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THE ROLE OF AGE, GENDER AND L1 STRATEGIES IN THE L2 STRATEGIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN GREECE¹

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Abstract

The current study investigated the effects of age, gender and L1 strategies on strategy use in English as a Foreign Language learned by primary school learners in Greece. Data were obtained (a) through the administration of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning to 103 participants of fourth, fifth and sixth grades and (b) through the examination of Greek coursebooks. Results showed a strong effect of age on strategic use but no strong effect of gender or L1 strategies. Overall, the reported medium use of strategies and the low use of specific strategies calls for pedagogic intervention in the form of strategic instruction.

Keywords: language learning strategies, L2 English, primary school, age, gender, transfer of L1 Greek strategies

1. Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been defined as "...specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalisation, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language" (Oxford 1992/93: 18). In Oxford's taxonomy, adopted here, LLS have been categorized as follows (adapted from Oxford 1990, 1992/93):

- Memory strategies help learners store incoming information in such a way that it can be recalled easily when required.
- Cognitive strategies are more task-specific. Learners use them in order to manipulate or transform the learning material or solve language problems.
- Compensation strategies enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge. They are intended to make up for an inadequate repertoire in grammar or vocabulary.
- Metacognitive strategies are essential actions, which help learners coordinate and manage their own learning process overall by planning, arranging monitoring and evaluating their learning.
- Affective strategies help learners control their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values while learning another language.
- Social strategies help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language.

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The role of LLS is considered positive as they speed up the above described processes and contribute to a learner-centred language instruction. Over the last 30 years or so, LLS have been researched with regard to various factors, such as age, gender, proficiency level, learning styles, motivation, beliefs about language learning, culture, the educational setting, or the tasks involved in the teaching process (for a review, see Oxford, 2011). However, research on the possibility and outcomes of transferring strategies from one language learning situation to another has mainly been conducted in the area of multilingualism and has concerned the influence of previously acquired languages on L3 grammar or vocabulary rather than the possible transfer of L1 strategies to the learning of an L2 in a foreign language setting (Jessner 1999, Kemp 2007, Sagasta-Errasti 2003).

Given the above, in the present study we investigate the reported preferences overall of strategy employment by primary school learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Greece, and, mainly, these learners' LLS preferences in relation to age and gender; we further investigate the possible transfer of LLS from the L1 to the L2. Relevant research in these areas is briefly presented below.

2. Language learning strategy research

Age is one of the variables that have been rather extensively investigated in relation to the strategies learners of different age groups employ while learning an L2. Scholars have argued that the attested differences in strategy selection and frequency of strategy use can be attributed to maturational differences (Bialystok & Hakuta 1999, Griffiths 2008, Ioup et al. 1994), the learning context (Muñoz 2006), L2 proficiency (Lan & Oxford 2003, Trángant & Victory 2012) and individual differences or personal factors, such as family, job and health (Griffiths 2008). An indicative example of how age may interact with other variables in LLS use is the finding that Dutch primary school learners reported using fewer metacognitive LLS than Dutch secondary school learners, while the opposite was found in a study with primary and secondary school learners in Greece (see Psaltou-Joycey 2010 and references therein).

With regard to gender differences in LLS use studies have shown that the two genders use a different range of strategies in most learning situations and that overwhelmingly females use strategies more frequently than males (Gu 2002, Kazamia 2003, Lan & Oxford 2003, Lee & Oxford 2008, Παπάνης 2008, Peacock & Ho 2003, Psaltou-Joycey & Kantaridou 2009, Vrettou 2009, 2011).

LLS research has shown that usually learners – and especially young ones – do not automatically transfer strategies they have used in one learning situation to a different one, as they tend to restrict a strategy to the context in which they first used it (Gu 1996, O'Malley & Chamot 1990, Davidson & Stenberg 1998). Consequently, such use does not contribute to developing learner autonomy in a cognitively economical way. To overcome this problem, learners need to explicitly practise transferring strategies to new tasks, so teachers must assist them in this process. Ideally, all teachers of different subject areas should teach strategies and learners would then be more likely to transfer strategies learnt in one class to another (Chamot 2008). In more realistic terms, Cohen, Weaver & Li (1998, in Chamot 2008: 148) suggest that “transfer can be encouraged not only across L2 task types but also across L1 and L2”, and Chamot (2001: 42) has called for research on “the transfer of learning strategies from the L1 to the L2 – and from the L2 to additional languages and then back to the

L1". Macaro (2001) proposed that young learners can benefit from awareness raising through recalling the strategies they recently used in their L1 and relating them to similar strategies in their L2, whereas Wenden (1999) has recognized a key role to metacognitive knowledge as it can facilitate strategy transfer and hasten the whole process of transfer from either language (L1, L2) to the other.

The above overview points to the need for further research in LLS, which is the aim of the present study, given also the relative paucity of research regarding LLS use by young learners in general (Tragant & Victori 2006) as well as in Greece, in particular.

3. Research questions in the present study

The present study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Which are the preferred strategies in English as a foreign language (EFL) as reported by Greek primary school learners?
2. Are these strategies influenced by
 - a) age?
 - b) gender?
 - c) exposure to or use of strategies in their L1?

4. Methodology

In this section we describe the context, the participants, and the methods of data collection.

4.1 Context and participants

In the Greek educational context, the teaching of all subjects is carried out with the help of an approved set of courseware materials, specially written for the Greek primary school learners. The instruction of English is introduced in the third grade of the state primary school and is taught three hours per week up to the sixth grade in the primary sector. Greek language courses are taught nine hours per week in the first and second grades, eight hours in the third and fourth grades and 7 hours in the last two grades.

A total of 103 Greek primary school learners of English completed a questionnaire (see section 4.2) that looked into their preferred learning styles. 29.1% (N=30) attended grade 4 (aged 10), 35.9% (N=37) attended grade 5 (aged 11), and 35% (N=36) attended grade 6 (aged 12) in two state primary schools, situated in a similar socio-economic context in Thessaloniki, Greece. In this study, 58.3% (N=60) were female and 41.7% (N=43) were male. Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of male and female students per grade.

Table 1: Gender distribution per grade (%)

	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Male	46.7	40.5	38.9
Female	53.3	59.5	61.1

4.2 Method of data collection

4.2.1 The questionnaire

The learners' preferred LLS were drawn with the administration of a questionnaire, which was distributed to 4th, 5th and 6th graders. The questionnaire was adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) in order to suit the Greek educational context and translated into Greek. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that this questionnaire was piloted for the needs of a nation-wide study in Greece, entitled "Adjustment of SILL in Greek and Turkish and strategic profiling of primary and secondary school learners and teachers" and coordinated by the Democritus University of Thrace (see also Footnote 1). Our ultimate aim is to adapt the SILL scale in order to determine the LLS profile of learners of English in Greek Primary and Secondary Education as well as of Muslim students learning Greek as a second language.

The questionnaire was administered in the presence of the questionnaire administrator and the class teacher toward the end of the school year (i.e. in April-May). The learners were introduced to the questionnaire and were informed that there were no correct answers. They were assured that their anonymity would be retained and that, once collected, the questionnaires would not be accessed by their teacher. When the learners became familiarized with the questionnaire, they were encouraged to ask questions and unclear points were clarified.

With regard to the questionnaire format, the questionnaire had two sections. Section one built participants' profile, whereas Section two contained 50 items, making use of the 5-point Likert scale as follows: (1) *I never or almost never do*, (2) *I rarely do*, (3) *I sometimes do*, (4) *I often do*, and (5) *I always do*. The items in this questionnaire fall into the following categories, as classified by Oxford (op.cit.): memory strategies (e.g. 'I review English lessons often'), cognitive strategies (e.g. 'I repeat the pronunciation of English words in order to learn them'), compensation ('When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures'), metacognitive strategies (e.g. 'I think about my progress in learning English'), affective strategies (e.g. 'I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English'), and social strategies (e.g. 'I practice English with other students').

4.2.2 The books

The three books implemented for the teaching of Greek in grades 4 through 6 (Διακογιώργη κ.ά. 2012, Ιορδανίδου κ.ά. 2012, Ιορδανίδου κ.ά. 2012) were studied so as to uncover the strategies that are introduced as part of everyday teaching. The 6 types of strategies (i.e. memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social) as suggested by Oxford were accounted for in order to subsequently categorise the strategies incorporated in the coursebooks.

4.3 Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out. The quantitative analysis, included: (a) descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means and standard deviations, and (b) inferential statistics: independent samples t-tests and ANOVA.

The Greek coursebooks were qualitatively analysed in order to trace the incorporation of and learners' exposure to strategy use in the L1 classroom context. The qualitative results were in turn quantified so as to give us an insight into the most promoted LLS in the L1 classroom context.

5. Results and discussion

We next discuss the results vis-a-vis each of our research questions formulated in Section 3. As already mentioned, the investigation of all research questions except the one concerning transfer of strategies was based on the results we obtained from the SILL questionnaire.

5.1 Research Question 1: Which are the preferred strategies in English as a foreign language (EFL) as reported by Greek primary school learners?

First, an analysis of the SILL data according to LLS categories, illustrated in Figure 1, indicates that the learners favour metacognitive and affective strategies the most and almost to the same degree (3.6 and 3.5, respectively). Next in the learners' preferences are social (3.2) and cognitive strategies (3.1), while memory and compensation strategies seem to be the least favoured strategies (2.9 and 2.5, respectively).

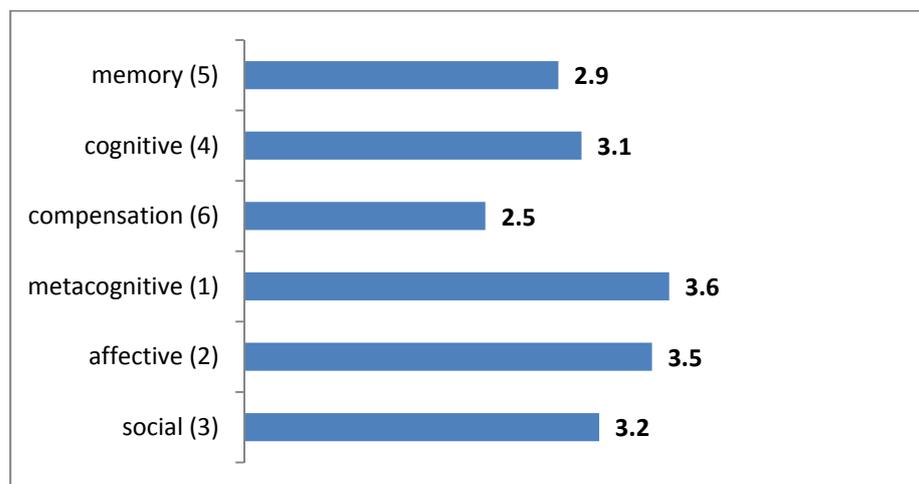


Figure 1: Learners' preferences in strategy type

Strategies with a mean score 4.5-5.0 are 'very high' use, 3.5-4.4 'high use', 2.5-3.4 'medium use', and 1.5-2.4 'low use' (Oxford 1990). In our study, according to the mean scores of reported LLS use per category only metacognitive and affective strategies seem of high use (3.6 and 3.5 respectively), while the rest of the strategies fall within the range of medium use. Note that a common research finding is medium LLS use as, for example, in Lan and Oxford's (2003) study with 379 sixth-grade primary school learners of EFL in Taiwan but also with adults and secondary school learners in Greece (Kazamia 2003, Psaltou & Kantaridou 2009, Vrettou 2009), as well as in other countries (e.g. Liu, 2013). It is worthy to mention that Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari's (2010) SILL-based data from 262 sixth-grade primary school learners of EFL in Greece were very similar to ours regarding the mean scores; moreover, the

order of preferences in LLS categories in Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari’s data was the same as the one here.

Next we present the ten most frequently used strategies. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores of the most ‘frequent’ strategies are within the range of high use (3.6 - 4.4). Half of these strategies are metacognitive (2, 3, 4, 6 and 8) and three are affective (7, 9 and 10), while there were also one memory and one cognitive strategy (1 and 5 respectively). Strategy 1 was the sixth graders’ favourite one, while strategies 2 and 3 were preferred the most by the fifth and the first graders, respectively.

Table 2: The ten most frequently used strategies

Strategy	Category	Mean score
1. I review English lessons often	Memory	4.1
2. I think about my progress in learning English	Metacognitive	4.1
3. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	Metacognitive	4.1
4. I pay attention when someone is speaking English	Metacognitive	4.1
5. I repeat the pronunciation of English words in order to learn them	Cognitive	3.9
6. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English	Metacognitive	3.9
7. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English	Affective	3.8
8. I have clear goals for improving my English skills	Metacognitive	3.8
9. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake	Affective	3.7
10. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	Affective	3.6

5.2 Research Question 2a: Are the learners’ LLS influenced by age?

Figure 2 traces the developmental patterns of LLS category use by the three age groups of our learners. Age seems to affect the choice of strategies the learners report they use in that the older the learners, the less frequently they appear to use five out of the six LLS categories, namely, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social LLS. Only compensation LLS seem to be used more by the older than the younger learners. The statistical analysis of the results, carried out by T-tests, and shown in Table 3, revealed that between fourth and sixth graders the age effect was significant for the compensation strategies and highly significant for all of the other LLS categories.

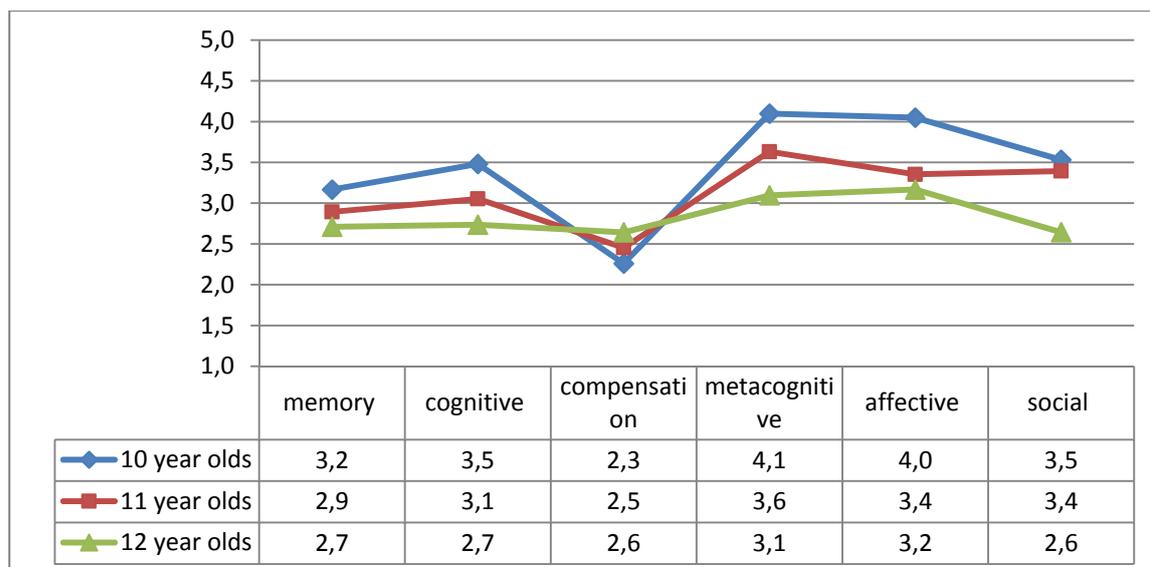


Figure 2: Learners preferences across age

Table 3: Significant differences in strategy types between age groups

Strategy category	Ages								
	10-11			10-12			11-12		
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Memory	1.938	60	.057	3.687	56	.001	1.525	64	.132
Cognitive	2.341	53	.023	4.844	52	.000	2.087	61	.041
Compens.	-1.003	59	.320	-2.152	56	.036	-1.093	67	.278
Metacogn.	2.468	54	.017	5.235	52	.000	2.783	58	.007
Affective	3.509	59	.001	4.679	60	.000	0.981	67	.330
Social	0.682	60	.498	4.893	59	.000	4.478	69	.000

Note that if strategy use is anticipated to increase with age, we would expect the older learners to report higher use of strategies than the younger learners, and not vice versa. However, it should be noted that our findings are not unprecedented. Psaltou-Joycey & Sougari's (2010) study with EFL learners in Greece showed that junior secondary school learners reported lower use of LLS than did primary school learners. To account for these results, Psaltou-Joycey & Sougari (op.cit.: 396) suggested that "primary learners make conscious effort to use various strategies in their attempt to achieve better learning outcomes and that they are more willing to experiment". Note also that age may interact with level of L2 proficiency. Although in our study L2 proficiency was not independently measured, we may assume that the learners' level of English language proficiency generally increased with grade level. On this assumption, our results are comparable with the results in some studies showing that less advanced L2 learners were more resourceful in LLS use than more advanced learners (see references in Tragant & Victori 2012: 294)

The above line of argument may account also for most of our data regarding separate LLS categories. ANOVA analysis was conducted in order to determine interaction effect of age and LLS type. In cognitive and metacognitive strategies there were significant differences between all three age groups in that, again, fourth graders reported using these strategies more frequently than fifth graders and so on. It is possible that the lower the grade of the learners, the more their need to use cognitive LLS as well as their need for metacognitive LLS.

Memory strategies too seem to be used significantly more by fourth than by sixth graders (with the other between-grades differences being either near-significant or not significant). Again, this complies with findings from other studies which indicated that learners of less advanced L2 proficiency tend to depend more on memorization strategies (e.g. Tragant & Victory 2006). Also, memory abilities, which are linked with learning in general and also with L2 learning (Ellis 2001), improve fast through adolescence (e.g. Gómez-Pérez & Ostrosky-Solís 2006) and thus the younger the learners, the more they may need to rely on strategies that help them remember words, sounds, etc. in L2.

Affective and social strategies too were significantly more used by younger than by older learners in our study, as in Psaltou-Joycey & Sougari (2010). A slightly higher use of affective LLS by younger than by older learners was found also by Magogwe & Oliver (2007), although this difference was not statistically significant. Other studies, however, found that the use of both affective and social LLS increases with age (e.g. Lan & Oxford 2003).

Compensation strategies were the only ones that were reportedly used more by older than by younger learners, with a statistically significant difference attested only between the fourth and the sixth graders. A plausible account for these results is that compensation strategies mature with age. Yet it is also possible that here again age may interact with L2 proficiency; generally speaking, in EFL contexts like the one in Greece, although sixth graders are generally not yet proficient enough in English, they are more able to communicate in this language than fourth graders, so they may employ more compensation strategies to this end.

Last, our results may have been affected by the “social desirability response bias – that is, telling the researcher what seems to be the “desired” response” (Lan & Oxford 2003: 373), if we assume that the younger the learners, the more they may wish to please. This possibility, however, will remain a speculation.

5.3 Research Question 2b: Are the learners’ strategies influenced by gender?

Overall there were no statistically significant differences in LLS use between male and female learners, except in the following three strategies that were reportedly used more often by girls than by boys.

1. *I repeat the pronunciation of English words in order to learn them* (cognitive)
[t (100) = -2,348, p=0.021, p<0.05]
2. *I try to find out how to be a better learner of English* (metacognitive)
[t (95) = -2,670 ,p=0.009, p<0.01]
3. *When I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again* (social)
[t (98) = -2,822, p=0.006, p<0.01]

Our results do not support the generally attested superiority of females over males in LLS use (see references in Section 2). However, most relevant research has involved adults or secondary school learners and in the few studies that involved primary school learners, those were sixth graders. In our study, on the other hand, only 35% of the participants were sixth graders, while the majority were fourth and fifth graders. Lack of gender effects on LLS use was found also in a study that involved fifth graders in Canada (Gunning 1997, reported in Lan & Oxford 2003:

351). Therefore, gender may not have a significant role in strategy use in children as young as those in our study.

5.4 Research Question 3c: Are the learners' strategies influenced by exposure to or use of strategies in their L1?

Before we start, let us contextualize. Greek is the language of instruction in all state schools and is considered the learners' L1 despite the presence of a considerable number of non-native children in the classes. Language instruction focuses primarily on literacy development which entails knowledge of the Greek system, enrichment of vocabulary knowledge, cultivation of reading and writing skills as well as ability to use academic speech. Oral fluency is taken for granted and it is not processed further.

A careful study of the Greek coursebooks revealed that the approach followed in all levels is text-based: rather extensive authentic texts, literary and other, are used as a starting point for the elaboration of language phenomena. The selected texts aim at providing the necessary material for conceptual processing and development of critical thinking as well as presentation of structural elements and applications for practice.

The term "strategy" is not encountered in any of the "student's" or the "teacher's" books. Nor is there any explicit instruction or explanation to teachers of how and why to approach the teaching of a particular language element in a certain way. To decide what strategies are being implemented indirectly we had to study the activities accompanying each unit and the instructions provided to the pupils by the coursebook writers as to how to proceed.

As the approach is text-based, a lot of strategies are used for reading comprehension but in a rather traditional way as the activities the pupils are asked to perform always follow the initial reading of the text. What is missing is a series of pre-reading strategies such as predicting by looking at accompanying pictures or titles, brainstorming of ideas, using world knowledge or presentation of unknown vocabulary. The learners are called to use these strategies in the after-reading session. Also despite the fact that the pupils are often asked to answer questions which require either the finding of the main idea(s) or of specific detailed information on the text, there is no reference as to how this can be facilitated by learning how to skim and scan a text. Comprehension questions mainly require answers in the form of multiple choices, true-false, matching sentences, putting sentences in the right conceptual order, or making judgmental comments.

All in all, through a careful study of all the units included in the 'student's' coursebooks for the three primary grades, 4th, 5th and 6th, we identified the implicit use of a number of LLS, with the ten most commonly employed in order of frequency being the following:

- 1. I use resources (literary texts, the internet, books, dictionaries, etc.) to find information (cognitive)*
- 2. I think about my progress in language learning (metacognitive)*
- 3. I think of relationships between what I already know and the new things I learn (memory)*
- 4. I remember new words, expressions and grammar rules because I have seen them printed in tables in my book (memory)*
- 5. I try to learn about the culture of people who speak other languages (social)*

6. *I participate in the class activities by forming pairs or groups with my classmates (social)*
7. *I use pictures, my imagination, or sounds to help me remember words (memory)*
8. *I make summaries of information that I hear or read in Greek (cognitive)*
9. *If I can't think of a Greek word, I use a word or a phrase that means the same thing (compensation)*
10. *I use various means such as constructions, flashcards, to help me remember words and phrases (memory)*

Therefore, Greek language coursebooks appear to promote mainly memory strategies as those were four out of the ten attested ones, while in the rest of the strategies there were two cognitive, two social, one metacognitive and one compensation. Given that the learners' preferred LLS were mainly metacognitive and affective (section 5.1), it seems the learners' strategies in English are not influenced by exposure to or use of strategies in their L1. This may hold with the exception of one of the metacognitive strategies, "I think about my progress in learning English", which was both found in the Greek coursebooks and was one of the learners' most preferred strategy in English (section 5.2).

The discrepancies between L1 and L2 strategies may be due to the difference between improving or teaching one's L1 and learning or teaching a foreign language, especially if the latter concerns low L2 proficiency levels. So, for example, when learners cannot recall a word in L2 they tend to use gestures or coin their own words, while in L1 they may use a synonym instead. Last, it is also plausible that L2 learning is more affected by the L2 strategies learners become familiar with either through explicit instruction, or through implicit exposure.

6. Conclusions

We hope that the current study has broadened insights into reported LLS use. In sum, our findings indicate that age is the most important factor regarding EFL strategies employed by primary school learners in Greece and that generally younger learners may use a wider range of strategies more frequently than older learners. Gender does not seem to affect LLS use, nor does exposure to L1 Greek strategies, at least as these appear in the examined coursebooks. Our data also show that most LLS types are of medium use, which is commonly attested in the LLS literature. The latter finding points to the need for pedagogical intervention in the form of strategic instruction, which has often proved beneficial (e.g. Chamot 2008).

As mentioned in section 5.1, our results resemble those in Psaltou and Sougari's (2009) study with primary school learners in Greece. On the other hand, there are some important differences between our results and those in Lan and Oxford's (2003) study with primary school learners of EFL in Taiwan. Moreover, our results differ from those in a study with primary school children learning English as a second language in Canada (Cunning 1997, reported by Lan and Oxford op. cit.). For example, omitting details due to space limitations, Lan and Oxford's learners reported lower LLS use than our learners and the study in Canada revealed high use of compensation LLS, while in our study these LLS had the lowest mean score of medium use. The above comparisons point to that LLS use may be socioculturally determined and context-dependent.

Of course the issues dealt with here need to be further explored with a larger and more representative sample of learners, the inclusion of observations regarding learners' actual LLS use, the examination of their EFL coursebooks, interviews of learners and teachers and classroom observation to probe strategic instruction in L1 and L2. This, however, is the aim of future research within the frame of the nationwide research we currently work (see Section 4.1).

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