

# Strategies of Successful Language Learners

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## Abstract

*Language learning strategies have been controversial ever since Rubin's (1975) landmark article more than 30 years ago. To this day, there is no consensus regarding exactly what a strategy is, which has impeded research initiatives and at times threatened the validity of research findings. The relationship between strategies and successful language learning has also been questioned. Based on the literature of the last three decades, this paper attempts to establish a definition of strategies as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning. Using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (Oxford, 1990) complemented by interviews, the paper looks at the strategies used by two successful learners, Nina and Kira, and considers the effect of other learner variables (motivation, nationality, age, gender, personality) on successful language learning. The paper concludes that although they were different in many ways, Nina and Kira were both frequent strategy users. Pedagogical implications of the findings are suggested.*

**Keywords:** strategies, successful language learners, motivation, nationality, age, gender, personality, metacognition

## Introduction

It is now more than 30 years since researchers such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975) and Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) explored the possibility that success in language learning might be related to the strategies students use. Rubin (1975, p. 43) provided a very broad definition of learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge", and she identified seven strategies which she believed to be used by good language learners: guessing, communicating, avoiding inhibition, attending to form, practicing, monitoring and attending to meaning.

Working at much the same time as Rubin in the mid-seventies, Stern (1975) also produced a list of language learning strategies which he believed to be characteristic of good language learners, among which he included experimentation, planning, developing the new language into an ordered system, revising progressively, using the language in real communication, developing the target language into a separate reference system and learning to think in the target language. Shortly after, Naiman et al. (1978) identified strategies for coming to grips with the language as a system, for using the language in real communication, for monitoring the interlanguage, for coming to terms with the affective demands of language learning and for coping with ambiguity as among those “essential for successful language learning” (p. 225).

Following these early studies, there was an “explosion of activity” (Skehan, 1989, p. 285) in the field of language learning strategy research. Since then, many writers such as O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Wenden (1991), Cohen (1998), Cohen and Macaro (2007) and Griffiths (2008) have suggested that learners might be able to learn language more effectively by the use of language learning strategies. In spite of this activity, however, defining and classifying language learning strategies has been and remains no easy task. O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985, p. 22) talk of “no consensus” and “considerable confusion”; Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.7) discuss “the elusive nature of the term”; Ellis (1994, p. 529) describes the concept as “fuzzy”; Cohen (1998, p. 3) talks of “conflicting views”; while according to Griffiths (2006, p. 6) there is a “welter of overlapping material and conflicting opinion”.

In the face of this controversy, Macaro (2006) has suggested abandoning the attempt to define strategies in favor of identifying a number of essential characteristics. Dornyei (2005) has gone even further and suggested that the strategy concept should be discarded altogether in favor of what he considers to be the more versatile concept of self-regulation, which relates to the degree to which students are able to manage their own learning. Gu, Wen, and Wu (1995), however, point out that we really need a definition before meaningful research can be achieved. And even if we adopt the self-regulation concept, we still have to answer the question “what do students *do* to achieve self regulation?” In other words, what are their strategies? Therefore, we cannot actually avoid the strategy concept even if we change the terminology, and the concept must be defined in the interests of valid research.

If we have a look at the literature of the last three decades and more, we find that Rubin (1975) herself defined language learning strategies as what

students **do**, that is they are active, and often itemized in terms of verbs (reading, memorizing, planning, revising, etc.). It is this activity component which distinguishes learning strategies from learning style, which describe learner preferences and are often itemized in terms of adjectives such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and so on (Reid, 1987). Although strategies may be deployed automatically and without deliberate effort (Wenden, 1991), learners remain conscious of what they are doing, as demonstrated by the fact that learners can usually, if required, verbalize their mental processes (Cohen, 1998). Strategies are chosen (Bialystok, 1991) by students in order to regulate (Winne, 1995) the achievement of a learning goal (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies might therefore be defined as “activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (Griffiths, 2008, p. 87).

## **What is the Relationship between Strategies and Successful Language Learning?**

Over the years, results from research into the relationship between language learning strategies and successful language learning have been rather mixed. Porte (1988), for instance, reported that his 15 underachieving students were actually frequent strategy users, but they continued to use strategies they had used in their native environments and failed to adapt their strategy use to their new learning situation. Along somewhat similar lines, Vann and Abraham (1990) concluded that, although their pair of students appeared to be active strategy users, they “failed to apply strategies appropriately to the task at hand” (p. 191). Other research results (for instance Green & Oxford, 1995) indicate that overall reported frequency of language learning strategy use is significantly related to proficiency, and that higher level students report using a large number of language learning strategies more frequently than lower level students.

In order to further explore the relationship between language learning strategy use and success in language learning, Griffiths (2003) conducted a study in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand, where a large number of students (N = 348) studying English completed the strategy questionnaire known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (Oxford, 1990). Participants included both males and females, ranging in ages from 14 to 64 and they came from 21 different nationalities. Students varied in proficiency over seven levels from elementary to advanced. According to the results, a statistically significant relationship (Spearman’s *rho* for nonparametric data) was discovered between reported frequency of

overall language learning strategy use and level of proficiency ( $R = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ), and with the exception of only nine out of the 50 strategy items (that is only 18%), advanced students reported a higher average frequency of use of each strategy than did elementary students. Advanced students also used many more strategies ( $N = 27$ ) highly frequently (average = 3.5+) than did elementary students ( $N = 3$ ). In other words, the results of this study indicated that higher level students do in fact use language learning strategies significantly more frequently than lower level students. It is worthy of note, however, that although the frequency average for elementary students (average = 3.1) was lower than for advanced students (average = 3.4), it was still in the positive range. In other words, even the lower level students were actually using strategies at quite a high rate of frequency, as Porte (1988) and Vann and Abraham (1990) also discovered. Nevertheless, according to the results of this study, from an overall perspective, more would seem to be better in terms of reported frequency of learning strategy use.

It would, however, be overly simplistic to suggest that the relationship between language learning strategies and successful language learning is uncomplicated. In reality, every learner is an individual, and influenced by an almost infinite array of individual differences (for instance Griffiths 2008; Skehan, 1989). Among this vast range of learner variables, those which are frequently considered include age, gender, motivation, personality, and nationality.

Perhaps the most stable learner characteristic of all is age: a student is as old as he or she is, and there is nothing anyone can do to change that. There has been a great deal of debate over the years about the effect of age on language learning, and explanations for age-related differences in language learning include an hypothesized critical/sensitive period, socio-affective influences, cognitive factors, and differences in learning situation. Although agreement is far from universal, overall it would seem that younger is better when it comes to language learning, especially in the area of pronunciation. Nevertheless, it has been shown that older learners can learn language very effectively (for instance Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, & Moselle, 1994).

Although gender was once thought to be fixed, views on this have changed in recent years. Females are often believed to be better language learners than males, although research evidence to support this belief has proven elusive. In studies where a gender difference has been discovered, it has in general been relatively small, with far greater variation between individuals than between the genders (for instance Nyikos, 2008).

Motivation has been shown to be a major factor in successful language learning. Whether it be intrinsic (originating from within the learner), extrinsic (originating outside the learner), instrumental (used as a means to an end), or integrative (used as a means of integrating with a desired community), motivation is necessary if learners are to be prepared to make the investment of time, energy, and sense of self (identity) which learning a language other than the first requires. Although over the years, claims have been made that one or other of these types of motivation is the most important for successful language learning, motivation is not a simple phenomenon (for instance Ushioda, 2008), and it is possible that all of these motivational types may have a part to play in the outcome of language learning endeavors.

Another learner characteristic which is usually considered relatively stable is personality. The most commonly used measuring instrument for personality is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI (Myers, 1962). From the MBTI, a pattern of results is generated by four bipolar constructs: extraversion versus introversion, sensing versus intuition, thinking versus feeling, and judgment versus perception. Ehrman (2008) discovered that, although overall good language learners display a wide variety of personality types, those with an introverted-intuitive-thinking-judging (INTJ) personality are over-represented among the best language learners.

And Individuals, of course, do not exist in isolation: they are born into a particular nationality/ethnicity/culture and throughout their lives, this very environment will exert an influence in one way or another. These overlapping concepts are not even easy to define and disentangle from each other, though nationality is usually considered to be essentially political (it is what goes on the passport) and may be associated with a particular language, ethnicity is usually defined in terms of race, and culture relates to how groups of people behave (Brown, 1994).

Valuable as figures, such as those reported by Griffiths (2003) above, may be for indicating trends and general truths, they can never represent more than paper profiles of flesh and blood learners in all their complexities. In reality, learners are much more than mere animated columns of statistics: they are often full of statistically inconvenient contradictions which an analysis of the aggregated data can never portray. It may be true that, over a sufficient number of cases, these contradictions tend to become leveled out, but this does not alter the fact that, on an individual level, learner characteristics of one kind or another can be a real force to be reckoned with.

A technique used by many researchers to probe the complexities of the individual learner is the interview. Interviews can provide a means of adding a

qualitative dimension to quantitative data obtained from questionnaires. The importance of this is emphasized by Green and Oxford (1995, p. 293) when they comment that this kind of multifaceted approach produces insights “that are at once broadly applicable and rich in observed detail”. This kind of “qualitative refinement” is important if the quantitative analysis of the data is to have relevance (Chaudron, 1986, p. 714). The interview technique has been used successfully by many researchers, including Naiman et al. (1978, p. 37) who comment that “the interview proved to be a useful research technique” and O’Malley et al. (1985, p. 35) who report that “generally we had considerable success in identifying learning strategies through interviews”.

In line with what has been discussed so far, this study was carried out to explore the relationship between learning strategies employed by learners and successful language learning. To this end, a series of interviews was conducted in order to further explore the following research question:

- What are the strategies that successful language learners use?
- Are there any relationships among language learning strategy use and individual variables such as age, gender, nationality, personality, motivation, etc.?

## **Method**

The study described here was carried out at a private English language school in Auckland, New Zealand, where a large number of international students from different countries around the world came to study.

## **Participants**

Nina and Kira (not their real names for privacy reasons) were part of a larger study (originally 26 students were interviewed) into student strategy use conducted at the school. Nina was a 19-year-old female student from Germany, and Kira a 28-year-old male from Japan. Nina and Kira were chosen for this report since, although they had a number of obvious differences (age, gender, and nationality) they were both very successful in their studies, and therefore, a closer examination and comparison of the way they used strategies seemed likely to be interesting in terms of the research question.

## **Instrumentation**

Before the interview, students first completed a Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, commonly known as the SILL (Oxford, 1990) to determine the frequency of their language learning strategy use. The SILL is a pencil-and-paper style survey in which participants are asked to rate strategy items (such as "If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again") on a five-point Likert scale: 5 (always or almost always true of me), 4 (usually true of me), 3 (somewhat true of me), 2 (usually not true of me) 1 (never or almost never true of me). Strategies are organized into six groups (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social). In addition to being used as a source of quantitative data, the questionnaire helped to identify potential interviewees.

## **Procedure**

Following the questionnaire, a number of individual students who appeared interesting for various reasons (perhaps because they were more or less successful in their studies than others) were invited to a semi-structured interview. Nina and Kira were among these. The interview, which lasted for perhaps half an hour, further explored students' strategy use (including key strategies other than what appeared in the SILL) and their perceptions regarding relationships among their own individual characteristics (age, gender, nationality, personality, motivation, etc.), strategy use, and success or otherwise in learning. Any other interesting insights were also noted.

## **Results**

Nina was 19 years old, and had already studied English for nine years in her native Germany when she arrived to start her English language course. She had passed the Cambridge First Certificate (FCE) examination, and was, therefore, already at quite an advanced level at the start of her course. After sitting the Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) and the Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE) examinations, Nina planned to return to Germany to study English at university in order to equip herself for a career in a field where her English would be useful. In fact, she gained an A pass in the high level Cambridge Proficiency in English examination (CPE), indicating near-native proficiency.

According to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Nina reported highly frequent (according to the average = 3.5 threshold established by Oxford, 1990) use of a large number of strategies and was also able to add a number of key strategies of her own to the SILL items. The pattern of her strategy use suggested a student who was able to cope with a degree of uncertainty (for instance items 24, 27), and was especially aware of the importance of vocabulary (for instance items 9, 10, 29) and the usefulness of reading in English (for instance item 16).

Another highly active strategy user was 28-year-old Kira from Japan. When he started his English language course, Kira was placed in a mid-elementary (second-to-bottom) class on the basis of the placement procedures adopted by the school. He said he wanted to learn English in order to obtain a new job and so that he could write English lyrics for songs which he could perform with the band he had in Japan. Although Kira had not studied English formally since leaving school and had “forgotten much”, even at an early stage in his course he was a very confident speaker and managed to use the knowledge he had very effectively, an ability which he put down to having worked in a duty free shop where he had to speak English to customers, and to having been in a band where he sang in English.

Although, unlike Nina, Kira did not sit an examination to provide an external measure of success, he progressed exceptionally quickly through the levels of the school (two levels per month). Kira also reported highly frequent use of a large number of the SILL strategies, including a rating of 5 (“always or almost always”) to all nine of the SILL’s “metacognitive” strategies. It is of interest that a student as successful as Kira should opt so emphatically for the group of strategies related to the ability to manage the learning process, which many writers (e.g., O’Malley et al., 1985; Anderson, 2008) consider typical of successful learners. Nina’s and Kira’s SILL overall results are set out in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Reported frequency of language learning strategy use by Nina and Kira**

	<b>NINA</b>	<b>KIRA</b>
Overall average reported frequency of strategy use	3.5	3.8
Number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently (average = 3.5+)	14	19

*Highly frequent threshold is average= 3.5 as set by Oxford, 1990*

As it is demonstrated in Table 1, both Nina and Kira met or exceeded the average high frequency threshold in their overall average frequency of



strategy use, though Kira had a slightly higher overall average than Nina. Moreover, the number of strategies reportedly used highly frequently, that is 3.5 and above, was 19 for Kira and 14 for Nina. Table 2 demonstrates the frequency reports of Kira and Nina on memory strategies.

**Table 2 – Reported frequency of memory strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Memory	1	I think of relationships	4	3
Memory	2	I use new words in a sentence	3	5
Memory	3	I create images of new words	2	5
Memory	4	I make mental pictures	2	5
Memory	5	I use rhymes to remember new words	1	3
Memory	6	I use flashcards to remember new words	1	2
Memory	7	I physically act out new words	1	2
Memory	8	I review English lessons often	3	4
Memory	9	I use location to remember new words	5	3

As demonstrated in Table 2, the strategies that were almost never used by Nina among the memory strategies were using rhymes and flashcards to remember new words and physically acting out new words. The most frequently used strategy by Nina was 'using location to remember new words'. However, for Kira the most frequently used strategies were 'using new words in a sentence', 'creating images of new words', and 'making mental pictures'. Kira did not report any of the memory strategies as 'almost never used'. Table 3 demonstrates the results for cognitive strategies.

**Table 3 – Reported frequency of cognitive strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Cognitive	10	I say or write new words several times	5	5
Cognitive	11	I try to talk like native speakers	5	5
Cognitive	12	I practice the sounds of English	4	5
Cognitive	13	I use words I know in different ways	3	3
Cognitive	14	I start conversations in English	5	4
Cognitive	15	I watch TV or movies in English	5	3
Cognitive	16	I read for pleasure in English	5	2
Cognitive	17	I write notes, messages, letters, reports	5	4
Cognitive	18	I skim read then read carefully	5	3
Cognitive	19	I look for similar words in my own language	5	3
Cognitive	20	I try to find patterns in English	3	5
Cognitive	21	I divide words into parts I understand	5	3
Cognitive	22	I try not to translate word for word	3	2
Cognitive	23	I make summaries	2	3

As demonstrated by Table 3, the cognitive strategies that were commonly used by Kira and Nina as most frequent were 'saying or writing new words several times' and 'trying to talk like native speakers'. Neither of them reported any of the cognitive strategies as 'almost never used'. The results of compensation strategies are set out in Table 4.

**Table 4 – Reported frequency of compensation strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Compensation	24	I guess the meaning of unfamiliar words	5	4
Compensation	25	When I can't think of a word I use gestures	4	4
Compensation	26	I make up words if I don't know the right ones	4	4
Compensation	27	I read without looking up every new word	5	3
Compensation	28	I guess what the other person will say next	3	4
Compensation	29	If I can't think of a word I use a synonym	5	4

All compensation strategies were frequently used by both Nina and Kira. The most frequent ones for Nina were 'guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words', 'reading without looking up every new word', and 'using synonyms in case she couldn't think of a word'. The results were different with Kira, as he reported all the compensation strategies with the same frequency except for 'reading without looking up every new word'. Table 5 depicts the results for the metacognitive strategies.

**Table 5 - Reported frequency of metacognitive strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Metacognitive	30	I try to find many ways to use English	3	5
Metacognitive	31	I use my mistakes to help me do better	4	5
Metacognitive	32	I pay attention to someone speaking English	3	5
Metacognitive	33	I try to find how to be a better learner	3	5
Metacognitive	34	I plan my schedule to have time to study	2	5
Metacognitive	35	I look for people I can talk to in English	3	5
Metacognitive	36	I look for opportunities to read in English	3	5
Metacognitive	37	I have clear goals for improving my English	4	5
Metacognitive	38	I think about my progress in learning English	4	5

According to Table 5, Kira reported that he always or almost always used all the metacognitive strategies. However, the most frequently metacognitive strategies used by Nina were 'using her mistakes to do better', 'having clear goals for improving her English', and 'thinking about her progress in learning'. The frequency counts of affective strategies are reported in Table 6.

**Table 6 – Reported frequency of affective strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Affective	39	I try to relax when afraid of using English	4	5
Affective	40	I encourage myself to speak even when afraid	5	5
Affective	41	I give myself a reward for doing well	3	2
Affective	42	I notice if I am tense or nervous	2	4
Affective	43	I write my feelings in a diary	1	1
Affective	44	I talk to someone else about how I feel	2	3

Referring to Table 6, both Nina and Kira reported ‘writing their feelings in a diary’ as never or almost never true of them. Furthermore, they both reported ‘encouraging themselves to speak even when afraid’ as always or almost always true of them. Table 7 illustrates the results for social strategies. As illustrated in this table, Nina and Kira had a very similar results in terms of the frequency of social strategy use.

**Table 7 – Reported frequency of social strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	SILL	Statement (paraphrased for brevity)	NINA	KIRA
Social	45	I ask others to speak slowly or repeat	4	4
Social	46	I ask for correction when I talk	3	3
Social	47	I practice English with other students	4	3
Social	48	I ask for help from English speakers	3	3
Social	49	I ask questions in English	4	5
Social	50	I try to learn the culture of English speakers	4	4

Table 8 demonstrates the total frequency count for each sub-group of the learning strategies. As clear, the highest mean frequency for Kira was on metacognitive strategies (5). The mean frequencies of other strategies for Kira were almost the same. For Nina, however, the highest mean frequency was on cognitive and compensation strategies (4.3). Social and metacognitive strategies received higher mean frequencies (3.7 and 3.2, respectively) compared to the affective and memory strategies (2.8 and 2.4, respectively).

**Table 8 – Reported mean frequency of sub-groups of learning strategy use by Nina and Kira**

Sub-group	NINA	KIRA
Memory	2.4	3.5
Cognitive	4.3	3.6
Compensation	4.3	3.8
Metacognitive	3.2	5
Affective	2.8	3.3
Social	3.7	3.7

Because of the similarities of the languages, as a European, Nina felt she had an advantage over Asian students, and she felt that women are more likely to study language than men, who are more likely to be expected by others to study something practical. She felt that it was an advantage for her to be doing something others accepted as “normal” rather than having to fight against the expectations of others. She did not feel, however, that either nationality or gender affected the strategies which were likely to lead to success. As for age, she commented that when she was younger she used reading as her main strategy (receptive), whereas now she was more aware of the importance of writing (productive).

When interviewed, Nina said that a key strategy she used was to always write down everything she learned since this helped to fix it in her mind and meant she could revise and learn it later. She had found talking to people in English the most useful strategy as a means of improving speaking skills, an area in which she lacked confidence. She felt that the best way to overcome this difficulty with confidence was to stay in an environment where the language was spoken, preferably living with a native-speaking family (as she did) since this maximized opportunity for practice and meant that she had to make the effort to interact in English whether she wanted to or not.

Nina was such a competent student that it was easy to forget that confidence is an issue, even with someone like her. One day she arrived in class uncharacteristically flushed and flustered. When asked what the matter was she said that, as she was walking to school and waiting to cross at the lights, a woman came up to her and asked how to get to the station. Trying to think how best to direct her, Nina said “Um”, and the woman immediately said “Oh, so you are a foreigner too!”. This brief exchange really unsettled Nina and threw her into a tail-spin of self doubt. “I didn’t say anything!” she exclaimed to class. “Only ‘Um’, and from that she could tell I was a foreigner!”. Although visibly affected by this encounter, it was not long before Nina had recovered from this ego-denting experience, as might, perhaps, have been expected from the high rating she gave to the strategy “I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake”.

Like Nina, Kira was very focused: he knew what he wanted and he worked very hard. Staff members often mentioned having to evict him from the self-study room as they were going round the school locking up long after the majority of the students had gone. According to all the teachers who had him, he was a delight to have in class, always participating keenly in classroom activities. He was also very popular among the students, having, among other things, organized a school soccer team which gave him status and a high profile and provided time out from direct study, which he used as a

deliberate strategy to “refresh myself”.

Kira was very definite and specific about his key strategies. He said he watched TV as much as possible to practice listening and read newspapers. In order to reactivate the knowledge acquired in his school days, he spent two to three hours a day working on his grammar. In class, he always sat next to the teacher, so that it was easy to ask questions, or next to the best speaker in the class, so that he could use that student's knowledge to expand his own. He did homework and lesson revision every day and talked with his host family in the evenings. He used every opportunity to converse with native speakers such as taxi drivers and shopkeepers and kept a special notebook in which he wrote sentences. Kira believed in writing full sentences in order to check the usage: isolated words and meanings he found insufficient. According to Kira, the responsibility for learning was basically the students', who needed to make positive efforts to learn if they were to be successful. However, he believed a teacher could be very helpful, especially by creating a congenial atmosphere, by providing useful feedback, and by acting as a reference.

Even allowing for the possibility that some of Kira's progress might have been the result of reactivating stored knowledge, he achieved a remarkable rate of promotion. He did not really have a great deal to say about his perceptions of his individual characteristics (in a way, his results spoke for themselves) though in relation to age, he did comment that he had not been a good student of English when he was young. However, when he was about six or seven years old, he used to go to visit a friend of his mother's who spoke good English and she would play language games with him. He found this a lot of fun and, therefore, from an early age developed a positive attitude towards English. He had an outgoing personality and showed real leadership qualities among the other students while his disciplined approach to his learning earned everyone's respect and helped him to achieve an all-round excellence which is a rare accomplishment in such a short time. The consensus among his teachers was that he was a conspicuously excellent, hard-working student who was keen to participate in everything and who approached his studies with a consistently positive attitude which made him a pleasure to have in class. The possibility that some of this success might be related to Kira's extensive repertoire of language learning strategies is suggested by the positive relationship which was discovered between the reported frequency of language learning strategy use and proficiency. Nina and Kira's key details are compared in Table 9.

**Table 9 – Summary of Nina’s and Kira’s key details**

	Nina	Kira
Strategy use	Highly frequent (average=3.5)	Highly frequent (average=3.8)
Nationality	German	Japanese
Gender	Female	Male
Age	19	28
Personality	Quiet/shy/lacks confidence	Outgoing
Motive	Cambridge Proficiency Exam	Better job
Key Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Talking to people in the target language to improve speaking skills</li> <li>- Consciously working to manage lack of self confidence</li> <li>- Living in an environment where the target language is spoken</li> <li>- Writing new language items down in a notebook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watching TV to practice listening</li> <li>Reading newspapers</li> <li>Talking to native speakers</li> <li>Writing sentences in a notebook</li> <li>Working on knowledge of grammar</li> <li>Manipulating position in the classroom</li> <li>Doing homework and revision regularly</li> <li>Providing for time out from study in order to refresh himself</li> </ul>

## **Discussion and Pedagogical Implications**

Nina and Kira were both highly successful students in that they both achieved the goal they were aiming for (a top pass in a high level exam in Nina’s case, and rapid promotion to the highest class in the school for Kira). From the study it is also clear that both Nina and Kira were highly frequent strategy users. They were also both highly motivated and invested a lot of time and effort in their study.

In other ways, however, they were not so similar with Nina being a young European female and Kira an older Asian male. Their personalities were also rather dissimilar, Nina being rather quiet and complaining of lacking confidence, and Kira being much more outgoing. It is important to remember that strategy use is only one factor affecting individual learning which may be influenced by a huge number of other variables (such as motivation, age, style, personality, gender, beliefs, culture, aptitude, affect, as well as the nature of the learning target and of the learning situation. For a detailed discussion of these aspects, see Griffiths, 2008).

The general concept of using strategies to enhance learning is not new. Generations of us must have used the first-letter mnemonic strategy to remember information such as the colors of the rainbow (Roy G. Biv = red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet) and the order of the elements

in chemistry. As a language teacher, I often show my students how to break down words they do not know into recognizable units. The word “insubordinate” which we met recently, for instance, can be divided into in=not, sub=lower, ordinate=order/rank, therefore, an adjective for one who does not behave according to his/her lower rank. Many students have never been shown how to carry out this simple exercise and are not aware that it is even possible. Yet such a simple strategy can unlock the mysteries of some quite intimidating vocabulary. Oxford (1990) suggests many other language learning strategies such as using flashcards or semantic mapping (creating a diagram with the key concept connected by lines or arrows to related concepts).

A possible reason for the effectiveness of learning strategies is that they require the learner to be more cognitively active than a learner who is less strategically engaged in the task (Gage & Berliner, 1992). According to a cognitive view, the language learner is seen as “an active participant in the learning process, using various mental strategies in order to sort out the system of the language to be learned” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 13). This conception, according to which the student must actively process linguistic information, “places great responsibility on the learner” (Bialystok, 1991, p. 77). Language learning is not merely a “unilateral process.....dependent on some benevolent, skilful, more proficient interlocutor” (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 12). Rather than mere passive receptacles for knowledge, learners become thinking participants who can influence their own learning and who must share responsibility for the development of language.

By recognizing that “learning begins with the learner”, Nyikos and Oxford (1993, p. 11) acknowledge the basic reality that, like the proverbial horse led to water but which must do the drinking itself, even with the best teachers and methods, students are the only ones who can actually do the learning. This is a reality which, every teacher should know (Oxford, 1990). As a result of their study, O'Malley et al. (1985, p. 43) concluded that many students used language learning strategies “inefficiently”. They also found that teachers were generally not highly aware of their students’ strategies. Although this was written more than 20 years ago, I would like to suggest that it remains uncomfortably true today, and much work remains to be done in this regard.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between language learning strategies and successful

language learning is not uncomplicated. However, there is evidence (for instance, Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003, 2008) that strategies are significantly related to successful learning.

On an individual level, Nina and Kira differed from each other in a number of ways: nationality (German/Japanese), gender (female/male), age (19/28). In addition, Nina had a somewhat quiet, introverted personality, whereas Kira was very outgoing and spent a lot of time interacting with others. Their goals were also different: she wanted to pass an exam, he wanted to qualify for a better job. However, they also had a number of important similarities. They were both highly motivated and focused on their studies.

Metacognitive strategies featured prominently in Kira's strategy repertoire and he was particularly emphatic that responsibility for learning belongs especially to the student. Although Nina did not state this in as many words, in fact she took a lot of initiative in her study, keeping copious notes and conscientiously learning what she had written. Although the actual strategies they used were not identical, both Nina and Kira reported highly frequent language learning strategy use, including both those listed on the well-known SILL inventory and key strategies of their own.

Most importantly, they were both very successful in their own ways. This would seem to suggest that although students may vary in a number of respects, those who succeed are motivated and they take charge of their own learning by means of strategies which suit their own individual characteristics, situations, and goals.

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