



Learning styles and strategies for language use in the context of academic reading tasks



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ABSTRACT

Although research has indicated that learning styles influence language learning strategy choices, many studies regard the two in isolation from each other. Additionally, most research in these areas is based on large-scale survey instruments that are removed from the context of language learning and use. This study represents an attempt to resolve these issues through two case studies of international students' learning strategy use on tasks in professional graduate programs in the US. Data gathered from interviews, documents, and task logs were analyzed first for strategy use on specific tasks, then for patterns that may indicate consistency according to learning style. The findings indicate that the participants' learning styles provide more predictability in strategy use on particular tasks than other factors such as discipline.

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1. Introduction

The study of language learning strategies has sought to identify patterns of strategy use that are indicative of successful language learning. Some early studies investigating language learning strategies have found some correlations between strategy use and a number of factors such as academic discipline (e.g., Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), while recent studies have focused on the appropriateness and effectiveness of strategies in particular academic contexts (e.g., Norton & Pavlenko, 2004; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Peacock & Ho, 2003) and the influence of added factors such as gender and learning styles (e.g., Chen & Hung, 2012; Li & Qin, 2006; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Wong & Nunan, 2011). Few studies, however, have examined how individual students use strategies in contexts beyond language learning. Learning strategies and styles have been researched in tandem using large-scale survey instruments; the relationships between strategies and styles are, however, rarely studied in the context of specific tasks (Cohen, 2003). In order to explore these connections, this study examines the strategy use of two international graduate students in professional graduate programs in the United States. The study triangulates reading strategy data through an examination of study logs, interviews, and documents. Further analysis indicates that the participants' learning styles were consistent influences on their strategy choices, even when those strategy choices seemed to contradict the task context. This finding confirms and expands hypotheses posited by Cohen (2003) and Dörnyei (2005) that strategy use is intrinsically connected to learning style.

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2. Literature review

The following sections comprise a review of 1) the development of research on language learning strategies over the past four decades, 2) reading strategies in the disciplines of business and law, and 3) learning styles, with a particular focus on cognitive learning styles.

2.1. Language learning strategies

Research in language learning strategies was initiated by the “good language learner” studies of the 1970s (Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) which sought to identify strategies used by successful learners so that those strategies could be taught to less successful learners. Those studies culminated in the aggregated cataloging of documented strategies in the early 1990s (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), marking a shift from identifying learning strategies to making them teachable. Researchers have not, however, been able to agree on the nature of strategies and their specific role in the language learning process. For example, O'Malley and Chamot define learning strategies as “special thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (1990, p. 1), while Oxford defines them as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (1990, p. 8). As indicated by the contrast between strategies as “thought” and strategies as “action,” the challenge in researching language learning strategies has been in making the connection between what learners think and what they actually do on learning tasks. Nevertheless, research into language learning strategies of the past two decades has consisted primarily of studies that use pre-conceived constructs such as Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). While the ongoing use of the original concept of learning strategies has yielded interesting research, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) argues that learning strategies are the product of a combination of learning styles, motivation, and task, and as such cannot be considered unchanging learner characteristics as they have been in previous research. To address these concerns, some recent studies have endeavored to determine what variables influence strategy choices through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a thicker description of strategic behavior and the influences upon it. Among the variables identified as influencing strategy choices are learning styles (Li & Qin, 2006; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Wong & Nunan, 2011), personality types (Chen & Hung, 2012), and learning context, including tasks (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Raymond & Parks, 2002).

2.2. Reading strategies in law and business

Researchers who have inquired into the reading strategies of international students in academic disciplines such as law and business have utilized qualitative research in order to establish which strategies were specific to reading (Bayliss & Raymond, 2004; Deegan, 1995; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Zhu, 2004). These researchers found that success in discipline-specific reading had some relationship to how learners dealt with factors such as workload, instructors' expectations, and prior knowledge through metacognitive strategies such as text selection, problem solving through skipping texts, and monitoring by interacting with texts.

Researchers who focused on reading in law and business contexts (Bayliss & Raymond, 2004; Deegan, 1995; Lundeberg, 1987; Raymond & Parks, 2002) found that successful learners in these disciplines were able to utilize their prior, discipline-specific knowledge, consult other texts to develop background knowledge, and, most importantly, recognize and develop more sophisticated reading strategies involving skimming for only the parts of a text that would result in the successful completion of an assignment. Few of these researchers attempted to discover what learning styles were related to these strategies.

2.3. Learning styles

Reid (1995, p. vii) defines learning styles as “an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills.” She divides learning styles into three categories: cognitive, sensory, and personality. Much research of the past decades has been devoted to cognitive learning styles (Cohen, 2003; Ehrman & Leaver, 2003; M. Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Rossi-Le, 1995), defined as a person's preferred and habitual approach to organizing and representing information (Riding & Rayner, 1998). Cognitive learning styles are commonly expressed as dichotomous continua such as *concrete-sequential* (learns better step-by-step or sequentially) vs. *abstract-intuitive* (learns better in context, intuitively); and *analytic* (learns better individually, setting own goals) vs. *global* (learns better through concrete experience and through interactions with others). These continua are summarized in Table 1. Reid (1995) and Ehrman (1996) caution that an individual learner's style will fall on some point along the continuum between the poles and may even fall in the middle. Furthermore, learning styles are neither congenital nor chronic; they change as a learner develops. Because of the

Table 1
Selected cognitive learning style dichotomies.

Concrete-sequential Learns better step-by-step or sequentially	vs.	Abstract-intuitive Takes clues from text, but relies on own schemata and opinions
Analytic Learns better individually, setting own goals	vs.	Global Learns better through experience and interaction with others

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