LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LOW-LITERACY HMONG ADULT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a short-term classroom-based study on learning strategy use and strategies instruction to low-literate adult Hmong students with no prior formal education. Data on strategy use was collected through classroom observations and interviews with 11 Hmong students. Results showed that participants were using a number of strategies successfully, and could benefit from more focus on metacognitive, compensation, and social strategies. Seven strategies instruction sessions were provided to the class.

INTRODUCTION

I am a teacher educator, working primarily with teachers who hope to teach English abroad. My primary motivation for entering the field of ESL nearly 20 years ago, however, was a desire to work with adult immigrant learners. While I have had several short-term opportunities to teach this population, I've never worked with low-literate students. A recent sabbatical provided me with an ideal opportunity to observe, interview and teach a group of low-literate learners.

While working with these students, I was reminded of a number of realities faced by teachers of adult ESL. They have very little classroom time to help their students with learning English. Issues of program funding and student mobility and life demands mean that students often don't have the luxury of learning English in a formal setting over many years. So, teachers really need to prepare their students for learning beyond the classroom. Language learning strategies are a way to empower students to continue learning on their own, in the real world of work and interaction with native speakers. It is also important to remember that low-literate students may not present strategies that we see in higher level or more educated learners, and we must re-direct our thinking to notice and tap into the many strategies they have in their repertoires. This study took a two-pronged approach: observing and eliciting what strategies a group of low-literacy students were currently using, then using that information to determine what additional strategies would be useful to teach to this group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Learning Strategies

Cohen (1998), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), and Oxford (1990) have done much work on defining and categorizing language learning strategies. Chamot (2005) defines strategies as actions that facilitate learning. They are goal-focused, and as they are being learned, must be conscious. Once a strategy has been used many times, it may become more automatic. Chamot points out that a major advantage of strategies is that they can be taught to learners who are struggling. While this may be true, Oxford and Leaver (1996)

note that the purpose of strategies instruction is not to encourage each student to use exactly the same strategy for the same situation or task. Rather, learners need to become aware of and build on strategies they already use, so that they can make choices that best fit their individual needs. Cohen (2003) also points out that strategies can not be labeled as "good" or even "effective" on their own: their effectiveness depends a given task or situation, and the learner's own learning style preferences.

While there are a number of schemes for categorizing strategies, a common list includes cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Cohen, 2003). Cognitive strategies include using memory aids, analyzing language to find patterns, practicing the language, and so on. (It should be noted that Oxford (1990) separates memory strategies out from other cognitive strategies.) Metacognitive strategies are those that help in organizing and evaluating one's learning. Affective strategies include actions that help one deal with the emotions that go along with learning a language. Social strategies are techniques for eliciting explanations and practice opportunities from other people. Cohen (1998) has distinguished between language *learning* strategies and language *use* strategies. The former are strategies to aid actual learning, and the latter are strategies used once the language has been learned and is available for use in communication.

Much reported research on adults' use of language learning strategies has been conducted with learners who have a strong prior educational background. For example, Bedell and Oxford (1996) cite studies done with learners from a wide variety of countries, primarily at the university level. Given the population under study for this paper, Starks-Martin's (1996) research on Hmong university students' perception of their own strategies use is interesting.[1] Using think-alouds, reading journals, and study skills portfolios to collect data, Starks-Martin (1996) found that her learners used a lot of memorization and repeated readings to comprehend texts. They also tended to use word-for word answers from the textbooks in answering questions, and studied alone. These findings seem to indicate use of cognitive strategies.

A smaller number of learning strategies use studies have been done with immigrant adults in the US in community colleges or community-based ESL programs. In a small-scale study, Degenhardt (2005) worked with a group of low-level adult learners in a community-based ESL program. Through the use of teaching journal entries, an observation checklist, and field notes, she collected data on observable strategies used by her learners while they worked on a cookbook project. The strategies she focused on were mostly cognitive and social ones, and included translating, code-switching, getting help, using mime or gestures, among others. Participants were Hmong, Karen, and Spanish speakers. Degenhardt found that, compared to the Spanish speakers, the Hmong and Karen students had fewer instances of using social strategies. She also found that cross-language pairings resulted in increased use of compensation strategies, and that all learners rarely used the strategy of self-evaluation.

Learning Styles and Learning Strategies

A recent survey of language strategies experts shows near uniform agreement that a learner's background (among other factors) affects choice of learning strategies (Cohen, 2008). These background factors include things such as age, gender, prior knowledge, and so on. Several published studies have looked at the background factor of learning style preferences among Hmong learners. Oxford (2003) defines learning styles as general preferences for approaching learning, whether it be learning content, learning a second language, or solving a problem. These can be perceptual styles (e.g. tactile, visual), social styles (e.g. introverted, extroverted), or cognitive styles (e.g. analyzing, synthesizing).

Hvitfeldt (1986) did a microethnographic study to examine the cognitive styles of field independence and field dependence (or field sensitivity) in a group of upper-beginning Hmong adults with little literacy background. Field independent learners tend to focus on internal modes of learning, pay less attention to social aspects of learning, enjoy learning abstract concepts and analyzing details, and so on. Field dependent learners, on the other hand, are more attuned to external, social aspects of learning such as peer and teacher support, and do well with global learning. Hvitfeldt notes that "Hmong classroom behavior, particularly the emphasis on cooperative achievement, the establishment of a warm and personal classroom climate, and the reliance on teacher guidance and direction, fits the description of field-dependent (or field-sensitive) observable behaviors" (p. 73). Worthley (1987) administered the *Group Embedded Figures Test* to a group of male Hmong students (17 years of age and older), and concluded that the majority of the group were field dependent.

Park (2002) looked at perceptual and social learning styles of Southeast Asian immigrant high school students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao. She also included Anglo students in the study. Specifically, she collected data on the perceptual preferences for auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile learning; and on the social preferences for group and individual learning. Park's data on Hmong students show a "major preference" for all four perceptual styles, with tactile learning scoring the highest. The data also show "major preference" for group learning, and "minor preference" for individual learning. Of all six learning styles examined, the Hmong learners scored highest preference for group learning.[2]

Given the results of the Hvitfeldt (1986) and Park (2002) studies on Hmong learners' cognitive, perceptual, and social learning style preferences, can we make some inferences about their strategy use? Cohen (2003) reminds us that learning styles and learning strategies do not operate separately from tasks. He notes that research literature linking style, strategies, and task is difficult to find. More common are studies that more broadly link certain styles with certain strategy preferences. Rossi-Le's (1995) is one such study that is of some relevance here because the subjects were adult ESL learners in two community colleges. Correlating data from the Perceptual Learning Style Questionnaire (Reid, 1987, as cited in Rossi-Le) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1986, as cited in Rossi-Le), she found, for example, that learners who showed a style preference for group learning reported using affective /

social strategies such as working with peers; those who showed a style preference for kinesthetic learning reported using authentic language use strategies, such as seeking out native speakers; and those who reported a style preference for visual learning reported using visualization as a strategy.

The picture emerging from the studies cited above on learning styles and strategies use among adult Hmong students seems to show learners that are field dependent (Hvitfeldt, 1986; Worthley, 1987) and with a preference for group learning (Park, 2002). These findings may lead one to believe that social learning strategies would be preferred. It is interesting, then, to note that both Degenhardt (2005) and Starks-Martin (1996) comment on low use of interactive strategies among their Hmong learners.

Strategies Instruction

If strategies can indeed help students become more effective learners of the language, it makes sense that teachers should try to integrate strategies instruction into their curricula. Chamot (2005) notes a number of important principles for strategies instruction, including identifying strategies that learners are already using, thoughtful matching of strategies and tasks, and providing both implicit and explicit strategies instruction. Citing a number of studies on the effectiveness of strategies instruction, Chamot goes on to note outcomes such as improvement on language skills tests[3], positive attitudes toward language learning strategies, and transfer of learning strategies to new tasks following strategies instruction.

There are many factors to consider as one approaches strategies instruction: In what language should the instruction take place? Over what period of time will the instruction take place? Which strategies should be taught? What are the students' current levels of awareness about strategies? Will the instruction be integrated with regular classroom instruction, or will there be a special "strategy class"? What is the learners' educational level and background? Clearly, each setting and situation will require slightly different approaches to strategies instruction. While there is no one-size-fits-all method to instruction, Oxford and Leaver (1996) advocate what they call "strategy-plus-control" instruction. They define control as the ability (on the part of the student) not only to use a specific strategy, but to evaluate the success of use, as well as the ability to consciously transfer the use of the strategy to a new setting or task. They note a number of characteristics of instructional models that emphasize "strategy-plus-control":

1. Identification of strategies to be taught.
2. Assessment of current strategy use as a precursor to strategy instruction.
3. Strategy instruction of students over a long period of time.
4. Explicit demonstration, discussion, use, evaluation, and transfer of specific strategies.
5. Preparation and use of specific materials tailored to the regular language learning tasks.
6. On-going evaluation by teacher and participants of the effectiveness of the strategy instruction.

7. Flexibility in individualizing or adapting strategy assistance to the needs of each learner. (p. 236)

Another commonly used model for strategies instruction is the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) Model (Chamot, Barnhardt, Robbins & El-Dinary, 1996), which involves the following steps:

1. Preparation: students prepare for learning a new strategy by identifying the prior knowledge and use of the strategy.
2. Presentation: the teacher models the use of the new strategy.
3. Practice: students practice the strategy with materials of moderate difficulty.
4. Evaluation: students evaluate their use of the strategy and how well it is working for them.
5. Expansion: students apply the strategy in a new situation or learning task.

The CALLA model and the strategy-plus-control models share a number of key steps, including assessment of strategy usage, explicit modeling of the strategy, practice with the strategy, evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy, and then applying the strategy in new situations / tasks.

In summary, while learning strategies and styles have been categorized and studied among students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and various models of strategies instruction have been proposed, little has been published on strategies use and instruction with adult immigrant learners with little to no prior educational background. These learners are perhaps in particular need of strategies instruction, since they are often in formal ESL instructional settings for a short period of time, due to limited funding and the need to find a job. Their lack of formal education means that learning to learn in general is vital for their success. The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What learning strategies are adult Hmong students with little or no prior formal education using to learn English?
2. What strategies would be useful for them?
3. What do teachers of adult ESL need to know about strategies instruction for learners with little prior formal education?

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project took place in a beginning literacy ABE/ESL class in a metro area learning center. Classes meet five days a week, for four hours each day. There is a workforce focus for the curriculum at this center.

There were four stages to the project: pre-study observations of the class to collect data about observable learning strategies the students were already using; interviews with 11 Hmong students on their use of strategies and their prior learning experiences; six strategies instruction sessions; and an evaluation session with the learners.

One reality of ABE/ESL classes is the amount of turn-over in the student population. While I chose this site specifically because it has a workforce education focus, and students' financial support is dependent on their attendance, there were few students who were involved in all four stages of the study.

PARTICIPANTS

As noted above, different students participated in different stages of the project. The pre-study observation stage focused primarily on five of the Hmong students (two of whom I later interviewed), and one Karen student (whom I didn't include in the interview group).

In the second stage, interviews were conducted with 11 Hmong students. (See Table 1) Two students were male and nine were female. Ages ranged from 20 to 58. Most had no prior formal education in Hmong. The amount of ESL study (both in the current program and prior programs) ranged from one month to slightly over 2 years. Ten of the participants reported some degree of proficiency in at least one other language (Thai or Lao). The two men both reported a fair level of fluency, while the women mostly reported understanding / speaking "a little". Participants were given a CASAS test in March, 2007. (Those scores with an asterisk were from January, 2007.) Scaled CASAS scores ranged from 174-191, which placed them at the beginning ABE literacy level. The following is a description of functional and workplace skills for learners scoring less than 200 on the CASAS test.

> Individual has little or no ability to read basic signs or maps and can provide limited personal information on simple forms. The individual can handle routine entry level jobs that require little or no basic written communication or computational skills and no knowledge of computers or other technology. (National Reporting System for Adult Education, 2007)

Table 1: Demographic Information on Interview Participants

Participant #	Gender	Age	Prior Formal Education (other than ESL)	Amount of ESL Study	Other L2 (self-reported proficiency)	CASAS score (scaled)
1	F	29	0	2 years, 3 months	Thai (a little)	188*
2	M	58	0	2 years	Thai (fluent), Lao	174
3	F	24	> 1 year	2 months	Thai (a little)	180
4	M	36	0 (learned to read Hmong from parents)	1 month	Thai and Lao (fairly fluent in both)	184

5	F	27	0	6 months	Thai and Lao (a little)	178*
6	F	24	0	1 year, 6 months		174
7	F	48	0	1 year, 6 months	Thai (a little)	176
8	F	50	0	3 months	Lao ("less than Hmong")	176
9	F	20	0	1 month	Lao (understands a bit)	191
10	F	37	0	8-9 months	Thai (a little)	176
11	F	46	0	1 month	Thai (a little)	175

The post-interview phase involved six strategies instruction sessions. All students in the class participated in these sessions, whether I had interviewed them or not. Attendance varied at each session, with approximately 15 learners each session. Learners were Hmong, Karen, and Somali. Because a number of the interviewees had already moved on to a higher level class, or had left the program, I didn't focus specifically on the Hmong group. The fourth and final stage involved surveying students who had participated in these strategies instruction sessions (regardless of whether I had interviewed them or not) to get their perspective on the strategies instruction they had received.

DATA COLLECTION

In selecting the methods for data collection, I kept a number of factors in mind: 1) The learners were low-literate; 2) There was a language gap: I speak no Hmong, and the learners have low English proficiency; 3) The learners had likely had little experience reflecting on their own learning, so this would be a novel concept for them; and 4) I wanted to select methods that other ABE ESL teachers could use with a similar population. These factors pointed to methods that didn't involve reading or writing on the part of the learners, that could be done with a translator, that would be fairly open-ended and conversational, and that were fairly intuitive for teachers. I had also decided that I wanted to get a general picture of strategies use, both inside and outside of the classroom, rather than focusing on a specific skill area. A final point I considered was that while the learners had had little formal education, they were all adults who had clearly learned many things during their lifetimes. How could I help them to reflect on their prior informal learning experiences to see what strategies they already used that could be transferred to language learning?

Cohen and Scott (1996) discuss a number of approaches to assessing language learning strategies: strategies interviews and written questionnaires, observation, verbal report, diaries and dialog journals, recollective studies, and computer tracking. In the current study, I used observation and interviews that focused on current and past learning experiences.

Observations

Cohen and Scott (1996) note that a major drawback of collecting data on learning strategies through observation is that only a limited number of strategies are behavioral; many occur on a cognitive level and are thus not observable. While this is clearly a disadvantage, I felt observation would still be a good initial, impressionistic way to gather data while at the same time allowing the students to get used to my presence in the classroom prior to the interviews, and also to learn about the tasks that the teacher used. I observed 9 sessions, for approximately 2 hours each session. For the first two sessions, I wrote general notes about strategies that I observed a number of learners using. For the next seven sessions, I focused on a specific student, and collected data through three-column field notes. In one column, I noted the time; in the second I noted the task and the teacher's actions, instructions, corrections, interactions with students, and so on; and in the third column, I noted the student's actions, utterances, and responses. To analyze this data, I read through the field notes and marked where I had observed a learning strategy, named the strategy, and noted whether it seemed an effective strategy for the specific task.

Interviews

The primary way that I collected data on learning strategies use among the group of eleven Hmong learners was through one-on-one oral interviews, with the aid of a translator. Cohen and Scott (1996) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of structure within learning strategy questionnaires and interviews. They note that with more structured interviews, there is more control on the part of the interviewer, and the data collected with this type of instrument is more easily analyzed statistically. On the other hand, less structured interviews offer the participants the opportunity to explore areas of interest to them. A disadvantage noted by Cohen and Scott is that data collected in this manner is more likely to be individualized, and this therefore makes it difficult to find overall patterns. Another point made by Cohen and Scott is that interviews can focus on either current learning experiences or past ones (recollective).

The interview questions I developed were intended to be a hybrid of structured and unstructured probes, and I hoped to have learners reflect on both current language learning experiences as well as past informal learning experiences (learning another L2 or a job). The interview covered six general areas: 1) the participants' prior formal learning experiences; 2) literacy activities in Hmong; 3) other language learning experiences; 4) participants' prior jobs and how they were learned; 5) learning English in the current program; and 6) use of English outside of the classroom.

Section 1 helped me assess how experienced the participants were in formal education settings, as well as how those educational experiences (if any) compared to their current program. Section 2 gave more details about level of L1 literacy. I knew most of these learners were considered to be low-literate in Hmong, but I wanted to get further

information. Sections 3 and 4 helped students reflect on informal learning experiences (learning jobs and other languages) and the strategies they used

Section 5 included the most structured questions. Using Oxford's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (Oxford, 1990) as a point of departure, I created general questions with two specific examples to cover the six areas of the SILL: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. For example, for memory strategies, I asked, "Do you do things to help you remember words and new ideas in English?" then gave some specific examples: "Do you try to use new words? Do you review your English lessons? Your notebook and papers?" I hoped to have students reflect generally on the strategy, then give a simple frequency answer: "many times", "sometimes", or "never". In practice, it was very difficult to get students to respond with frequencies, even with the translator's help. After several interviews, I dropped the frequency questions and just noted if the students reported using this type of strategy.

The final section of the interview, section 6, focused on use of English outside of the classroom. I hoped that it would give me a chance to explore again some use strategies.

RESULTS

Observation

Table 2 below summarizes the most common effective and ineffective strategies observed. Table 3 includes a number of strategies of unknown efficacy. I have labeled each with one of the six areas covered in the SILL. However, it should be noted that there may be other areas that each could fit into.

Table 2: Most Common Effective and Ineffective Strategies

Effective Strategies	Ineffective Strategies
Paper and pens ready, on track with papers; look over handouts as class gets ready. **(metacognitive)**	Difficulty keeping track of papers
Copy from board or handouts when appropriate (when the teacher gives them time); attend to classroom activity **(cognitive and metacognitive)**	Copy from board or handout when the teacher is explaining something else or is leading choral repetition
Copy from board or handouts and ask questions that show comprehension **(cognitive)**	Copy from board or handouts, but with attention solely on form, not meaning
Spontaneous repetition of dialogs; personalizing of new vocabulary (Ex: "Mai <u>x-ray</u> four time." i.e., I've had x-rays four times.) **(cognitive)**	
Create new language as requested **(cognitive)**	

Use text, pictures, other clues to orient themselves to the material (i.e., on grocery ads, look for pictures of "apples" as well as text) **(cognitive and compensation)**	Look only for requested text (i.e., on grocery ads, look for the word "apples" alone)
Ask teacher for help: clarification of directions, correction of answers, etc. **(cognitive and metacognitive)**	Avoid interaction with teacher
"Teach" other students: checking their work, asking teacher to help others, etc. **(social)**	

Table 3: Most Common Strategies of Unknown Efficacy

Ask for and give translations in L1 **(cognitive)**

Choral repetition to self **(cognitive and memory)**

One needs to be careful in generalizing these results, particularly since they only represent observable strategies. However, a few things do bear noting. First, students were very adept at a number of observable social strategies. They asked each other questions, checked their work with the teacher and with peers, asked the teacher to help peers who needed it, translated for each other, and so on. They truly made their learning a social experience. This is in line with Hvitfeldt (1986), Worthley (1987) and Park's (2002) work which showed Hmong learners to be field sensitive and to have a preference for group learning. Second, there were a number of "routine" classroom strategies that these learners were clearly familiar with: copying, repeating to themselves, and scanning a text to find target words. This was interesting for me to note, since most of the learners had little experience in a formal classroom setting. I noticed that the more experienced learners often directed the newcomers to write things down, and the teacher certainly asked for repetition and gave students time and directions to copy, too. However, it is also interesting to note that these strategies were not always effective. Indeed, sometimes students were engaged in copying, for example, in a way that hindered their learning (for example, when the teacher was explaining something else). As mentioned in the literature review, Cohen (2003) reminds us that strategies can only be judged effective (or not) within the context of a given task or situation. So, for a strategy to work, there needs to be informed choice on the part of the learner: they need to know why they're using it, and the appropriate times and settings to use it.

Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the interviews with the Hmong learners covered six general areas. The results for each are discussed below.

1) Participants' prior formal learning experiences
Only one of the participants had any formal education (outside of ESL classes). She had attended school in Thailand for less than a year when she was about 10. She reported

that the teacher's writing on the board and "explaining things" were helpful to her learning. In terms of her own learning strategies, she reported that writing in a notebook was helpful. Due to the remoteness (in time and distance) of this experience, it was difficult to get more details.

2) Literacy activities in Hmong
Seven of the participants reported some literacy in Hmong (five women and both men). One reported learning to read from his parents, another from her children, and a third from friends. Of the seven, four reported being able to write: one writes her name, one writes grocery lists, two write to relatives, and one writes "many things". In terms of reading activities, six of the seven reported some skills: two can sound out words but not read sentences; one reads notes and letters from family; and three reported feeling comfortable reading a variety of texts (one of these specified that she reads typed texts more easily).

3) Other language learning experiences
As noted above, ten of the participants reported some degree of proficiency in at least one other language (Thai or Lao). The two men both reported a fair level of fluency, while the women mostly reported understanding / speaking "a little". Most reported being able to do tasks such as naming objects, talking about their family, and shopping. None of the participants had studied Thai or Lao formally. They all reported learning the languages through talking with native speakers. One participant noted, "It was easier to learn Thai because I had to speak it. Thai is easier to understand than English. When I hear Thai, I can just try to speak it. The words are easier to understand. English has so many words, [synonyms]." This was particularly interesting to me. These learners may have low proficiency in English, but they are not novice language learners: they've spent most of their lives in

settings where they are not native speakers, and they've learned at least some of the other L2. I had seen them speak Thai (seemingly without embarrassment) with Karen speakers in the class, and they also seemed largely comfortable trying to speak with the teacher in English. When asked in another question about how they feel when they need to speak English, most reported not feeling nervous. Yet, it was fascinating that seven of them later reported using no English outside of the class, and one of these reported actively avoiding using English.

4) Participants' prior jobs and how they were learned
All eleven participants reported having at least one prior job (held in either Thailand or Laos). Ten of them had done farming with their family. Four had done farming for others. Two had done sewing. One each had done construction, road work, retail work, and work as a maid. When asked how they had learned their jobs, nearly all reported beginning to work as a child, and observing older people work.

5) Learning English in the current program (learning strategies)

Table 4 summarizes the participants' reported use of strategies. There are several points worth noting. For metacognitive strategies, eight of the learners reported trying to review material at home, between 30 minutes to 2 hours a day. This was surprising to me. I expected that they would not have much time for learning at home. They also reported great frustration with review, because they could not remember what the material meant, or could not read their own handwriting. In addition, nine of the participants reported spending a lot of time thinking (and worrying) about the fact that they need to learn English. In terms of affect, there were mixed responses. Three participants noted feeling stressed about learning English. In contrast, when asked how they deal with nervousness about speaking English, eight reported not feeling nervous. Perhaps they interpreted the question to be about nervousness in the classroom.

Table 4: Participants' reported strategy usage in current program

Memory strategies	Cognitive strategies	Compensation strategies	Metacognitive strategies	Affective strategies	Social strategies
saying words outloud (n=5)	listening to TV in English (n=7)	using a translator (n=3)	reviewing at home (n=8)	in class, focusing on listening rather than responding (n=1)	asking for help from others (teacher, peers, children, others) (n=11)
writing words down (n=4)	listening to relatives speak English (n=3)	using realia (in a store, eg) (n=3)	setting aside time to practice with family (n=1)		
	checking comprehension with others (n=2)	preparing ahead for communication (n=1)			
	speak less Hmong in class (n=1)				

6) Use of English outside of the classroom
As mentioned earlier, seven of the participants reported using no English outside of the class, and one of these reported actively avoiding using English. Of the others, three use English in the grocery store, two with their children's teachers, two with doctors (although one pointed out that she quickly resorts to a translator), and one practices with her family.

STRATEGIES INSTRUCTION

After the observations and interviews, the classroom teacher and I wanted to teach some relevant strategies to the learners. We reviewed the data I had collected, and the

teacher added her own observations of areas where the learners were having difficulty. It seemed like the most immediate needs were for memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. More specifically, since learners had identified the desire to review at home, but a lack of understanding of their materials, we felt that teaching them first how to create flashcards, then use them would be useful (memory strategies). It was also clear that the materials in their notebooks were not well organized, and this impeded review (a metacognitive strategy). Planning opportunities to practice with native speakers in low-stress situations was another goal (a metacognitive and social strategy), so we wanted to help them identify common phrases they could use. We also felt that they needed some phrases that would help them with circumlocution (a compensation strategy).
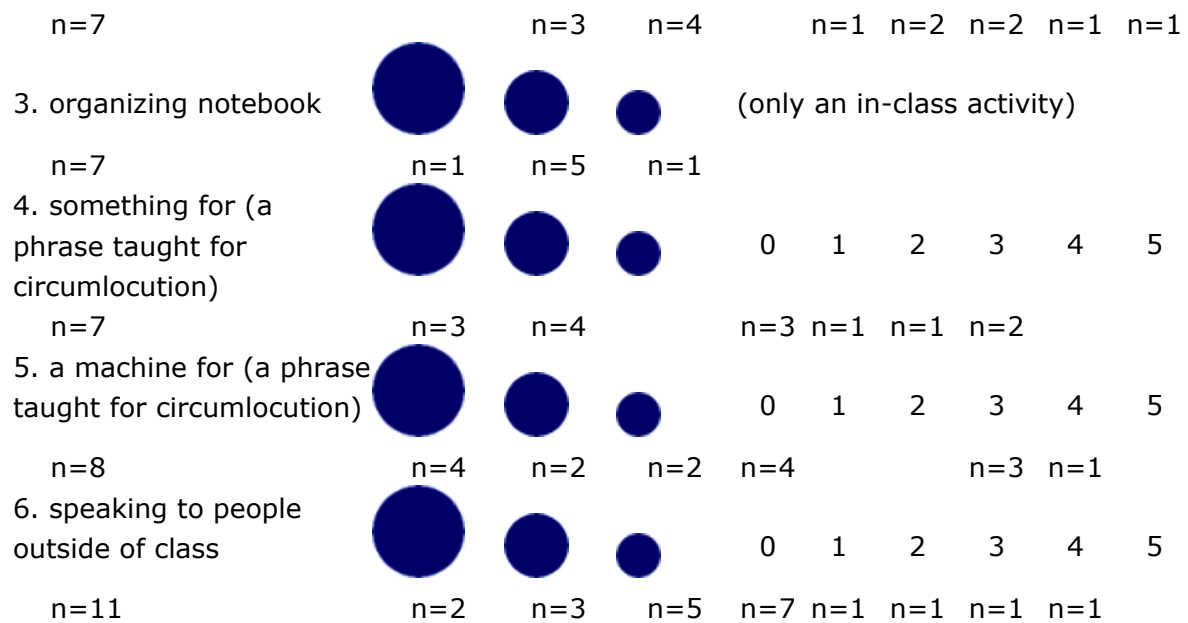
We developed seven one-hour long strategies instruction sessions, which were conducted approximately weekly. For three of these, more proficient students (from a higher level class at the site) were used as translators. The others were conducted entirely in English. Each session began with a brief statement of why the strategy was important, when it could be used, and how it related to problems that the interviewees had articulated. Then, the instructor modeled the strategy. The bulk of the time was spent having learners either create their own materials (flashcards) or practicing using the strategy. For about half of the strategies, the classroom teacher was able to follow up during the rest of the week to help students to either continue applying the strategy, to apply the strategy to new language, or to check on their use of the strategy outside of class. For example, after identifying a schema for organizing the materials in their notebooks, she had them identify where to place class handouts each time they received them.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK ON STRATEGIES INSTRUCTION

After the seven strategies instruction sessions, I wanted to get feedback from the learners. I developed a feedback sheet that used visuals, and also used more proficient English speakers from a higher level class as translators. While there were eleven respondents in all, not all of them had attended every instructional session. Table 5 provides the participants' responses. In the second column, "helps me learn / speak", participants were instructed to select the largest circle for "a lot", the middle one for "some", and the smallest one for "a little".

Table 5: Learners' Feedback on Strategies Instruction

Strategy	Helps me learn / speak			I use it x times out of class					
1. making flashcards	⬤	⬤	⬤	0	1	2	3	4	5
n=7		n=4	n=3				n=3		n=1
2. using flashcards	⬤	⬤	⬤	0	1	2	3	4	5

n=7   n=3   n=4   n=1 n=2 n=2 n=1 n=1

3. organizing notebook   ●●● (only an in-class activity)

n=7   n=1   n=5   n=1

4. something for (a phrase taught for circumlocution)   ●●●   0   1   2   3   4   5

n=7   n=3   n=4   n=3 n=1 n=1 n=2

5. a machine for (a phrase taught for circumlocution)   ●●●   0   1   2   3   4   5

n=8   n=4   n=2   n=2   n=4   n=3 n=1

6. speaking to people outside of class   ●●●   0   1   2   3   4   5

n=11   n=2   n=3   n=5   n=7 n=1 n=1 n=1 n=1

The participants found the metacognitive strategy of organizing their notebooks to be most helpful, followed by the phrases taught for circumlocution (a compensation strategy). The social strategy of speaking to people outside of the class was the one they reported as least helpful, and also the one they tried least frequently outside of class.

DISCUSSION

This project began as an attempt to answer three key questions about adult Hmong learners' use of learning strategies. While there were a number of problems in the design and carrying out of the project, interesting information did result. After discussing a number of the drawbacks in the study, I will address each of the three key questions.

One area of weakness in the design was that the interview questions about strategy use were very general, and thus the responses lacked detail. Indeed, this lack of detail made it difficult to categorize some of the behaviors. A better option would have been to have learners perform a specific language task, then reflect on how they had accomplished the task. In terms of the strategies instruction section, the project would have benefited from a more long-term time frame. Much more time could have been spent in practicing and applying each strategy. Finally, it is difficult to evaluate the impact, if any, of the strategies instruction sessions on the learners' use of strategies and on language learning. Again, the timeframe was too short to allow for more follow-up.

1. What learning strategies are adult Hmong students with little or no prior formal education using to learn English?
It is of course impossible to generalize the results of the observations and interviews. In addition, the more important question is what strategies they are using effectively. The clearest one that I saw was using peers and the teacher to help them learn. A number of learners were able to focus their attention in the classroom appropriately. I was also gratified to hear that at least one learner spent time planning for interactions, and

another allowed herself to just sit and listen in class when she felt overwhelmed. Perhaps the most interesting insight for me was less about a specific strategy, but that these learners are very experienced in being non-native speakers and language learners, despite the fact that they are recent immigrants to the US, and have only recently been in formal learning situations. Are there elements of informal learning, which seems to have served them well in learning Thai, that could be built into ESL curricula here? Perhaps a more experiential, community-based approach may replicate some of their successes, and be more familiar to them than sitting in a classroom. This is not a criticism of the teachers at the site of the study, who do a very good job of integrating a lot of field trips into the curricula, as well as applying work skills in a hands-on way at a thrift shop housed at the site.

2. What strategies would be useful to students?
We chose strategies based on the outcomes of the observations and interviews. For this reason, it is difficult to generalize which strategies would be useful for another group. However, I think that most low-literate learners with no prior education would benefit from metacognitive strategies, particularly those related to thinking about, organizing, and evaluating their learning. In addition, because there are so many language gaps when one is at a low proficiency level, some compensation strategies would also likely benefit most low-literate learners.

3. What do teachers of adult ESL need to know about strategies instruction for learners with little prior formal education?
Awareness about the different types of strategies is important for all teachers, as well as ideas about how to gather information about students' current strategy use. Teachers also need to think about integrating strategies instruction in with the rest of their curriculum, and find ways to recycle strategies once they have been taught.

In addition, there are a number of factors that are helpful for those working with learners with no prior formal education. These include:

> 1. Trying to anticipate what students will have difficulty with as a result of being low-literate. For example, our students had real difficulty with metacognition about their first language. (It was hard for them to think of a word in their L1 that "sounded like" an English word – something I asked them to do when making flashcards.)
> 2. Breaking strategies down into smaller steps. For example, students made flashcards in session one. In session two, they practiced using the flashcards. In session three, they added more information to their cards (person, thing, action).
> 3. Having students practice strategies with known material. When students are familiar with the basic task and language, they are free to focus more on the strategy being taught.
> 4. Using higher-level students as translators during strategy training sessions. This allows for more depth in the explanations. In addition, the strategies apply to all levels, so it's time well spent for all students.

CONCLUSION

This project shows that preliterate adult Hmong students are already using a number of learning strategies effectively. It also suggests that many learners can benefit from additional strategies instruction, and in fact want to learn how to learn more effectively. When providing strategies instruction, teachers need to pay particular attention to teaching them in manageable steps, and using known material for practice. Suggestions for further research are to do more in-depth interviews with individual learners. To focus specifically on current language learning, it would be good to have them perform a learning task, and then reflect on that. Another fertile area for further exploration is the learners' experiences of learning Thai. An interesting way to gain retrospective information on these informal learning experiences would be asking them to tell stories about learning the language. Perhaps there are program and curricular changes that we could make to better match the learning styles and preferences of these learners.

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[1] It should be noted that the Hmong participants in studies cited in this review of literature, with the exception of Degenhart's study, are from the first wave of Hmong immigration to the US in the 1970s and 1980s, or US-born children of those who arrived during that period. We are still learning about the most recent group of Hmong immigrants (those arriving post-2004).

[2] Park notes the need for further research to determine whether Hmong learners did in fact have a strong preference for five of the six styles, or whether they just had a tendency to answer positively to research questionnaires. (In fact, when compared with the other ethnic groups in the study, the Hmong had the highest preference scores of all groups for five of the six learning styles.)

[3] Chamot does point out that in some studies, the correlation between strategies instruction and language performance is more "complex" (p. 119).