Strategies for Success in IELTS

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Abstract

This study investigated the strategies used by international students in the process of developing the language skills needed in order to be successful in international examinations. The project involved students in IELTS preparation classes studying at an institution in Auckland, New Zealand, who were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their strategies for language skills development (LSD). The results of the analysis of the questionnaire data were compared with the students' examination results. Selected individual students were also interviewed in order to gain a qualitative perspective regarding LSD strategy use and how this might relate to success in terms of examination results. Recommendations are made regarding implications for the teaching/learning situation.

Introduction and Rationale

"Furtherover there is been a significantly decrease respectively….". This title of Heron and Mc Mahon's (2003, p.162) paper is likely to send shivers down the spines of those of us who have been called on to teach classes of international students preparing for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or other similar examinations. Furtherover, we have all also no doubt struggled to balance the one-track demands of getting students though the exam versus spending the time that is required to develop the underlying skills needed to avoid the kinds of linguistic monstrosities quoted in the first sentence of this paragraph. This is often no easy task for a teacher whose students may be convinced that the only useful way to prepare for IELTS is to complete practice test after practice test and to memorise huge chunks of unprocessed language.

As English has continued to expand its influence as the international language, it has become more and more necessary for those who wish to take advantage of educational, business or immigration opportunities to be competent in English, and to be able to demonstrate this competence by means of results in examinations such as IELTS, which has, in recent years, become increasingly recognized as an international benchmark for proficiency in English. The research outlined in this proposal aimed to investigate the strategies used by international students preparing to sit IELTS in the process of developing the language skills they need. It is hoped that insights from this study might help international students to study more effectively, thereby increasing their chances of success in high stakes examinations such as IELTS.

Literature Review

Although in recent years examinations such as IELTS have become widely used as an indicator of proficiency in English, defining language proficiency for international students is no easy endeavour. The traditional view, which "has entailed viewing proficiency as little more than grammar and lexis" (Harley, Allen, Cummins and Swain, 1990, p.7), has, in more recent years, been recognised as quite inadequate, and a great deal of time, money and effort has gone into developing testing systems which reflect the growing awareness of the need for a broader view of language proficiency.
The concept of proficiency has been linked to the degree of skill with which a language can be used (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992). Although Oller (1979) suggested that all elements of language derive from a single underlying skill which can not be divided into discrete components (a view suggesting that performance in, for instance, reading and listening relies on the same underlying language skills, and that other aspects of linguistic competence such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are all part of the same general proficiency) other research has supported the concept that proficiency consists of a complex amalgamation of a number of inter-related factors (Bachman, 1990). The view of proficiency as a multi-dimensional phenomenon implies that it is valid to test for discrete language abilities (such as listening or writing) when assessing proficiency and that results relating to discrete elements of language may or may not relate to other areas of competence. A high score for reading, for example, may not necessarily indicate that a student can engage in fluent conversation.

Since IELTS examines candidates on all four skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking), it would seem reasonable to suggest that a useful IELTS preparation course needs to focus on the strategies required to develop skills in all of these four areas. Although issues surrounding the concept of "strategy" as applied to language learning have been long debated and remain controversial (Cohen, 1998; Dornyei and Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Green and Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003a, 2003b; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo, 1985; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Wenden, 1987), Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford (2003, p.319) suggest that "virtually all definitions of strategies imply conscious movement towards a language goal". For the purposes of this study, the goal under investigation was language skills development (LSD). The study examined the strategies used by students in the process of developing these skills, and how these strategies relate to success in a skills-focussed examination (IELTS). According to the findings of Green and Oxford (1995) and Griffiths (2003b), it would be predicted that more successful students would report more frequent strategy use than less successful students.

Although the body of research into language learning strategies is now considerable (Griffiths 2003b, 2004), relatively little of it has focussed on the strategies which students use to develop skills in using language (reading, writing, listening, speaking) as distinct from language learning strategies in general (such as for learning vocabulary or grammar, for management of time or affective factors and so on). Although these more general strategies may lead on to skills development (for instance, vocabulary knowledge may help students to write or speak more effectively, or to understand what they read or hear), they are somewhat removed from strategies which directly address the skill under development. Considering that so many students need to learn language in order to use it in their ongoing enterprises, this lack of research into language skills development might be considered surprising, although some interesting work in this area has recently been done (for instance by Cohen and Chi, 2002). The current study aimed to explore this hitherto somewhat neglected area of language learning strategy research.

Research Questions

This study aimed to seek the answers to several important questions relating to how students develop language skills
> Which strategies do students report using most frequently in the process of language skills development (LSD)?
> How does reported LSD strategy use relate to success in a skills-based exam (IELTS)

Research Design

The study was conducted in two sections. Part A used a questionnaire to investigate frequency of LSD strategy use, the results of which were compared with the students' IELTS results. In Part B selected students who had not yet sat IELTS were

interviewed in order to obtain a more individual view of factors relating to IELTS preparation.

Participants

The participants in Part A of this study were students studying in IELTS preparation classes in a private tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. These students completed a LSD strategy questionnaire during the course as a means both of raising student awareness regarding strategy possibilities and of gathering research data. Of these students, 21 supplied their IELTS results after sitting the exam. There were 11 males and 10 females aged from 19 to 38. Students came from mainland China, Taiwan Vietnam, Japan and Korea.

In the light of the findings from the LSD data, 8 students were interviewed in Part B in order to further explore LSD strategy use from a qualitative perspective. There were 3 female interviewees and 5 males aged from 18 to 36. They came from China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Russia, India, Spain, and Chile. The student interviewees were not included in the questionnaire data from this study since they had not sat IELTS at the time of the interview.

Instruments

This study used two research instruments: a questionnaire and an interview schedule.

The questionnaire – Part A

The questionnaire used in this study was modelled on established instruments by Oxford (1990) and Cohen and Chi (2002) and also includes items suggested by students in the course of the study by Griffiths (2003b). When constructing the questionnaire, every effort was made to consider the issues raised by de Vaus (1995) regarding the construction of questionnaires. The language was kept as unambiguous and as simple as possible, and items kept as short as possible. Double-barrelled items were avoided, although at times similar elements (such as radio, TV, movies) were combined in order to avoid making the questionnaire unduly lengthy. Negative questions, which can be difficult to understand and answer appropriately, were also avoided. The Language Skills Development (LSD) Strategy Questionnaire can be found in **Appendix A**. The LSD Strategy Questionnaire has been trialed with three groups of trainee teachers (whose suggestions were noted and changes made as appropriate) and with classes of international students studying at degree level.

The interview schedule – Part B

The interview schedule used in this study was modelled on the one used by Griffiths (2003b) in a previous study, altered slightly to focus more on strategies for language skills development rather than on language learning strategies in general. It consists of three main questions (regarding key strategies, learning difficulties and the effects of

learner variables) designed to elicit students' perceptions of their strategy use and to explore some of the factors which inter-relate with this strategy use (See **Appendix B**). During the interview, the interviewer asked the students the questions on the guide and noted the responses for later summarising. In addition to providing direct answers to the questions, students were encouraged to elaborate on their answers by providing examples and personal insights, which were also noted by the interviewer. A version of this schedule has been trailed in a previous study (Griffiths 2003b).

Data Collection

In Part A, questionnaires asking students to rate the frequency of their language skills development strategy use were handed out in class time and used to stimulate discussion and reflection regarding LSD strategy use in addition to being used as a data gathering instrument. As students sat the IELTS exam, they were followed up (where contact details were provided) and asked for their IELTS score, although it was made clear to them that they did not have to provide this private information if they did not wish to do so.

In Part B, selected students were interviewed to further probe their LSD strategy use from a more individual perspective. Interviewee selection depended on a number of factors, such as willingness to be interviewed and availability.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires (Part A) was entered onto SPSS and examined for mean frequency of reported LSD strategy use, and for correlations (Spearmans) between reported LSD strategy use and IELTS scores. The data obtained from the interviews (Part B) was examined for common themes in order to identify patterns of LSD strategy use.

Results: Questionnaire – Part A

The results from the language skills development (LSD) strategy questionnaire indicated that students who obtained a score of IELTS band 6 or higher reported using LSD strategies more frequently (mean=3.4) than students who obtained a band of IELTS 5.5 or less (mean=3.3). Furthermore, those students who scored 6 or more reported using strategies related to all four skills more frequently than those who scored 5.5 or less, with the exception of speaking strategies, where the average reported frequency was the same. Although these differences were not significant (possibly because of the relatively low number of participants), these results are generally in the direction of what might have been predicted from previous research (for instance Green and Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003b): that more successful students use strategies more frequently than less successful students. These results are set out in Table 1.

Table 1

IELTS Score	Listening LSD score	Reading LSD score	Writing LSD score	Speaking LSD score	Total LSD score
6 or more	3.7	2.9	3.2	3.5	3.4
5.5 or less	3.5	2.8	3.1	3.5	3.3

Two of the LSD strategies were found to have a significant correlation with IELTS results. Listening strategy 7 (I avoid translating what I hear word-for-word) was found to be positively correlated with results (R=.447, p<.05), whereas writing strategy 6 (I use reference materials such as a dictionary, thesaurus or grammar book to check that what I am writing is correct) was negatively correlated (R=.504, p<.05) with results. In other words, more successful students avoid translating, while less successful students are more dependent on reference materials. Although it might be possible to argue that use of these strategies is also related to proficiency (that is more proficient students do not need to translate or use their dictionaries as much), it would seem sensible for teachers to encourage students to move in the direction of developing strategies more typical of more proficient students as soon as they are able to cope with them.

Results: Interviews – Part B

In addition to the quantitative questionnaire results, eight students were interviewed in order to obtain a qualitative perspective regarding students LSD strategy use. Six were personally interviewed, while the remaining two were interviewed via email as they were no longer in New Zealand.

The skills the students reported finding most difficult to acquire were listening and speaking, although the Chinese and Korean students stated that writing an essay in an English style format was initially the most difficult and required a major change in mind set, from repeating the tutor's thoughts to explaining their own.

Interestingly, the one skill these students thought the most useful for developing their language, was reading, especially reading for pleasure. They felt this helped to expand their vocabulary and knowledge of sentence structure.

However, individual students had other strategies that had worked well for them in overcoming specific difficulties. Those who had listening problems used the media to help overcome this difficulty. Two preferred watching television, one preferred listening to Internet sites and one found that listening to music helped. Another two said they varied between having the television or radio on, but in "Kiwi-style" often just had it on in the background, so they were not always actively listening, but absorbing the sounds and patterns of the language. These two also said they usually went to sleep listening to the radio.

In addition, to improve their speaking, these students overwhelmingly agreed that the best strategy was to mix with English speakers as much as possible, but they also agreed this was not as easy as it seemed. One student who has a New Zealand partner

had no problems with this, but some of the others came up with interesting solutions as to how this could be accomplished. Two of them decided to join local sports clubs, so they could get exercise and have fun, as well as improving their English. Another chose a local church to join, while another, who described himself as a devout drinker, said that he practised speaking best by going to bars.

There was also a range of answers when these students were asked whether certain factors had influenced their choice of the strategies they used to develop their skills. They did not think gender was a factor, nor was their reason for learning a factor, but it must be acknowledged that all these students were from IELTS preparation courses, so they would probably all have had similar ambitions to further their education and improve their job prospects. In addition, they did not feel that nationality was a factor, but some stated that a student's first language was important. One said that having a first language with the same alphabet was an advantage, while another said that it was a benefit to have a first language that had a similar word order (subject, verb, object) as English. Yet another student who had spelling problems because her first language is phonetic, stated the only way for her to learn English spelling was repetition; she had to write new words over and over until she memorised how they were spelt.

Although the older students felt that it was easier for younger students to learn another language, one of the younger students disagreed, saying that English tests presuppose a certain amount of world knowledge, so passing tests was easier for older students who had more knowledge and experience of world events.

Finally, other factors that students reported as having affected their performance were ones that could be said to be problems for most students living in a foreign country. The most commonly mentioned were illness and homesickness, but one student had had difficulties by continually moving house, which is always unsettling. Another two said that their language development had been hampered by flatting with friends or people of the same nationality as themselves, and therefore using their first language continually at home.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that the more successful students use language learning strategies more frequently on average than less successful students. This generalisation applies especially to the strategy of avoiding translating word-for–word, which was the only strategy item found to be significantly positively correlated with results. In addition to these quantitative findings from the questionnaires, a number of interesting findings emerged from the qualitative interview data. Students were unanimous in their belief in the importance of reading to improve their vocabulary and usage. Students also used the media as a source of aural input, and, in spite of difficulties, they mixed with native speakers to improve their speaking. Generally, students did not seem to feel that gender, motivation or nationality was a major influence on their learning or on their choice of learning strategies, but some mentioned that the nature of the first language might affect the ease with which English could be learnt. Although older students felt that younger students had a advantage when learning language, one of the younger students felt that lack of world knowledge was a disadvantage for younger learners.

Overall, this study has discovered that, on average, students who are more successful in IELTS make more frequent use of strategies to develop their language skills than students who are less successful. For teachers, these findings might help to reinforce their confidence that helping students to develop their language skills is useful for promoting success in IELTS and beyond, and help them to resist the sometimes considerable pressure from students for endless practice tests and rote learning of "set phrases in spite of they misunderstand it" (Heron and McMahon, 2003, p.163).

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Appendix A   NAME

QUESTIONNAIRE

STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (LSD)

AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO SUCCESS IN IELTS

The following questionnaire contains some of the strategies which students report using in order to assist the development of language skills. Please read the following strategy items and grade each one according to the frequency with which you use it

1.very low   2.low   3.medium   4.high   5.very high

You can add notes to the questionnaire form if you wish

READING SKILLS

_____1. I read extensively for information in the target language
_____2. I read for pleasure in the target language
_____3. I find reading material at my level
_____4. I use a library to obtain reading material
_____5. I first skim read a text then go back and read it more carefully
_____6. I look for how a text is organized and pay attention to headings and sub-headings
_____7. I make summaries of what I read
_____8. I make predictions about what I will read next
_____9. I guess the approximate meaning by using clues from the context
_____10. I use a dictionary to get the exact meaning

WRITING SKILLS

_____1. I write letters or e-mails to friends in the target language
_____2. When my mistakes are corrected, I learn from the corrections
_____3. I write a variety of text types in the target language (e.g. notes, messages, lists)
_____4. I plan my writing before I start
_____5. If I cannot think of the correct expression I think of another way to express my meaning (e.g. synonyms)
_____6. I use reference materials (e.g. a dictionary, thesaurus or grammar book) to check that what I am writing is correct
_____7. If I am unsure about something I want to write I try to express my meaning and do not worry too much about correctness.
_____8. I write a rough copy before writing a good copy
_____9. I write a diary in the target language
_____10. I get someone to proof read my writing

LISTENING SKILLS

_____1. I attend out-of-class events where I can listen to the new language being spoken

_____2. I use the media (e.g. radio, TV or movies) to practise my listening skills

_____3. I listen to native speakers in public places (e.g. shops, restaurants, buses) and try to understand what they are saying

_____4. I listen for key words which seem to carry most of the meaning

_____5. I predict what the other person will say next based on context, background knowledge or what has been said so far

_____6. I ask the speaker to slow down, repeat or clarify if I do not understand

_____7. I avoid translating what I hear word-for-word

_____8. I use the speaker's tone of voice, gestures, pauses or body language as a clue to meaning

_____9. If I am unsure about meaning I guess in order to maintain communication

_____10. I listen carefully to how native speakers pronounce the language I am trying to learn.

SPEAKING SKILLS

_____1. I repeat new language to myself in order to practise it

_____2. I seek out people with whom I can speak the target language

_____3. I plan in advance what I want to say

_____4. If I am corrected while speaking, I try to remember the correction and avoid making the same mistake again

_____5. I ask questions in order to create conversation

_____6. I do not worry about correctness as long as I can communicate my meaning

_____7. If necessary, I use gestures to convey my meaning and keep a conversation going

_____8. I practise the target language with other students

_____9. If I do not know the vocabulary I want to use, I use similar words or phrases or make them up

_____10. I try to pronounce the target language like native speakers

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BIODATA   M/F   NATIONALITY _____

BIRTHDATE: (day) _____ (month) _____ (year) _____

WHAT ARE YOUR REASONS FOR STUDYING?

Are there any other strategies which you have found useful for developing the language skills you need?

INTERVIEW GUIDE

STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (LSD)
AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO SUCCESS IN IELTS

1. Which language learning strategies have you found most useful for developing skills in English (key strategies)?

2. (a) Which skills have you found most difficult when learning English?

   (b) Which strategies have you used to help overcome these difficulties?

3. Do you think the strategies you use have been affected by your

(a) nationality

(b) gender

(c) age

(d) reason for learning

(e) other factors

If so, what effect have these factors had?