Strategy development and progress in language learning

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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of strategies used by learners to regulate their own language learning is widely accepted, the lack of longitudinal studies in the language learning strategy field has long been recognised. This article reports on a study conducted in a private English language school for international students in Auckland, New Zealand, which aimed to investigate how progress in language learning related to changes in reported frequency of language learning strategy use over a period of time. Using a questionnaire known as the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory, or ELLSI (Griffiths 2003b), students were surveyed on entry to the school. Thirty students were surveyed again three months later.

The results suggested that, in general, the students who progressed most rapidly were those who reported the greatest increase in frequency of language learning strategy use over the three-month period of the study, especially strategies related to the use of resources, to the management of learning, to vocabulary and to writing in English. Implications of this finding are discussed and suggestions made regarding applications to the teaching/learning situation.

Introduction

Although the body of research into language learning strategies is now considerable, the overwhelming majority of it has looked at a sample of learners at a particular point in time rather than over a period of time. According to Ellis (1994: 559), longitudinal studies are ‘sorely needed’ because of our incomplete understanding of the development of language learning strategy use and the relationship of this development to progress in language learning. However, strategy research has ‘rarely’ (Chaudron 2003: 17) used longitudinal studies, which Dornyei (2003: 1) describes as ‘rare and precious’.

No doubt much of the explanation for the rarity of longitudinal studies of language learning strategies relates to the sheer difficulty of setting them up and following them through. Language students often have quite short courses, so amassing a worthwhile quantity of data from participants who may be difficult to track or unwilling to cooperate, and then matching one
set of data with another, is not always easy on a purely practical level. Longitudinal studies are much slower and more complicated than the more common cross-sectional research model. It has been recognised, however, that longitudinal studies could ‘make important contributions to our knowledge’ (Vann and Abraham 1990: 192). For this reason, the current study was undertaken in order to gain an insight into changes in language learning strategy use over time and to investigate any links between such changes and progress in language learning.

**What are language learning strategies?**

Since Rubin (1975) first brought the language learning strategy concept to a wide audience, the term has been notoriously difficult to define. It has been described as ‘elusive’ (Wenden 1987: 7) and ‘fuzzy’ (Ellis 1994: 529), while, according to O’Malley et al (1985: 43), there is ‘no consensus’ regarding what constitutes a learning strategy and how strategies differ from other learner activities or other types of strategies (such as communication strategies and teaching strategies), as well as ‘considerable confusion’ about how learning strategies are defined and how they relate to each other. In recent years, difficulties with theoretical inconsistencies and conceptual ambiguities have led educational psychologists to virtually abandon the term *strategy* in favour of *self-regulation* (Dornyei and Skehan 2003: 611), which, according to Dornyei (2005: 191), ‘refers to the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning’. However, self-regulation is achieved partly by means of strategies (Winne 1995), which more or less brings the argument full circle by acknowledging strategies as an essential component of self-regulation. A review of the literature suggests that, in spite of the difficulties, the term *strategy* still enjoys wide currency among teachers, researchers and writers (such as Chamot 2001; Cohen and Dornyei 2002; Oxford 2002; Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford 2003; Griffiths 2003a, 2003b) right up to the present.

According to Rubin (1975), language learning strategies are what students do; that is, they are active, and they are chosen by learners for a particular goal (Bialystok 1978; Oxford 1990, 2002; Cohen 1998; Chamot 2001). Cohen (1998) and Macaro (2004) argue that such purposeful selection must be conscious. Wenden (1991) points out that strategy choice may become quite automatic, and learners (especially expert learners) may not need to make a deliberate deployment decision on every occasion. However, this is not the same as saying they are not conscious, in the same way as much of our driving behaviour, although automatic, is still (hopefully!) conscious. Another indication of the conscious nature of strategies is
that learners, if interrupted during strategic behaviour, can usually verbalise the process, suggesting that they are, in fact, conscious of what they are doing (Gu 2005). Learning strategies are used by learners to regulate/manage/control their learning (Wenden 1991; Winne 1995), a goal that distinguishes them from other types of strategies such as communication strategies (which are used for immediate communicative needs, for instance Tarone 1981) or from other related concepts such as learning style (which relates to a learner’s preferred way of going about learning, for instance Reid 1987). By combining the defining elements identified above, language learning strategies emerge from a 30-year literature as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning, a definition that underpins the study reported in this article. For examples of language learning strategies that match this definition, see the ELLSI questionnaire in Appendix.

How does the use of language learning strategies relate to progress in language learning?

The role of language learning strategies in effective language learning was given prominence in the 1970s in the work of researchers such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman et al (1978), who each produced lists of strategies used by ‘the good language learner’ in order to learn. A taxonomy of strategies was also produced by O’Malley et al (1985), who divided their strategy items into three groups, which they labelled cognitive, metacognitive and social. According to their findings, the most successful students made frequent use of metacognitive strategies in order to manage their own learning. Oxford (1990) produced the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a questionnaire that has been used for a great deal of research into aspects of language learning strategy use (for a review, see Griffiths 2003b).

Using SILL, course level was discovered by Green and Oxford (1995) and by Griffiths (2003a, 2003b) to be significantly positively related to reported frequency of language learning strategy use, with higher-level students reporting, on average, a higher frequency of language learning strategy use than that reported by lower-level students. These results, however, do not give any indication of how individual students’ strategies might develop over time, or how any such changes might relate to progress in language learning, issues that are explored in the study reported in this article.

The study

It is the relationship between changes in strategy use and progress that the
The study reported in this article aimed to investigate by looking at students’ reported frequency of language learning strategy use on entry to their language course and again three months later, and by comparing any changes in the reported frequencies with students’ progress in terms of promotion through the levels of the school.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The study aimed to investigate the following two main questions:

- Does reported frequency of language learning strategy use change over time?
- How do any changes in reported frequency of language learning strategy use relate to progress in language learning in terms of promotion in course level?

RESEARCH SETTING
The study was conducted at a private school that teaches English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Auckland, New Zealand. Courses at the school ranged over seven levels (elementary, mid-elementary, upper elementary, pre-intermediate, mid-intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced). In order to determine initial course level, students new to the school were given the Oxford Placement Test, or OPT (Allan 1995), a commercially available test consisting of a grammar section and a listening section, frequently used in language school contexts to assist with the placement of new students. In addition, students’ speaking ability was assessed by a member of staff during a five-minute interview, in the course of which the ability to communicate effectively and fluently and to understand and answer questions with appropriate vocabulary and grammatical accuracy was noted. Because of time constraints, a writing task was not usually included in the assessment at this time unless there was uncertainty over appropriate placement as indicated by the other assessment methods.

After placement, promotion through the levels of the school was determined by the results of regular weekly tests. These tests were based on the work covered in class during the week. If students scored well in the test (usually 75% or more), they would be offered the opportunity to go up to a higher level. The level at which a student was working at any point in time was therefore a result of the placement systems in the school combined with the results of the weekly assessment system. This kind of flexible placement system is typical of many language schools, but its somewhat fluid nature needs to be borne in mind when interpreting results. Students who made
good progress in their language learning might well be promoted quite frequently. In other words, rate of promotion implies progress in language development in this environment. Levels of promotion over a given period of time can therefore be taken as suggesting rate of progress in language learning.

**INSTRUMENT**

The instrument used to collect the data for this study was the ELLSI questionnaire, constructed using strategy items suggested by students as ones they had found useful (for details, see Griffiths 2003b). This questionnaire (see Appendix) consists of 32 language learning strategy items such as ‘Reading books in English’ (item 4) or ‘Consciously learning new vocabulary’ (item 16), which students are asked to rate from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always) according to their perception of how frequently they use each item. In Griffiths’s (2003b) study, the alpha coefficient for reliability for ELLSI was calculated at 0.87, which is in the range described as ‘very respectable’ (Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995: 7)

ELLSI was chosen for the current study mainly because of its relative brevity. By comparison, the shortest version of the well-known SILL (Oxford 1990) consists of 50 items. Brevity was important because learners in the setting where the current study took place were fee-paying international students who were studying for relatively short periods of time. These students were not usually willing to ‘waste’ large amounts of time on anything that they did not perceive as directly related to their immediate goal of learning English. In addition to completing the strategy ratings, students were asked for birth date, gender, class level, nationality and reasons for learning.

**PARTICIPANTS**

There were 30 longer-term students (those with courses of three months or longer) who completed an ELLSI questionnaire on two occasions. The first occasion was in the week of arrival at the school, when all students completed the questionnaire. The second occasion was three months later, when they were approached by the researcher and asked to complete another questionnaire. Although three months is not a long time in language-learning terms, the students in this school generally came for quite short courses, the minimum being two weeks. Very few students enrolled for courses longer than three months, which was, therefore, the longest period of time over which a study could realistically be spread in this environment.
Participants’ ages ranged from 16 to 32, with the majority (23 or 77%) being in their twenties. These 30 students came from a variety of national backgrounds (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Thailand, South America). There were 11 (37%) males and 19 (63%) females. Students gave a variety of reasons for wanting to study, including improving their job prospects, needing it to further their education or using it for travel purposes.

DATA COLLECTION
During their first week at the school, students participated in a special two-hour study skills class, usually held on a Wednesday afternoon. The basic purpose of the class was to check on how students were settling into the school, to introduce students to the school facilities (such as the self-study centre) and to raise their awareness of how to study (as distinct from the usual focus on what they studied) in the hope that they might be able to gather ideas for more effective study and thereby derive maximum benefit from their time at the school. During the period of the current study, the study skills class was also used for research purposes, which was explained to the students.

During the class, students were asked to complete the ELLSI questionnaire, which was then used as a basis for reflection and discussion before being collected. Students were also encouraged to add any comments they wanted to make to the questionnaire form so that these could be used to add a qualitative dimension to the quantitative data provided by the ratings figures. The questionnaire was then collected. As longer-term students reached the three-month point in their courses, they were asked by the researcher to complete a second ELLSI and to hand it in at their convenience. The class level attained by the time of the second survey was noted and the second ELLSI matched with the first. Altogether, 30 such pairs were collected.

DATA ANALYSIS
Data from the ELLSIs were entered onto Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program for analysis. For each student the total entry and re-survey ratings for reported frequency of language learning strategy use were calculated, as well as the difference in the rating totals between surveys and the medians for each of these sets of figures. In addition, the number of levels through which each student had been promoted was noted and the median calculated. The most frequently promoted group of students (three to four levels in three months) was identified, as well as the least frequently promoted group (no promotion over three months), and median changes in
entry/re-survey scores calculated. A non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used in order to investigate whether the difference in the amount of change in frequency of strategy use by the most frequently promoted group of students and the least frequently promoted group of students was significant.

For each of the five most frequently promoted students the change between surveys in the frequency rating of each strategy was calculated and then aggregated to indicate the strategies that were most subject to change in frequency of use by this frequently promoted group of students. Any salient patterns of strategy use, both by individual students or by groups of students, were also noted, as well as any comments that had been added to the form.

**QUANTITATIVE RESULTS**

For the 30 students who completed two ELLSIs at an interval of three months, the median ratings total for reported frequency of use on entry was 95.5. When re-surveyed three months later, the median was 106.5. The difference between the entry and the re-survey medians for language learning strategy frequency ratings use was, therefore, +11. Promotion for these 30 students over that period of time ranged from zero to four levels, with the median being one level.

Over the three months, there were five students who were promoted three or more levels and nine students who were not promoted at all. The median total ratings increase for the frequently promoted group was +21, whereas the median for those who were not promoted was only +3, a difference that was found to be significant (p<0.05, Mann-Whitney).

For a group of eight students, the re-survey ratings total was lower than the ratings total on entry. With only one exception (student 28), students in this group were promoted only one level or not at all.

The entry and re-survey ratings totals for frequency of language learning strategy use for each of the 30 students are set out in Table 1, along with the changes in the totals between surveys and the number of levels of promotion. The data have been sorted in descending order of levels of promotion, and the most frequently promoted group, the least frequently promoted group and the group reporting a decline in frequency of language learning strategy use have been shaded for emphasis. Medians are noted at the bottom of the table.

The ten strategy items that reportedly most increased in usage by the five most frequently promoted students were:

- Item 6: Watching TV in English
- Item 7: Revising regularly
Table 1: Entry and re-survey averages for reported frequency of language learning strategy use (ELLSI), with the change in average reported frequency of strategy use between surveys and the number of levels of promotion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student number</th>
<th>Entry average</th>
<th>Re-survey average</th>
<th>Entry/re-survey change</th>
<th>Levels of promotion</th>
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Item 10: Writing letters in English
Item 14: Reading newspapers in English
Item 16: Consciously learning new vocabulary
Item 17: Keeping a language learning notebook
Item 19: Taking note of language used in the environment
Item 20: Controlling schedules so that English study is done
Item 25: Listening to native speakers of English
Item 29: Watching movies in English.

This frequently promoted group reported reduced usage of two strategies:

Item 13: Using a dictionary
Item 28: Making friends with native speakers.

**Discussion of quantitative results**

Although care needs to be taken when interpreting these results because numbers are relatively low (N=30), the time span relatively short (three months) and significance level not high (p<0.05), these findings suggest that, overall, the students who progressed most rapidly in terms of promotion through the levels of the school were those who reported the largest increases in the frequency of their language learning strategy use over the three-month period. The group of students who progressed through three to four levels reported a median increase of 21 in frequency ratings, which is seven times greater than the median increase of three reported by students who remained at the same level throughout the three months.

Not all of the students in the study reported an increase in the frequency of their language learning strategy use over the three months. In fact there was a group of eight students whose re-test totals were lower than their entry totals. Possible explanations of this phenomenon might be that students who reported using strategies frequently on arrival might be affected by others who were less strategic in their approaches to their studies, by peer pressure, by a desire to fit in, by a need to adapt to the new culture in which they found themselves or by the sudden absence of the kinds of pressures they had at home. Another possible interpretation might be that the language learning strategies reported on arrival might not have been a realistic representation of actual strategy use, a recognised limitation of self-report data discussed at length by Gu, Wen and Wu (1995), among others. It is possible
that not all students report their strategy use reliably or using the same frames of reference: what is ‘always or almost always’ for one student might, for instance, be given a lower rating by another (Gu, Wen and Wu 1995). Furthermore, increases in reported strategy use might represent increased awareness rather than increased frequency. Whatever the explanation for the decline in reported frequency of strategy use among these eight students, this group achieved only a very low rate of promotion (median=0.5, which is half of the overall median), a negative finding that helps to strengthen the positive connection discovered between reported strategy growth and progress in language learning.

If we look more closely at the group of ten strategies that most increased in reported frequency of use by the five most frequently promoted students, it is noteworthy that five (50%) related in one way or another to the utilisation of resources readily available in the environment in which learners were studying (items 6, 14, 19, 25, 29). It would seem possible that the reported willingness of students to utilise readily-available resources such as television, newspapers, native speakers, movies and the environment in general might contribute to their relatively rapid rates of promotion. Another three strategies (33% of the group) might be considered to relate to the management of learning (items 7, 17, 20) by means of revision, keeping a notebook and controlling schedules. The presence of three strategies relating to students’ ability to manage their own learning in this list of ten would seem to support the finding by O’Malley et al (1985) that more successful students are more capable of using strategies to control their own learning (metacognitive strategies) than are less successful students. Of the remaining two strategies in this group, one related to vocabulary (item 16) and one related to writing (item 10), underscoring the potential usefulness of these types of strategies.

Of the two strategies that decreased in use by the most frequently promoted group of students (items 13, 28), the decline of the strategy of making friends with native speakers may well reflect the reality that many international students arrive with high hopes of new friendships but find making such friendships more difficult than they had anticipated, as noted on several of the questionnaire forms handed in by the students in this study. The declining use of dictionaries raises questions in regard to teaching practice: since frequently promoted students report using dictionaries less frequently over time, does this suggest that the use of dictionaries should be discouraged or even banned in language classrooms? Most ESOL teachers will have come across students who, when given a passage to read, obsessively set to work to look up every word in their dictionaries, often then writing direct translations above the English text in their own languages. These
kinds of students often seem to make minimal progress. However, is it reasonable to conclude from these experiences that dictionary support is always unhelpful? Perhaps lower-level students may still need frequent dictionary support if they are not to lose confidence and motivation? Because of their direct implications for classroom practice, these are important questions for further research.

**Individual perspectives**

In addition to providing quantitative information by means of rating the strategy items of the ELLSI questionnaire according to frequency of use, many of the students also added comments to the survey form. When added to teacher feedback, these comments contributed a useful qualitative dimension, which may help to throw further light on the question of why some students (for instance student number 9) make more rapid progress than others (for instance student number 28).

Student number 9, who will be called Taro, was a 20-year-old Japanese student wanting to study English so that he could go to university and get a good job with his knowledge of English as the international language. His strategy ratings total on entry was high (137) and, over the next three months, he increased this to 148. During his time at the school Taro tackled his studies positively, made a lot of friends with local people and other students alike, and interacted freely and frequently with his teachers. Taro moved through four levels (elementary to intermediate) in three months, the highest rate of promotion in this study. The findings of this study would seem to suggest that the increase in Taro’s already high reported strategy frequency average by the time of the re-survey might have been a contributing factor in his rapid progress.

By comparison, student number 28, who will be called Lee, a 21-year-old Korean student wanting to learn English ‘for myself’, was initially placed at pre-intermediate level. Her initial frequency ratings total was very high (138) and she appeared to arrive with good intentions of making the best of her time in New Zealand, giving ratings of 5 (always or almost always) to strategies such as ‘Talking to native speakers’ and ‘Making friends with native speakers’. However, even in this first survey, completed in the first week of her course, Lee was complaining in notes, which she added to the ELLSI questionnaire form, that ‘teacher doesn’t talk to Asia student’, that ‘I want talking with native person for long time’ and that ‘I want to stay small [number of] students in my classroom’. A picture emerges of a rather inflexible and unhappy student who found it difficult to adapt to the realities of the situation in which she found herself. By the end of three
months, Lee’s frequency ratings total had decreased to 113. In her second survey, Lee complained that ‘I cannot meet English person’: she gave ‘Talking to native speakers of English’ a rating of 2, and ‘Making friends with native speakers’ a rating of only 1, with the implication in her comments that native speakers are difficult to talk to and unfriendly. Although she had been promoted to upper intermediate (two levels of promotion), a rate of promotion that is actually higher than the median (one level), the impression among those of us who knew her at the school was that she could have done better but for her negative attitudes, which appeared to be reflected in the declining frequency she reported in language learning strategy use.

Of course, there are a number of differences between Lee and Taro, in addition to their different patterns of strategy development, which might help to explain why it was that Taro progressed more rapidly than Lee. He, for instance, had a friendly, outgoing personality, whereas she was quick to find fault and blame others for her problems. He was positive and had a clear motivation, whereas she was negative, complaining and gave a vague reason for wanting to learn. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that the differences in their strategy development may also have contributed to their different rates of progress.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that although this study found a positive relationship between increased reported frequency of strategy use and progress overall, this finding does not necessarily apply to every individual student. An examination of Table 1 reveals that not all students who achieved a high level of promotion also reported a large increase in their frequency of language learning strategy use. Student number 20, for instance, progressed through three levels despite reporting an increase of only +3 in the strategy frequency ratings total. Conversely there were those, like student number 5, who reported a relatively high entry/re-survey ratings change of +16 but who were not promoted at all during the three-month period of the study. Nevertheless, although an uncomplicated linear association between rate of promotion and reported increment in language learning strategy use cannot be claimed, the results of this study do indicate that, in general, increased reported frequency of language learning strategy use is linked to progress, and that, on average, the most frequently promoted students are the ones who report the greatest increase in the frequency of their language learning strategy use over a period of time.

**Limitations and suggestions for further research**

Although the main finding from this study indicating a possible connection between progress in language learning and development of language learning
strategy use over time is interesting, there are a number of limitations, which suggest useful directions for future research:

1. The number of participants is too small to allow anything but tentative conclusions regarding the relationship between strategy development and progress in language learning. Studies with larger numbers of participants, which would be expected to produce more reliable results and possibly higher levels of significance, would be useful.

2. The three-month timeframe of this study is too short to provide anything more than an indication of possible direction of the relationship between strategy development and progress. A study over a longer period is required for robust results.

3. The flexible nature of the levels used as the dependent variable in this study may well have affected reliability. A standardised measure of proficiency, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System), might produce more reliable results and, perhaps, higher levels of significance.

4. The limitations of self-report questionnaires discussed earlier in the article should not be overlooked. Although questionnaires can be a very useful means of gathering data (Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995), they are not without their limitations (Gu, Wen and Wu 1995). Alternative research techniques such as interviews would be a useful way of further probing insights from the questionnaires and of cross-checking the questionnaire results.

5. Increasingly in the literature, there is an awareness that language learning strategies are but one facet of a much more complex self-regulation concept. Although this study has produced interesting insights into the relationship between strategy development and progress, the role of strategies in self-regulation is still poorly understood and under-researched.

**Implications and conclusion**

A review of the literature since 1975, when Rubin’s article on good language learners created widespread interest in language learning strategies, suggests that language learning strategies might be defined as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning. This was the definition used for the current study, which conducted an investigation into the development of language learning strategies over a period of time.
The results from this study have contributed some useful extra insights to those obtained from previous research, indicating that those who progressed most rapidly were those who reported the largest increases in the frequency of their language learning strategy use, especially those strategies relating to the use of resources, to the management of their own learning, to the expansion of vocabulary and to writing. Although this generalisation did not apply to every individual learner, the relationship of increased strategy use to progress was significant overall, suggesting that promoting language learning strategy use in the classroom might be beneficial as a means of facilitating progress and empowering students by developing their abilities to regulate their own learning.

Although the usefulness of strategy instruction has been questioned (for instance by Rees-Miller 1993), many others have run successful strategy instruction programs (including Weinstein and Mayer 1986; Chamot and Rubin 1994; Nunan 1995; Cohen 1998). The finding from the study reported in this article – that progress is related to increased frequency of reported language learning strategy use – would seem to suggest the potential usefulness of helping to increase students’ strategy awareness and use. Effective programs to develop these strategy repertoires remain a major area for ongoing research.

REFERENCES


Appendix

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY INVENTORY (ELLSI)
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Dear student: please read the following list of language learning strategies. Please mark each one according to whether you:

(1) never or almost never use it
(2) do not usually use it
(3) sometimes use it,
(4) usually use it
(5) always or almost always use it.

1 _____________Doing homework
2 _____________Learning from the teacher
3 _____________Learning in an environment where the language is spoken
4 _____________Reading books in English
5 _____________Using a computer
6 _____________Watching TV in English
7 _____________Revising regularly
8 _____________Listening to songs in English
9 _____________Using language learning games
10 _____________Writing letters in English
11 _____________Listening to music while studying
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Talking to other students in English</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Using a dictionary</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Reading newspapers in English</td>
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<td>Studying English grammar</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Consciously learning new vocabulary</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Keeping a language learning notebook</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Talking to native speakers of English</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Taking note of language used in the environment</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Controlling schedules so that English study is done</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Pre-planning language-learning encounters</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Not worrying about mistakes</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Using a self-study centre</td>
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<td>Trying to think in English</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Listening to native speakers of English</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Learning from mistakes</td>
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<td>Spending a lot of time studying English</td>
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<td>Making friends with native speakers</td>
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<td>Watching movies in English</td>
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<td>Learning about the culture of English speakers</td>
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<td>Listening to the radio in English</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Writing a diary in English</td>
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