OVERCOMING LIMITATIONS:

HOW A FILIPINO SPEAKER OF ENGLISH USES COMPENSATION STRATEGIES

Jennifer Lloyd

ABSTRACT

While the topic of language learning strategies has become very popular in the last few decades, there have been few studies addressing how social context impacts the use of language learning strategies. This article examines how both the stage of learning and the setting in which the learning is taking place affect a specific individual's use of compensation strategies for speaking English. More specifically, this article focuses on professional vs. casual settings. The participant is an adult Filipino speaker of English who has seventeen years' experience using English in her profession in a variety of settings abroad. She is currently working as a nurse in Minnesota. Based on interviews, questionnaires, and observations, this study concludes that even though the participant feels more proficient speaking English at her workplace than in nonprofessional settings, she utilizes compensation strategies in both settings. The findings indicate that compensation strategies can aid in language learning regardless of the learner's proficiency level and setting in which the learning is taking place.

RESEARCH

Researchers have long recognized the advantages of using strategies for language learning. Many have examined whether or not the use of certain strategies make some language learners more successful than those who do not employ those strategies (Naimen, Fohlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1996) Other researchers have examined how strategies contribute to individual differences in language learners (Ellis, 2004). Oxford (1990) defines language learning strategies as "Specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Which strategies a learner employs depends upon a number of factors: learner age, stage of learning, gender, the target language, learner cognitions, learning style, cultural background, personality, previous experience of language learning, and the setting in which learning is taking place (Ellis, 2004).

Parks and Raymond (2004) are among the few who have researched how the setting factor influences a language learner's use of strategy. In Strategy use by nonnative-English-speaking students in an MBA program: Not business as usual! Parks and Raymond (2004) examine "how social context may constrain or facilitate the use of strategies or the development of new strategies" (p. 374). They suggest that international students often have a hard time taking initiative to employ the strategies

that are typically associated with a good language learner. The subjects of the study were Chinese students who, after completing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, registered in a Master's in Business Administration program in a Canadian University. The results, which were based off of interviews, observation, and collection of various documents, showed that the move by the students from the EAP to the MBA program (sheltered core courses) resulted in changes in their strategy use in regard to reading, writing, and team work: "Their use (or nonuse) of strategies was variously constrained or facilitated by the way they were positioned within a specific social context" (Parks & Raymond, 2002, p. 384).

The subject of this study, whom I will call Marie, is from the Philippines and speaks English as her third language—following Visayan and Tagalog. Marie pursued a nursing career in order to seek adventure and a higher salary abroad. After nursing in the Philippines for three years, Marie worked in Saudi Arabia for fifteen years and in Kuwait for one year. She is currently working in a nursing home in Minnesota, where she has resided for just over a year.

Marie is not alone in leaving the Philippines in order to pursue a nursing career abroad. According to Choy (2002), due to nursing shortages, health-care organizations from Minnesota and Wisconsin are recruiting more and more Filipino nurses. Ong and Azores (1994) predict that the U.S. will continue to alleviate their nursing labor demands with Filipino nurses searching to escape the uncertain economic conditions of the Philippines (as cited in Choy, 2002).

Many nurses who are non-native speakers of English and desire to work abroad take courses that teach the specific English necessary to work in the nursing profession. This type of English teaching is called English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Orr (2002) defines ESP as a "Tailor-made language package to specific communities of learners with highly specialized language needs" (p.2). Increased specialization in language learning emerged in the 1960s in response to the growing demands of international technology and commerce and a linguistic shift of focus from prescriptive grammar to meaningful communication in specific settings. ESP also developed in response to the advances in educational psychology that placed an emphasis on the learners' needs and interests. A half of a century later, some now consider ESP to be the most important area in English language teaching (Hutchinson & Waters, 2000). Although Marie has never had explicit ESP training, the main context in which she has been using and learning English over the last seventeen years has been within the nursing profession.

In light of the above research on language learning strategies and the participant's prolonged experience of using English in a certain setting, this research examines the following questions: Which language learning strategies does a specific individual utilize? How is her choice of strategy affected by her stage of learning and setting in which she is learning?

METHODOLOGY

A variety of methods exist to assess language learning strategies and skills; however, because each method offers advantages and disadvantages, Cohen and Scott (1996) recommend using a combination of methods that best target the desired information of a given study. Johnstone (2000) also recommends this diversity or "triangularization" of methods. For the purposes of this study, interviews, written questionnaires, and observation were the tools used to collect information about the subject's competency in English and language learning strategies.

Over a time period of two months, I met with Marie in her home, a setting in which she would be comfortable, to conduct the interviews and questionnaires. After obtaining Marie's permission, all of the interviews were digitally recorded. The initial interview was semi-structured. It included predetermined questions and a background questionnaire (see appendix); however, Marie was given much room to elaborate, and I could clarify as needed. In subsequent meetings, the interviews consisted of a few follow-up questions, and then I allowed Marie to lead the conversation and to tell me about whatever it was that interested her. For a majority of the time she talked about her experience in Saudi Arabia and showed me photo albums. Due to the fact that Marie loves to talk, I was able to record large amounts of natural data without having to use many prompts.

In order to determine Marie's stage of learning, she completed a chart developed by Naimen, Fohlich, Stern, & Todesco, (1996) to self-assess her proficiency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English. Naimen et al. (1996) had developed this chart for their participants in an adult interview study documented in their book, *The Good Language Learner,* to self-assess their proficiency in the language they were learning. Proficiency is categorized as *Elementary*, *Working Knowledge*, or *Advanced (native-like) Knowledge* based on agreement with a list of statements. For example, to assess proficiency in speaking, the statements used to categorize include "I can make essential sound discrimination; understand simple statements & questions on topics very familiar to me (meals, purchases, etc.)" –*Elementary*, "I can understand most casual conversations on familiar topics, related to my family, work, daily events, etc." –*Working Knowledge*, and "I am able to follow conversations of native speakers (at normal speed)"—*Advanced Knowledge* (Naiman et al., 1996). Based on this chart, I was able to determine Marie's stage of learning English in different contexts—both professional and nonprofessional.

In order to determine which language learning strategies Marie employs, she completed Rebecca Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning.* This inventory was designed to help learners become more aware of how they learn a language and to help teachers effectively teach each student by teaching to their strategies. The

questionnaire is divided into six parts, which address the following language learning strategies: remembering more effectively, using your mental processes, compensating for missing knowledge, organizing and evaluating your learning, managing your emotions, and learning with others. In each section, the language learner is provided with examples of specific learner actions and asked to rate himself or herself on a scale of 1 to 5 ranging from *Never or Almost Never True of Me* to *Always or Almost Always True of Me*.

Observation was my third method of collecting data. While interviews and questionnaires can prove valuable in collecting information about language learning strategies, according to Cohen and Scott (1996), much of the data collected from these instruments is comprised of the learner's generalized self assessment, which may or may not be completely accurate. There is much debate about the level of consciousness a learner has about his or her strategy use. However, Oxford (1990), believes that learners are often very aware of the strategies they use. Other researchers agree that the language learner's own reflections and observations about his or her learning provide more information than would an outsider's observations of this internal process (Hutchinson & Waters, 2000).

While both opinions of the learner's awareness of his or her strategy use are valid, good research always attempts to collect data using a variety of methods. Cohen and Scott (1996) recommend using observation in order to obtain data from an objective perspective rather than relying solely on the learner's self assessment. Therefore, in order to complete Johnstone's (2000) triangularization method, I included observation in my data-gathering methods. I observed Marie in both her workplace, a nursing home, and a local café—a more casual, nonprofessional setting, and took notes regarding her language learning strategy use. I would have liked to have digitally recorded Marie speaking English in her workplace; however, in the best interest of the residents, I chose not to.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study, as outlined below, indicate that Marie uses compensation strategies both in professional settings, where she feels more proficient in English, and in casual settings, where Marie feels less proficient in English.

Strategy Choice

The results of Marie's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (Oxford, 1990) are as follows:

<u>Strategies</u>	<u>Score</u>

Remembering More Effectively	3.6
Using all Your Mental Processes	3.7
Compensating for Missing Knowledge	3.3
Organizing and Evaluating Your Learning	4.3
Managing Your Emotions	3.3
Learning with Others	4
Overall Average	3.7

After obtaining these results, I originally had planned on analyzing the strategy that Marie indicated as using the most, which was *Organizing and Evaluating Your Learning*. However, as I began to analyze the recorded data from the interviews, Marie's prevalent use of compensation strategies caught my attention. Upon examination of the specific questions regarding compensation strategies, the following results show that Marie usually does use compensation strategies when speaking (see #2 and #4), which became my focus.

Score

___4___   1. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.

___4___   2. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use

             gestures.

___3___   3. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.

___3___   4. I read English without looking up every new word.

___2___   5. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.

___4___   6. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

4 = Usually true of me   3 = Somewhat true of me   2 = Usually not true of me

According to Oxford (1990), compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge limitations and to stay in conversations long enough to get sustained practice. Compensation strategies are perhaps among the most important of language learning strategies for beginner or intermediate learners; however, they are also useful for more expert learners. While Oxford (1990) acknowledges that some experts classify compensation strategies such as using synonyms as merely being communication strategies that are not useful for learning, she defends her position that compensation strategies do aid in learning language. Because of the difference in classifications, the

distinction between compensation strategies and communication styles is a matter that merits further research.

Analyzing Data

After transcribing the recorded data, I located and tagged Marie's use of the following selected compensation strategies for speaking English from Oxford's (1990)

*Language Learning Strategies***:**

    1. Getting Help: Asking for help by hesitating or explicitly asking for the missing expression.

    2. Using Mime or Gesture: Using physical motion in place of an expression during a conversation to indicate the meaning.

    3. Adjusting or Approximating the Message: Altering the message by omitting some items of information or making the ideas simpler or less precise.

    4. Using Circumlocution or Synonyms: Using a roundabout expression involving several words to explain a single concept or using a synonym to convey the intended meaning.

    5. Avoiding Communication Partially or Totally: Avoiding communication when difficulties are anticipated or encountered in order to save the learner emotionally.

The following are examples of Marie's use of each strategy:

Getting Help

In both of these examples, Marie directly asked me to provide the missing information or to verify her use of a word.

    1. "We did the exam for speaking, the exam for writing, the exam for…what is that…?"

    2. "Kuwait was just a very small country…you call that country?"

Using Mime or Gesture

In the first example, Marie gestured to indicate the "rope" that is used to symbolize the uniting of man and woman in Filipino weddings, and she also asked for help. In the second example, the first gesture was for "bottle," and the second gesture "choke."

1. "They will put this…uh (gesture), what do you call that?

    2. "They cannot hold the feeding. (gesture) They just leave it there and then, ah you will   just see the baby…(gesture)…

Adjusting or Approximating the Message

In the first example, Marie used the word "place" in place of the more complicated expression "housing development." In the second example, Marie used "like this" multiple times in order to simplify the message.

1. "So my friend bought a house in this place."

2. "I get a lot of (laugh) penalty. I have to pay like this, like this. Why? Because they caught me talking in like this."

Using Circumlocution or Synonyms

In these examples, Marie uses roundabout expressions to communicate "interviewer," "research," and "a test-taking strategies class."

1. "And the one who will do the interview is also from here."

2. "It seems when I see my boys studying it's almost the same but more of the, on their side, more on the research, they have to make some researches."

3. "All I did was just to attend, oh, what is this? Some, uh, it's like, you know, they give us tips or hints how to go straight and how to go, how to answer all those questions…"

Avoiding Communication Partially or Totally

In both of these examples, Marie trails off and does not complete her thought.

1. "But they have a good, it's a good place to work for me as long as you…"

2. "It's a good hospital, and it's really crowded you know (laugh) because once it's a good hospital…"

As is evident in my last example, the strategy of avoiding communication was the one that was most open for interpretation. Did Marie leave her sentences unfinished due to encountering or anticipating difficulties, or did she simply not finish because her point could be inferred by what she had already stated? Oxford (2006) does give examples of this strategy in her book; however, no explanation is offered as to how the learner's knowledge limitations were assessed.

Observations

In my observations of Marie in professional and casual settings, the most noticeable compensation strategies she used were *Adjusting or Approximating the Message* and *Avoiding Communication Partially or Totally.* Marie often replaced more specific words with "this" or "that" when conversing. Also, she frequently trailed off and did not complete her thoughts as in the following example of partial avoidance:

"All I did is prepare the meds so when the residents is already here, it's easy to…"

Marie seemed to avoid communication more often when in a group of people. One on one, Marie was very talkative and did not usually shy away from topics. However, Marie did not participate very much in her coworkers' conversations unless she was directly asked a question—even then she answered with a very short response that did not encourage more conversation on that topic (such as professional basketball or online chatting). At the café, Marie participated more in the conversations that were familiar or interesting to her. This is an example of how avoiding communication can save the learner emotionally and enable her to contribute more at a later time.

Stage of Learning

When assessing her English proficiency according to Naimen et. al.'s (1996) chart, Marie indicated advanced or native-like knowledge in all areas in the skills of reading and writing. However, in the skills of understanding and speaking, while overall she would consider herself to be advanced in these skills, she indicated having difficulties in certain areas. Marie specified difficulties in understanding movies, jokes, and different language styles and dialects. She did not indicate any struggles with understanding lectures or professional discussions. When asked about her speaking proficiency, Marie did not feel she has native-like knowledge when it comes to being able to participate in any conversation or discussion with high degree of fluency or approximating native accent.

Marie expressed that she feels most comfortable using English at work—although she acknowledged that every nursing context presents her new challenges in English. In Saudi Arabia, she said her main language challenge was learning to communicate with her coworkers, most of whom were nonnative speakers of English from many different countries. In Minnesota, one of her challenges is learning to speak like Minnesotans. Marie said that whenever she responds to being thanked by saying "You're welcome," her sons always correct her; she should be saying "You bet!" Based on the questionnaire and interviews with Marie, it seems that Marie is at an advanced proficiency level of English when using English for professional purposes and is less proficient when using English in more casual settings.

Based on these results, I did not expect that Marie would use many compensation strategies at work. However, as noted above, Marie used compensation strategies when speaking English at work and in casual settings. I believe this is due to the fact that most of my observations of Marie at work were of her casual conversations with coworkers and residents. Thus, while nursing requires a specific knowledge of English for the profession, a large part of nursing is also interacting with people on a more casual, personal level.

DISCUSSION

The conclusions of this study lend support to the idea that compensation strategies can aid in language learning regardless of the learner's proficiency level and the setting in which the learning is taking place. Even though Marie has seventeen years of experience speaking English in her nursing career and believes herself to be very proficient when using English in her workplace, she continues to use compensation strategies to overcome knowledge gaps. Despite Marie's experience of using English in a variety of settings—the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—Minnesota is a new setting that presents new language obstacles.

In *RN*, a professional nursing journal, the article "Say it in English!" discusses the importance of nurses speaking English around their patients. The editor writes, "So please, don't add to a patient's sense of worry, fear, or isolation by speaking another language in front of her—or even outside of her room. Say it in English" (Ostrowski, 2006, p. 9). The ability to speak English in the nursing field is essential to the profession. However, as a growing number of nonnative English speakers explore nursing careers in the Midwest, concerns are raised regarding their English proficiency. Many foreign nurses are very well educated in their field and have had rigorous training in ESP, but one must keep in mind that the change in setting inevitably brings with it new challenges in English, as is evident in the present study. Therefore, the pedagogy of compensation strategies and other language learning strategies in the field of ESP is a matter that merits further research.

Background Questionnaire

What languages were spoken in your childhood home?

What do you regard as your native language?

What languages were spoken in your neighborhood?

When did you begin studying English and under what circumstances?

How long have you lived in the United States?

In what environments do you speak English?

How do you rate your overall proficiency in English compared with the proficiency of native speakers of the language?   a) Excellent b) Good c) Fair d) Poor

How important is it for you to become proficient in English?

              a) Very important b) Important c) Not so important

What are the main reasons you want to learn English?

Do you enjoy language learning?

Do you feel you are still learning? (what kinds of things?)

Please list all of the languages you have studied and under what circumstances:

AUTHOR

Jennifer Lloyd is completing her undergraduate degree in ESL education and a concentration in linguistics at Northwestern College in Minnesota. Address correspondence to: jblloyd@students.nwc.edu

REFERENCES

Choy, C. C. (2003). Empire of care: Nursing and migration in Filipino American History. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Cohen, A. D. & Scott, K. (1996). A synthesis of approaches to assessing language learning strategies. In Rebecca L. Oxford (Ed.) Language learning strategies around the world: Cross-cultural perspectives (pp. 89-106). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Ellis, R. (2004). Individual differences in second language learning (Davies, A. & Elder, C., Eds.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (2000). English for specific purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Johnstone, B. (2000). Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics. New York: Oxford University Press.

Naimen, N., Fohlich, M., Stern, H.H., & Todesco, A. (1996) The good language learner. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Orr, T. (Ed.). (2002). English for specific purposes. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Ostrowski, M. (2006). Say it in English. RN, 69:9, 2.

Oxford, R. L. (1990) Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Parks, S. & Raymond, P. M. (2004). Strategy use by nonnative-English-speaking students in an MBA program: Not business as usual! The Modern Language Journal. 88(iii), 374-387.