and Limitations of Questionnaires Compared with Other Strategy Instruments

Compared with the other strategy assessment techniques (see Table 1), student-completed strategy questionnaires have a very important and appropriate use. These questionnaires provide a general assessment of each student's typical strategies across a variety of possible tasks. However, strategy questionnaires do not describe in detail the language learning strategies a student uses in response to any specific language task (as do some specific-strategy interviews or think-aloud protocols). For a researcher or a teacher who wants to discover strategy use on a particular reading
<table>
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<th>Type of assessment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy questionnaires</td>
<td>Identify “typical” strategies used by an individual; can be aggregated into group results; wide array of strategies can be measured by questionnaires</td>
<td>Not useful for identifying specific strategies on a given language task at a given time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Identify strategies that are readily observable for specific tasks</td>
<td>Not useful for unobservable strategies (e.g., reasoning, analyzing, mental self-talk) or for identifying “typical” strategies</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Identify strategies used on specific tasks over a given time period or more “typically” used strategies; usually more oriented toward task-specific rather than “typical” strategies of an individual; depends on how interview questions are asked</td>
<td>Usually less useful for identifying “typical” strategies because of how interviews are conducted, but could be used for either task-specific or “typical” strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue journals, diaries</td>
<td>Identify strategies used on specific tasks over a given time period</td>
<td>Less useful for identifying “typical” strategies used more generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollective narratives (language learning histories)</td>
<td>Identify “typical” strategies used in specific settings in the past</td>
<td>Not intended for current strategies; depends on memory of learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think-aloud protocols</td>
<td>Identify in-depth the strategies used in a given, ongoing task</td>
<td>Not useful for identifying “typical” strategies used more generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy checklists</td>
<td>Identify strategies used on a just-completed task</td>
<td>Not useful for identifying “typical” strategies used more generally</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

comprehension task in a given classroom on Monday morning, a general strategy questionnaire like the SILL would not be useful. It is a misuse of the SILL (or any other strategy questionnaire) to try to identify task-specific strategies with that instrument.

Strategy questionnaires have certain advantages. They are quick and easy to administer, may be the most cost-effective mode of strategy assessment, and are almost completely nonthreatening when administered using paper and pencil (or computer) under conditions of confidentiality. Moreover, many students discover a great deal about themselves from taking a strategy questionnaire, especially one like the SILL that is self-scoring and that provides immediate learner feedback.

An advantage specifically accruing to the SILL is that this questionnaire is free of social desirability response bias. Social desirability response bias, or the tendency to answer in a way that the researcher “wants” one to answer, is usually identified by a moderate to high correlation between the Marlowe-Crown Social Desirability Scale and a given instrument like the SILL. No such correlation appeared in a large-scale study by Yang (1992b), in which the researcher tested 505 students of ESL on the SILL and the Marlowe-Crown. Therefore, students appeared to express themselves freely and openly on the SILL. In other studies, the current author compared results of informal strategy interviews with the way that respondents answered on the SILL and found that respondents had answered the SILL honestly (Oxford, 1986). At this writing, no other language learning strategy questionnaire has been studied for social desirability response bias.

Implications for Research and Instruction

First, language researchers must conceptualize language learning strategies in a way that includes the social and affective sides of learning (as shown in the SILL) as well as the more intellectual and “executive-managerial” sides. Language learning is not just cognitive and metacognitive. It involves much more from the learner.

Second, through strategy assessment teachers can help their students recognize the power of using language learning strategies for making learning quicker, easier, and more effective. Teachers need to know the appropriate uses and limitations of each assessment technique, as seen in the previous section. Multiple techniques are to be encouraged whenever the time and resources are available. When time and resources are restricted, teachers should use the most reliable and valid strategy assessment measure that they can for the purposes they have defined. When the purposes include tapping the “typical” or general strategy use of an individual student or a group, strategy questionnaires like the SILL can be extremely helpful. If much more precise measurement of highly task-based strategy use is the purpose, then other measurement tools are required.

Third, based on the information from strategy assessment, teachers can weave strategy instruction into regular classroom events in a natural, comfortable, but explicit way. Chamot and Kupper (1989), Oxford (1990b), and O’Malley and Chamot (1990) provide helpful details on how to do this. Teachers must also keep in mind differences in motivation, learning style, gender, and other factors that affect learning strategy use.

Fourth, teachers need to be judicious in their selection of strategies to use in instruction, and existing research can provide good clues for this selection. Research indicates that some strategies in certain studies do not relate strongly to proficiency.
For example, based on Takeuchi’s research (1993a), it is possible to say that using flash cards is clearly not a sure-fire strategy to promote proficiency in all cultures and for all kinds of learning styles. Flashcards might work for some students but not for others. On the other hand, research shows that paying attention and actively using the language for writing seem to be widely appropriate strategies in most contexts and for most kinds of learners.

Fifth, strategy assessments using different measurement modes with the same sample of students could be cross-correlated. This would contribute to the validity of various assessment techniques. For instance, it would be useful to correlate results from a think-aloud protocol, an interview, and a survey to see how closely they relate to each other. If results show that an interview and a survey are highly correlated but that they are only weakly correlated with a think-aloud procedure, this information would be useful in selection of an assessment procedure next time.

Sixth, studies will need to be replicated so that more consistent information becomes available within and across populations. Particularly important is more information on how students from different cultural backgrounds and different countries use language learning strategies. Teachers need to have more background on how to use such information in the classroom. Here is a clear opportunity for researchers to better translate their findings into materials to be used in the classroom.

In sum, it is critical that learning strategies be considered when planning courses, teaching students, and designing classroom research. Appropriate learning strategies should be among the first considerations of any ESL/EFL teacher or researcher who wants to enhance student learning.

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