The "Very Successful L2 Learner" in the Sixth Grade of the Greek Elementary School as Portrayed through a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Rubin's (1975) seminal article on "successful learners" instigated prolific research into those language learning strategies which would distinguish a good from a poorer learner in order to diminish the difference them. Dearth of similar research in the Greek context, especially at primary educational level, gave rise to a study of a quantitative and a qualitative paradigm with the purpose of investigating the strategies of Greek-speaking 6th-graders in elementary schools according to their language proficiency, motivation, and gender in Thessaloniki in 2008 (Vrettou, 2011). This paper presents the qualitative data collected through semi-structured short interviews of 30 participants, long interviews of 12 students as well as interviews of those informants' Greek and English language teachers (24 in total). The results depicted the excelling lower intermediate or B1 (Council of Europe, 2001) level student. Implications for teachers include aiming for the characteristics of this very successful learner, being strategic ingenuity, very high motivation, divergence from rote memorization with a lot of critical thinking, and high metacognition. Such features are supported in the new Greek Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education (2003), accentuating the importance of strategy instruction in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Language Proficiency Level, Motivation to Learn English, The "Very Successful L2 Learner", Primary Education.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, wide variation in learners' ultimate attainment in a second or foreign language (L2) gave rise to the study of individual differences, especially of language learning aptitude and motivation. In the 1970s, the field of individual differences was stimulated by research on the "good language learner", which put forward the concept of language learning strategies, another trait which helped students on their journey to success (Dörnyei, 2005).

In her landmark article "What the "good language learner" can teach us", Rubin (1975) suggested that knowledge of the makings of "successful learners" could be included in classroom instructional strategies for poorer learners to maximize their performance.

Aside from Rubin's (1975, 1981), all the early "good language learner" studies (Naiman, Frölich, Stern, and Todesco, 1978; Stern, 1975) identify the language learner characteristics which are conducive to success: attention to both form and meaning while communicating, active involvement in language learning, awareness of the learning process, and use of metacognition so as to assess progress and needs as well as to control one's learning (Ellis, 1994).

As data have accumulated over the years, researchers have come to the realization that "no single ideal set of characteristics existed" as different sorts of language learners can have various talents in a variety of settings (Oxford, 2008: 306). This paper will delineate such talents and settings so as to attempt to answer the complicated question of what actually makes for such a good learner.

As there is lack of similar research in the Greek context, a qualitative study will also be presented with the aim of pinpointing the distinguishing traits of specific excelling EFL students at primary educational level.

Research Review

In language learning, "good" or "successful" outcomes have generally been equated with proficiency or achievement in an L2. However, the ingredients of successful learning have been an object of controversy since a very large number of variables are involved (Griffiths, 2008b). The most prominent ones which research has identified as contributors to success include specific learner traits, aspects of the teaching and learning situation, and particular linguistic knowledge to be acquired.

Learner Characteristics

Undoubtedly, good language learners are motivated. Work in the 1970s, 80s and 90s has shown strong relationships between motivation and proficiency in an L2 (Gardner, 1985, 2001; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). In fact, Skehan's (1989) tentative conclusion that motivation is the cause of achievement seems to be confirmed in causal modeling techniques (Gardner, Tremblay, and Masgoret, 1997). The study of a range of motivational constructs considering the reasons for learning a target language, whether being integrative or instrumental (Gardner, 2001), intrinsic or extrinsic (Noels, 2001), have added to the impact of this factor in language learning.

Consistently predicting learning outcomes has also been language learning aptitude, that is, a special ability for learning foreign languages, which is separate from general intelligence. As all learners may become reasonably proficient in an L2, aptitude can advance the rate and speed of learning, reflecting existing strengths and weaknesses in cognitive abilities (Ellis, 1994) not only in adults but also in young learners (Milton and Alexiou, 2006). Although it was originally perceived as a stable cognitive trait (Carroll, 1962), accommodation of the aptitude profiles of learners appears to be a challenging prospect in order to maximize their efficiency (Ranta, 2008). Age and gender are the most stable learner characteristics. Research evidence in the 1970s (Krashen, Scarcella, and Long, 1979/82) fostered the popular belief that the younger the better, mainly attributed to the existence of a critical period beyond which native-like proficiency is very hard to achieve. However, counter research evidence seems to refute the strong version of the

critical period hypothesis (Nikolov and Djigunovic, 2006; Singleton, 2001); moreover, longitudinal classroom-based studies (Cenoz, 2003; Munoz, 2006) have indicated that older starters can also prove to be efficient learners.

As to gender, perusal of large studies and meta-analyses of studies on sex differentiation in verbal abilities in the normal population suggests that language proficiency differences are non existent. In early language learning, girls slightly exceed boys but this advantage gradually disappears in childhood (Wallentin, 2009). Thus, any differentiation in language acquisition may well be related to social practices that construct identities (Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, 1999).

Another learner trait is learning style, which refers to a rather consistent way of processing information from the environment (Nel, 2008). A number of sensory styles (i.e. visual, auditory, and kinesthetic/tactile or haptic), environmental (related to sound, light, temperature etc), and sociological (connected to group or individual work or teacher authority) styles constitute perceptual learning preferences which have been identified (Reid, 1995). Cognitive style preferences have been expressed in bipolar opposite terms, such as "field dependent versus field independent", "impulsive versus reflective", or "global versus analytic" (Psaltou-Joycey, 2010). In the literature, some researchers have found positive and statistically significant correlations of field independence (i.e. tendency to analysis and breaking down information into its component parts) with achievement. Overall, none the less, it appears that no one style is typical of good language learners as various styles can lead to success (Nel, 2008).

Personality, often included in learning style taxonomies (Reid, 1995; Psaltou-Joycey, 2010), is a very important factor in the learning process. It has widely been measured along four bi-polar scales: (1) extraversion-introversion (focusing on the outer world of activity or the inner world of ideas and experiences); (2) sensing-intuition (empirically inclined versus relying on intuition and imagination); (3) thinking–feeling (making decisions rationally versus using personal or social values); (4) judging–perceiving (taking action in a planned way seeking closure versus preferring flexibility and spontaneity keeping options open). Ehrman (2008) contends that at the Foreign Service Institute where she worked, introversion was over-represented in the highest achievers in an oral interview test together with intuition, thinking, and judging. That might imply that teachers should identify their students' learning styles and personalities and give them activities that are most functional for them.

Good language learners also seem to hold positive beliefs about themselves as language learners and about the language they are learning (White, 2008). The impact of beliefs is likely to be indirect by exerting influence on the L2 learning strategies deployed by learners (Ellis 2008), especially beliefs connected to self-efficacy (Yang, 1999), i.e. a person's judgment of their performance (Bandura, 1986).

According to Griffiths (2008c), L2 learning strategies are physical or mental activities consciously selected by learners in order to regulate and thus facilitate their language learning. Comparison of strategy classification schemes through confirmatory factor analysis has indicated that Oxford's (1990) six-factor model of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategy categories appears to be more powerful in accounting for learners' strategy use (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002). Quite a lot research has revealed positive and statistically significant relations between reported strategy use and proficiency (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Peacock and Ho, 2003; Vrettou, 2009, 2011; Wharton, 2000).

Another learner characteristic considered to be a major determiner of language learning effectiveness is metacognition (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994). The term denotes thinking about one's thinking, containing critical reflection of one's knowledge and doings (Anderson, 2005). Thus, it involves keeping focused, planning one's learning, setting goals and objectives as well as self-monitoring and self-evaluating (Oxford, 1990). Researchers generally agree that raising awareness of one's learning can lead to better learning (Anderson, 2008; Cotterall and Murray, 2009; Pintrich, 2002). In other words, good language learners make frequent use of metacognitive strategies (Griffiths, 2008a; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

Finally, actively contributing to one's learning is regarded as advantageous to successful learning by many theorists. Deeply rooted in 18th- and 19th-century philosophical work on the society and the individual, the idea of autonomy permeates a democratic society, which is built upon active individuals who respect the autonomy of others. Revived interest in the philosophical dimension of autonomy in education has led to education policy reform initiatives around the world (Benson, 2006).

Aspects of the Teaching and Learning Situation
Over the course of time, a rich diversity of approaches and methods has been deployed in language teaching and learning. Despite the lack of a firm research basis, approaches and methods are actually prescriptive of what and how to teach (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The breadth of available options and the peculiarities of particular learners in particular social and cultural contexts render teachers and learners the challenge of eclecticism in procedures followed in order to promote success in language learning. Hence, teachers should be flexible, adaptable and creative in order to enhance their students' learning efficacy. As there are many ways to learn a language well, good language learners, on the other hand, can flexibly employ the methods which are most appropriate for them to achieve their goals (Griffiths, 2008d).

Strategy instruction may also aid learners in improving on the language being learned. All models for strategy instruction suggest explicit teacher demonstration and modeling, and underscore students' evaluation, choice, and transfer of strategies to other tasks. Among other issues, the influence of a learner's culture and context of learning should carefully be considered in strategy intervention (Chamot, 2008).

Instruction in task analysis in task-based learning could additionally assist learners to progress. Being part of the planning phase in metacognitive procedures, task analysis starts with identification of the task purpose, proceeds with task classification, and is concluded with the task demand stage, where strategies and actions that need to be taken for the completion of a task are considered. In that way, learners can be trained to select the strategies that are most appropriate for a task rather than pick strategies at random (Rubin and McCoy, 2008).

Furthermore, an informed policy on corrective feedback on the part of the teacher could also be paramount to the advancement of learners so that a balance might be kept between correction and encouragement. Error correction should be associated with the focus of a lesson activity in which it appears while fostering the expectation of positive feedback in the affective domain to sustain motivation (Roberts and Griffiths, 2008).

L2-related Goals

Attaining proficiency in an L2 requires a great amount of effort on the part of learners, who aim to acquire linguistic knowledge (regarding pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and functions) as well as skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). That is a demanding journey to be taken arduously and patiently.

First of all, good language learners seem to have clear and acceptable pronunciation (Brown, 2008). Although pronunciation is generally absent from school curricula (MacDonald, 2002), mastery of it is fundamental since lack of intelligibility can break down any effort for successful communication. What is more, in recent research, the importance of native-like pronunciation emerges as it has shown positive and statistically significant links with language proficiency (Green and Oxford, 1995; Lan and Oxford, 2003; Peacock and Ho, 2003; Vrettou, 2009; 2011).

Moreover, learners regarded as good need to systematically build up their vocabulary knowledge and acquire fluency using important vocabulary strategies such as guessing from context, using word parts, using dictionaries, and using memorization techniques, particularly the keyword technique (Nation, 2001). Teaching and extensive practicing of these strategies can help learners to reflect on and control their learning (Moir and Nation, 2008).

In addition, as Rubin (1975) suggested, good language learners attend to form, often referred to as grammar, and acquire strategies for learning it (Bade, 2008). Communicative language teaching calls for attention to the structural aspects of language in order to communicate meanings effectively in various situations (Littlewood, 1992). To that end, emphasis on the comprehension and development of language functions, i.e. the uses to which particular grammatical forms are put, can essentially contribute to the development of a good learner's communicative competence (Tajeddin, 2008). Giving the students practice in form within a communicative context can help them in making the "leap" from form-focused accuracy to fluency in production (Ur, 2003).

To conclude, since language involves both reception and production, good language learners need to be equipped with effective listening strategies, especially prediction, inferring, monitoring, and clarifying (White, 2008); good oral strategies, which facilitate the development of oral skills not limited to specific situations, facilitate learning useful vocabulary and completion of specific speaking tasks (Kawai, 2008); effective reading strategies, such as developing clear goals for their reading, monitoring, and securing comprehension of the text (Schramm, 2008); and good writing characteristics, such as reading a lot in the target language, attending to vocabulary, meaning, and form, and creating their own opportunities to write (Gordon, 2008).

The Good Learner in the Greek ELT Context

The English language was introduced in the last three grades of the Greek state elementary school in 1987. In 2003, when the Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education was published, English instruction was extended to the third grade of primary education. Since 2010, English has additionally been taught on a pilot basis in the first and second grades of elementary school in 800 schools around the country.

Despite the longer hours provided in foreign language education by the state, it is a characteristic in Greece that the majority of the young learners have private tuition alongside state school instruction with the aim of obtaining a language certificate to be included among future career qualifications (Alexiou and Mattheoudakis, 2013).

Based on cognitive theories of learning and the communicative task-based approach in second language acquisition, the new curriculum for the nine-year compulsory education, that is, elementary and junior high school, aims for a holistic approach to content learning whereby interdisciplinary (or cross-thematic) connections and relationships are established and supported. As for learners, they are expected to develop responsible well-rounded personalities through cultivation of their cognitive, emotional, and social skills and abilities. More specifically, the "good language learner" does not rely on memorization and seeks knowledge through discovery having "learning how to learn" strategies and using technology and resources. He/she has good communicative skills (in listening, speaking, reading, writing, argumentation etc), metacognitive strategies, critical and creative thinking abilities, high motivation, and cooperativeness.

As regards the cross-thematic curriculum framework for foreign languages and particularly English, the principles of foreign language literacy, multilingualism, and multiculturalism are promoted. Hence, the good language learner should pay attention to pronunciation, develop the four language skills, foster communication and mediation skills as well as develop linguistic and cultural consciousness.

The new pilot Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (Ενιαίο Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών Ξένων Γλωσσών (ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ) 2011), which is common for all languages taught at the Greek state school and integrates all levels of education, introduces the novelty of identifying language proficiency levels according to the Council of Europe CEFR levels (Council of Europe 2001), and linking foreign language school education to the State Certificate of Proficiency ("Kratiko Pistopoiitiko Glossomatheias" or KPG). Thus, streaming all students into levels of proficiency and teaching them materials appropriate for their needs with the aid of technology can assist in the attainment of A2-B1 levels at the end of elementary school while B2-C1 levels can be reached at the end of junior high school. Consequently, an A2 level 6th-grader in elementary school may be described as "good" or "successful"; a B1 level peer can be regarded as "very good" or "very successful".

The Study
The current study (Vrettou, 2011) hoped to explore Greek-speaking young learners' strategic behavior in the Greek context, where similar research evidence is lacking (Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari, 2010; Παπάνης, 2008). More importantly, the aim was to discover strategic ways which can help elementary school students improve their EFL learning with pedagogical implications for their teaching.

The study, which was conducted for a doctoral thesis, was comprised of two parts. In the first part, quantitative data were collected through cluster sampling; in the second and third parts, which are to be reported here, individual short and long interviews were held respectively through the method of simple random clustering (Aaker, Kumar, and Day, 1995).

For the qualitative parts of the study, students were randomly selected in such a way so that all three proficiency levels which came up in the study (that is, A1, A2, and B1 levels), both genders, and the three areas of the city where they came from could equally be represented.

Research Tools and Participants
During the first part of the study, the variables of language proficiency level, motivation to learn English, and gender were examined in relation to the strategy use of 763 6th-graders of

elementary schools in the western, central, and eastern administrative areas of the city of Thessaloniki in the year 2008. The students were administered an adapted form of Oxford's (1990) 7.0 version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL); that is a strategy questionnaire composed of six strategy categories, namely, memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social ones. The informants' motivation to learn English was measured by the average of their responses to three questions on the background questionnaire concerning liking English, will or desire to learn the language, and effort expended on the task, following Gardner's (2001) socioeducational model of second language acquisition. In addition, the standardized Quick Placement Test (QPT: UCLES, 2001) measured linguistic proficiency.

In the part with the short individual semi-structured interviews, which lasted 15-30 minutes each, 30 students were examined. In the beginning, they were required to state their English learning experience and text books being taught outside of school (in case they were attending private English classes). Questions were targeted at the assessment of the students' motivation (concerning their liking of the foreign language and will to learn it) and were generally formulated on the basis of items on the strategy questionnaire which had been significantly affected by proficiency level and motivation to learn English in the statistical data; ways, if any, of constant improvement of the learners' English were also sought.

In the third part, 12 students participated with long one-on-one semi-structured interviews lasting 30-60 minutes each (depending on the students' answers). Apart from the questions included in the short interviews, additional questions were asked (with regard to effort expended on learning and to classroom-related factors, that is, whether the students were satisfied with the course books, the teachers, and the way of teaching; if they were satisfied with their English performance; if they preferred rote learning to learning the gist in their own words; if they liked questions seeking their own personal judgment, i.e. when their opinion was asked for; and, aside from rote memorization, what other ways helped them to learn English words better). As for the 12 Greek and 12 English language teachers of those interviewees, they were asked to provide qualitative information about the students' learning profiles so that a fuller picture of their personalities and learning could be drawn.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before the conduct of the interviews, held in Greek by the researcher herself, the participants were informed of the aim of the whole procedure: to investigate their English learning habits thoroughly. The students were encouraged to express themselves in a free way. As far as the Greek and English language teachers are concerned, they were deemed to be instrumental in delineating their students' learning.

All the answers in the interviews were hand-written since tape-recording was not allowed by the Pedagogical Institute and the Ministry of Education, which gave permission for the present study. Besides, the teachers' answers were taken down in the form of notes to create a relaxed atmosphere knowing that any personal information regarding the students would easily be erased. Anonymity was safeguarded in relation to any kind of information given by the students and teachers, too.

The analysis performed was qualitative evaluating the interview data in order to validate and elaborate the quantitative data gathered.

Findings and Discussion

According to the QPT scores, three proficiency levels were identified for the 763 participants of the study: the beginning or A1 level (34.6%), the elementary or A2 level (54.8%), and the lower intermediate or B1 level (10.6%).

The results of the 30 short interviews validated the statistical results of the study. That is to say, the higher the proficiency level of the interviewees, the more motivated they were found to be; the more they used reviewing, tried to talk like native English speakers, took part in English conversations, and read English books; they also used the compensatory strategies of guessing from context and using a synonym or circumlocution as well as the metacognitive strategies of paying attention when somebody is speaking, thinking about their progress, and planning their schedule to a higher degree; they also utilized the affective strategy of noticing their nervousness and the social strategy of asking questions in English to a greater extent. It should be noted that in the quantitative results of the study, among extra strategies significantly related to proficiency were avoiding word-for-word translation, attending to the grammar system of the language, trying to find as many ways as possible to use one's English, listening carefully, and writing texts in English, thus developing all the four linguistic skills.

What is more, the responses to the question whether they tried to improve their English constantly indicated the children's strategic ingenuity. The beginners believed that more studying, asking questions, and reviewing could make them better learners. The elementary students suggested that reading texts in order to work on pronunciation, reading books and writing summaries of them, listening to English songs, practicing English with others, and playing with cards written in English or playing electronic games could help the children further their English performance. The lower intermediates were the most resourceful of all coming up with more alternative strategies. For the purpose of advancing their English, they would read English books, use dictionaries, listen to the course book CD to improve their pronunciation, listen to songs, practice English with others, travel to England for practice, have a native English speaker for a teacher, watch movies without subtitles, and use the vocabulary and grammar they had been taught.

The 12 students' long interviews yielded similar results in respect of all the questions asked in the short interviews corroborating the statistical data once more. Thus, the high motivation of higher proficiency students was confirmed again.

As regards the microlevel of motivation, all students seemed to have positive attitudes towards the teachers and the way of teaching. However, more than half of the interviewees made complaints about the course book series taught at the time in state elementary schools for being especially tedious with childish topics in contrast to the interesting books taught at the private EFL institutes they attended.

All the informants were generally satisfied with their performance in English. The majority of them preferred learning the gist of new information in their school subjects to rote learning. Nevertheless, all the lower intermediates were enamored of expressing their views on matters seeking their personal opinion showing their disposition towards critical consideration.

When asked about ways which help them to learn English words better, the beginners were the least resourceful reading and copying the words, spelling them, making examples, or creating tags with names of objects on them. The elementary students used language-related strategies such as finding synonyms, antonyms, or derivatives, breaking the words down into parts, creating

sentences, using the new words in writing assignments, making flashcards, and drawing on them. The third group were even more flexible strategically as they would look at vocabulary use through examples, they would create their own examples, try to find links with related words, practice pronunciation and vocabulary in reading texts, use a dictionary, write compositions and summaries, hold debates, and above all, use the words they had been taught both orally and in writing, thus exploiting all linguistic skills.

The information conveyed by the Greek and English language teachers of the 12 participants in the long interviews portrayed the learning profiles of the students at the three proficiency levels. Low motivation and adherence to rote learning characterized the beginners. Varying degrees of motivation marked the elementary students. As for the lower intermediates, who represent the "very successful" learner in elementary school, they distinguished themselves as exceptional students in their classes and were particularly diligent, responsible, open-minded, organized, and very mature for their age. They had well-developed critical abilities deviating from plain rote memorization, and were highly motivated to learn the English language in order to enhance their learning (aside from resorting to a large number of strategies, as clearly shown in the students' short and long interviews).

There is some relatively recent research into the strategy use of the successful learner, which is in accordance with the present study. Takeuchi (2003) compiled the characteristics of 160 good foreign language learners in autobiographical accounts of strategy use in the Japanese context. All of the learners used metacognitive strategies, such as maximizing opportunities to use the language, were concerned with vocabulary building, pronunciation accuracy and grammar rules, avoided translation, guessed meanings, and used strategies related to listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Griffiths (2003); Peacock and Ho (2003) conducted interviews which indicated the intimate association of motivation with success in language learning, which was also evident in Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004); Qingquan, Chatupote, and Teo (2008) together with the importance of metacognitive qualities. Besides, Griffiths' (2003) data highlighted her high achievers' frequent use of strategies, which were deployed by the high proficiency students in her main study, too.

Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

This research has shown strong relationships of strategy use with language proficiency and motivation to learn English (Vrettou, 2011). The interviews part confirmed the statistical data and conduced to the depiction of the "very successful" learner, who is at a lower intermediate level in elementary school (Ενιαίο Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών (ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ) 2011). The attributes of such an excelling learner should be targeted in primary education in order to further students' performance.

Some of the lower intermediate interviewees had received intensive English instruction in the private sector, which could explicate their advanced level. Notwithstanding, many of them were apparently ahead of their level (one third of the B1 group in the short interviews and half of that group in the long interviews) as the years of their learning experience and the materials they were being taught at the time of the research both in the state and private sector clearly indicated an A2 level. Since all the above learners were very flexible and ingenious strategy users,

it appears that strategy training might enrich students' strategic repertoire in order to meet the challenges of English learning within the foreign language classroom and beyond.

It is also important that critical thinking abilities be nourished by all teachers in all the school subjects so as to broaden the students' horizons away from plain memorization.

Metacognitive skills should additionally be developed so that all students learn to plan and organize their learning, set specific goals and objectives, and seek practice opportunities to use the language.

Finally, students' liking of English and desire to learn it need to be boosted as much as possible so that efforts put into learning could be increased with the aim of promoting foreign language prowess.

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