

# Utilizing students' preferred language learning strategies for IELTS test preparation

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*This paper looks at how students' preferred language learning strategies can be used to maximize students' performance in the speaking component of the IELTS test. The research is based on work by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and was undertaken in the context of an intensive IELTS test preparation course in Vietnam.*

*The study found that using students' preferred learning strategies can be an effective way to help them prepare for high stakes international exams. Students who used the metacognitive strategies of self-evaluation and effective organization performed comparatively well in the test. In contrast, those students who used the cognitive strategy of delayed production generally did not achieve their desired results in the speaking test. A series of recommended activities which had the broadest appeal and most positive outcomes for test candidates are suggested.*

## **Introduction**

This article investigates the way in which student language learning preferences can be used by teachers and students to improve learning outcomes and maximize scores in the speaking part of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assessment. While it is acknowledged that preparing students for a highly-structured, international, high-stakes exam in a limited time frame must be prescriptive to a degree, an assumption underlying this research is a belief that learners will benefit most if teachers take into account the students' varied learning styles and preferences. From a teaching perspective, the study is influenced by a socioconstructivist perspective and is an adaptation of the ideas outlined by Nunan (1988) in his advocacy of a learner-centred curriculum. This perspective of learning promotes the co-construction of knowledge through relationships – collaboration between teacher and student, student and student, and students and peers (Nunan 1988).

This article has three parts. Part one briefly outlines the aims and research method used: teacher observation and a questionnaire. The research methodology is based on the work of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) who created a schema of classification of learning strategies. In part two this schema is used to describe and analyse the learning strategies of a small group of students enrolled in an IELTS test preparation course.

Part three of the article discusses several activities which take advantage of the students' learning preferences as well as some alternative strategies that the students utilised to improve their language learning based on the findings of the research. While this paper looks at all the learners' strategies, it focuses most heavily on what they do to improve their speaking performance in the exam.

### *Part One – Research Aim and Method*

In their study of learning strategies, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) refer to metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective strategies. Metacognitive strategies allude to the way in which people think about their learning, and involve strategies such as advanced organizing and self-management, selective and directed attention, self-monitoring and evaluation. Cognitive strategies are those techniques that assist communication, and include repetition, use of resources, translation, and inferencing. Socioaffective strategies refer to the way in which learners mediate their language learning experience with others. These interpersonal strategies include cooperation, collaboration, peerchecking and asking questions for clarification. (Hismanoglu 2000; O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

The students' learning preferences were identified through three principal research mechanisms: (1) teacher observation of the students' learning in class, (2) a questionnaire to identify the students' learning strategies and preferred ways of learning and (3) a focus group which was used primarily to clarify some of the issues that emerged in the observation and questionnaire.

### *Observation*

In the teacher observation of the students, the teacher looks for evidence of the metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective factors identified by Chamot and O'Malley. While teacher observation of students cannot reliably identify all these factors, it is particularly useful for some. For instance, regarding metacognitive strategies, teachers can notice whether learners have prepared for class or not, whether they keep a journal or vocabulary book, or whether they self-correct. In cognitive strategies, repetition, resourcing and inferencing are all identifiable in class and where the teacher knows the students' L1, translation is also often evident. Finally, the degree to which students use socioaffective strategies such as cooperation and asking for clarification or confirmation can be determined by observing students' willingness to participate in pair and group work in class or other activities which require interpersonal contact (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Nunan 1992 96-8).

The observation also allows the teacher to determine various socioaffective factors in the learners' personalities such as self-esteem and level of extroversion. Observation was considered more accurate than student self-assessment because previous work

with students showed that what they thought about themselves and actually what they did in class did not always closely correspond (Gillette 1987 164-6; Arnold and Brown 1999 11-2). For example, Chart A shows that most students considered that they used cooperation as a cognitive learning strategy. However, observation of the class suggested that this was not the case, and in fact some students only participated in pair work and other cooperative activities reluctantly.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire designed for this paper was based on the survey designed by Hismanoglu (2000). As with this research, Hismanoglu's work was seeking to identify key language learning strategies used by a group of students. The survey in this paper is based on students' responses to a list of thirteen statements about learning styles. These statements are grouped according to strategy type: metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective. The students are asked to show their level of agreement with the statements from 1. 'Never true of me' to 5. 'Always true for me' (Appendix A). The questionnaire also reveals which of O'Malley's strategies the students believe they rely on most. This may often reflect what the student most *would like* to do rather than what they *actually* do. So, it could be said that the questionnaire shows the kinds of activities that the students most enjoy.

However, while acknowledging the benefits of questionnaires, they also, in Nunan's words contain 'pitfalls' not least of which is the possibility of misrepresentation (Nunan 1992 143). In language acquisition, one of the key problems seems to lie in the fact that questionnaires offer academics the opportunity to present quantitative data in an area of research (at least in the classroom setting) which seems more conducive to qualitative evidence. In this essay, the questionnaire has been used to identify learner strategies with the more detailed data emerging from the observations and the focus group.

### *Chart A – Questionnaire results*

Respond to each of these statements in the coloured boxes by placing a tick in one of the boxes on the right – A. 'Never true of me', B. 'Usually not true for me', C. 'Somewhat true of me', D. 'Usually true of me', E. 'Always true of me'.

Numbers indicate the number of students who chose the respective answers. Adapted from research by O'Malley *et al* (1985).

		<b>METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
1	Advanced organizer	I review lessons before class and generally prepare for class carefully			1	2	3
2	Selective attention	I focus on a specific point of language when I study at home or at school	1	1	1	2	1
3	Self management	I try to arrange the best conditions for learning		2	1	2	1
4	Self monitoring & evaluation	I correct myself when speaking I try to identify my errors and fix them			3	2	1
5	Delayed production	I talk when I have to. I prefer to learn by listening. I only talk when I'm sure about what I am going to say	1	3		2	
		<b>Cognitive Strategies</b>					
6	Repetition	I imitate other people's speech.			1	2	3
7	Resourcing	I often use a dictionary or other reference books.				3	3
8	Translation	I often try to translate from English into Vietnamese and Vietnamese into English	1		1	4	
9	Inferencing	I often guess the meaning of new words from their context in both speaking and reading				1	5
		<b>Socioaffective strategies</b>					
10	Clarification	I often ask for clarification from the teacher or classmate if I don't understand			4	1	1
11	Cooperation	I actively participate in pair work in class				3	3
12	Cooperation	I actively participate in group work in class				2	4
13	Cooperation	I like helping my partners or when they help me			3	2	1

**Chart A**

## *Part Two - The learners and their learning strategies*

The learners, who at the time of the research were planning to sit the IELTS test, are six students; four men and two women, aged between 19 and 24 years. For the purpose of anonymity the names of the students have been changed to Thanh (male), Trung (male), Tri (male), Binh (male), Hang (female) and Ngoc (female). All planned to study in Australia upon their successful completion of the IELTS test.

### *The metacognitive strategies*

The observations and questionnaires revealed that all six students displayed metacognitive strategies. All were advanced organizers and self-managers showing considerable evidence of preparing carefully and comprehensively for class. They completed all homework assignments and for the most part acted on the suggestions that the teacher made to them regarding test preparation. However, there were some significant differences between these students which were likely to have affected their progress in class as well as their final test results.

Tri and Binh used the metacognitive strategy of delayed production. They liked to observe, listen and then when ready, participate. In the focus group discussion, Tri explained this strategy by saying that that even in Vietnamese, he was inclined towards reticence. While delayed production may be an effective strategy in long term language learning with no time constraints, it is problematic in IELTS test preparation courses which are normally of short duration, focused on skills development, and culminate in the exam. That is, Tri and Binh may have benefited from a longer course with more time, which seems to be necessary for the delayed production strategy to be effective. They delayed their speaking and the practice of speaking skills for so long that they did not have enough time to make the improvements necessary to achieve their desired IELTS band score. While unquantifiable, it is probable that their inability to produce more spoken language earlier in the course and thereby allow time for skills development most probably was a factor in their failure to achieve their desired speaking band score in the test.

### *Cognitive strategies*

The research specifically focused on the cognitive strategies of repetition, translation and inferencing. These were identified as the main strategies used by the students during the teacher observation sessions and so seemed to be the most fruitful areas to pursue in the questionnaire and focus group. Trung, Hang, Thanh and Ngoc all incorporated repetition and imitation into their language learning strategies. Trung used it as a way to improve what he felt was his poor pronunciation, while Hang, Thanh and Ngoc wanted to have more native-like sound to their language by imitating the prosodic features of spoken English.

Trung, Hang, Thanh and Ngoc were also very good at resourcing. They were enthusiastic users of the various technologies and materials that the teacher suggested. As will be discussed, they actively used tape recorders, speech recognition computer programs and pronunciation books. While many other students used these resources during the five week IELTS preparation course, the four students mentioned here were by far the most frequent users. Given their subsequent relative success in the IELTS speaking test compared to other students in the class, it is reasonable to infer that it was the consistent application of the resourcing strategies rather than the resource strategies themselves which proved decisive in test success.

### *Socioaffective strategies*

The students exhibited varied features of socioaffective learning strategies. Thanh, Trung, Hang and Ngoc all exhibited characteristics of extroversion and were enthusiastic participants in both fluency and accuracy speaking activities. They appeared to receive enormous satisfaction from pair, group and whole class discussions. In contrast, Tri and Binh were unwilling participants in pair work and group work. Both the teacher observation as well as the focus group showed that Tri and Binh were reluctant speakers. Tri and Binh's psychological profile seem to fit quite accurately with what Arnold and Brown describe as introversion. "Introverts" they say "can have great inner strength of character and may show high degrees of empathy, both qualities being useful for language learning" (Arnold and Brown 1999 11; Gillette 1987 165). However, Tri and Binh's reluctance to participate in pair work in class and unwillingness to become involved in the peer-managed speaking groups after class (which will be discussed below) hampered their opportunities for improvement in their speaking skills.

### *Part Three – Recommended activities*

Six interrelated activities and strategies were adopted in response to the time constraints of the course, the students' learning preferences as well as what were seen as their chief language weaknesses.

#### *(1) Self and peer assessment – promoting the independent learner*

First, individual goal-setting and self-assessment were promoted. All the students had displayed some of the metacognitive strategies involved in being advanced organizers and showed a willingness to monitor their own progress. Requiring the learners to assess their own performance and that of their partners against a set of criteria not only quickly developed their own critical and cognitive skills, but also kept them focused on the IELTS test throughout the duration of the course (Nunan 1999 193). For this research project a set of criteria was designed for assessing both the speaking and writing activities. However, any teachers who wish to promote self and

peer assessment as a learning strategy could now use the speaking and writing band descriptors published by IELTS and available on their website (IELTS 2005).

### *(2) Regular feedback meetings*

A second strategy which took advantage of the students' metacognitive strategies of self management and self monitoring was to have a regular post-class meeting with two or three students to make sure that they fully understood their shortcomings. These 'meetings' usually involve the teacher speaking with students and specifying how they are progressing. The teacher should make an effort to provide at least one piece of personalized advice to each student and they in turn can express their own concerns regarding the test. The key to making this an effective strategy is to identify a course of action that individual students can take to overcome the shortcoming and improve their overall speaking skills.

### *(3) Teacher-student joint analysis of recorded speech*

To take advantage of the students' metacognitive strategies of self-monitoring as well as their preferred cognitive strategy of repetition, students were asked to record themselves on a cassette tape speaking on some IELTS-type topics. The teacher would then listen to the recording together with the particular student and provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the language used referring to set criteria. Typical examples of the types of errors made were prosodic features such as sentence stress, reductions, and intonation as well as specific pronunciation errors common to Vietnamese native speakers. This activity seemed to produce very positive results.

Although the evidence is inconclusive, one of the keys to the success of this activity seemed to be for the teacher and the particular student to listen to the recording together rather than the teacher to listen to the recording separately and then give feedback. This joint listening enabled the teacher to clearly illustrate to the student his or her strengths and weaknesses in their language repertoire by identifying specific examples from the recording. The very act of a student listening to his or her own voice under the guidance of a teacher seemed to force the student's acknowledgement of the errors. A second important component of this strategy is that this process of recording, then listening and identifying areas for improvement, and then recording again could be repeated several times. This put the focus on the individual students to take responsibility for repairing their language. A revealing corollary of this is that the two students who chose not to fully participate in this activity achieved the lowest two band scores in the class for the speaking component of the test.

### *(4) Complete practice speaking tests in front of the whole class*

When students were aware of the basic structure of the speaking component of the IELTS test, they were offered the chance to be given a practice speaking test by the

teacher in front of the whole class. This was used as a forum where students could raise any issue they wished about the test procedures as well as identify and revise various forms of language that may arise in the IELTS test. This classroom activity was an attempt to fully exploit the students' preferences and obvious aptitudes for the metacognitive strategies of planning and monitoring their language learning as well as the various socioaffective strategies the students had displayed such as peerchecking and giving feedback. This activity assisted both the extroverted students who seemed to develop even greater confidence, as well as those more introverted students who had the opportunity to see their classmates perform and witnessed language and speaking strategies that could help them in the exam.

*(5) Students form peer-managed speaking groups*

The students' metacognitive and socioaffective strategies were further exploited in peer-managed speaking groups. All students were requested to form peer-managed speaking groups where they would meet two or three times a week outside class time to practice speaking. This provided the learners with the opportunity to practice the various skills and test taking strategies that they had learned in class. These groups usually met in the early afternoon following their morning classes. Those students who participated actively in these groups made significant improvements in both their spoken accuracy and fluency. As with the voice recording activities, those students who chose not to become actively involved in these speaking groups did most poorly in the speaking part of the IELTS exam.

*Chart B – IELTS speaking test results completed two weeks after completion of the course*

STUDENT'S NAME OR NUMBER	SPEAKING TEST SCORE
Binh	5
Hang	7
Student 3	6
Student 4	6
Student 5	X
Student 6	X
Student 7	6
Student 8	6
Student 9	6

Student 10	5
Thanh	6
Student 12	5
Trung	6
Ngoc	7
Tri	5
Student 16	6
Student 17	6
Student 18	7

**CHART B**

*(6) Using writing patterns in speaking*

While Thanh and Ngoc both were quite effective writers, they expressed particular anxiety over parts two and three of the speaking test. These components of the IELTS test involve a short talk of up to two minutes duration and a short discussion in which many of the examiner's questions are related to the talk topic. As both students seemed to rely quite heavily on metacognitive strategies in their learning and had displayed a willingness to self evaluate and reflect honestly, they were told that although writing and speaking are clearly different skills, there are some key principles in essay writing that are not exclusive to writing but are also found in speaking such as coherence and cohesion. Thanh and Ngoc were shown that these features they had mastered in their writing could be transposed into their speaking style (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 159-69; Wakamoto 2000: 71-81).

**CONCLUSION**

Those learners who used the metacognitive strategies of self-evaluation, selective or focused attention and were able to organize time as well as use cognitive strategies such as skills revision all performed to or beyond their expectations in the speaking component of the test. Conversely, those students who used strategies such as delayed production found it difficult to progress within the limited time period of the course. That is, while it was clear that introverted students could clearly be successful in the IELTS speaking test, they seemed to have much greater difficulty in repairing, developing and extending their spoken language repertoire in the duration of an IELTS test preparation course.

Socioaffective factors seem to be crucial in language learning within the context of preparing for the IELTS test. A clear assumption of the IELTS speaking exam is that to be successful, students must be able to communicate and be willing to do so. A reluctance to speak on the part of the candidate might well preclude him or her from achieving a band six score which stipulates that the candidate “is willing to speak at length” (IELTS, 2006). The two most introverted students who achieved the lowest speaking scores were the most reluctant speakers.

In short, this study suggests that introverted students and the strategies that they usually prefer are at a distinct disadvantage in the typical time-restricted IELTS test preparation course. A possible remedy may be that these students and their teachers should try and rely more on those strategies which allow for the practice, repair and extension of language production rather those activities used in the pre-production stages.

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