What makes less fluent learners differ from fluent speakers?
: Individual learner differences, learning style, and learning strategies

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The present study examines the correlations among learners' individual differences, learning styles, learning strategies, and learners' fluency by employing statistical procedures. To investigate their relations, a questionnaire on 5 individual variables (the starting point of learning English, the nature of the prior learning, class presentation rates, motivation, and studying hours), learning style survey, and strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) were administered to 67 Korean participants at different speaking-fluency levels. The results show that learning strategy plays a mediating role between individual variables and learners' fluency. Therefore, to be a fluent speaker, learners have to participate in interaction to employ learning strategies more widely and often.

1. Introduction

When it comes to language proficiency, we cannot but think of individual differences, learning styles, learning strategies as major variables which affect the ultimate level of language proficiency. There have been many researches which investigated the relationship between individual differences and proficiency (Altman, 1980; Skehan 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), between learning styles and proficiency (Naiman et al., 1978; Seliger, 1977; Carter, 1988), and between learning strategies and proficiency (Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1989). Some researchers insist that Individual learner differences such as beliefs, affective states, and previous learning experiences together with various situational factors, like the nature of instruction or the target language determine the learners' choice of learning strategies. These then influence two aspects of learning, the rate of language acquisition and the ultimate level of L2 proficiency (Ellis, 1994).

However, there have been few studies which explored the correlations among these three variables. In the present study, in order to find out the variables which influence learning processes and mechanisms, surveys on individual learner differences – the starting point of learning English, the nature of the prior learning, class presentation rates, motivation and studying hours -, learning styles, and learning strategies were conducted to 67 participants at different proficiency levels.

2. Previous studies

Previous studies in relevance to proficiency can be divided into three categories: individual differences and proficiency, learning styles and proficiency, and learning strategies and proficiency. In the field of the study exploring the correlation between individual learner variable and proficiency, Oxford & Nyikos (1989) argue that highly motivated learners use more strategies relating for formal practice, functional practice, general study, and input elicitation than poorly motivated learners. With regard to learning styles and fluency, Carter (1988) reports that field independence relates to both formal linguistic achievement and to functional language use, while Reid (1987) insists proficiency level is not related to learning styles, but length of residence in the U.S is. To prove the relation between learning strategies and proficiency, Bialystok (1981) examines, in his correlational study, that only functional practice correlates with proficiency in grade 10, whereas functional practice, formal practice, and monitoring are related to proficiency in grade 12. And O'Malley & Chamot (1990) manifests good language learners are aware of themselves in terms of learning process, which is, they can use the metaligual strategy.

On the bases of these separate previous studies, however, it is impossible to assert that there are positive inter-correlations among these various factors. In the present study, the correlations among those variables are examined by taking statistical approach.

3. Research questions

The research questions in the study are as follows:

1. Are there any correlations among individual variables – the starting point of learning English, the nature of the prior learning, class presentation rates, motivation and studying hours-, learning styles, learning strategies, and speaking proficiency?
2. If they are correlated, how do they influence each other?
3. What can be inferred from the relationships among the variables?

4. The study.

4.1 Participants

Totally 67 learners at different proficiency levels participate in the present study. All participants are grouped according to their fluency levels: beginner level, low intermediate level, high intermediates level, and advanced level. 11 Beginners, 21 low intermediate learners, and 25 high intermediate learners are the college students who had the same English conversation class from March, 2003 to July, 2003 at S college in Korea. Each group under advanced level was grouped according to the final grade in the class. Students who was awarded grade C~D in their conversation class are regarded as beginners, the students who got grade B~B+ are low intermediate learners, and the

students whose final credits were A~A+ are grouped as high intermediate learners in the present study. Finally, the advanced learners are consisted of graduate students whose major are English language at K University in Seoul and all passed the English test required for further graduate study at K University.

4.2 Methodology.

In order to see the relationships among the 3 variables which influence language fluency – individual differences, learning styles, and learning strategies –, three questionnaires were administered to 67 learners of English. A questionnaire addressed with individual variables contains a) starting point of learning English, b) the nature of the prior learning, c) class presentation rates, d) motivation, and e) studying hours.

In addition, learning styles survey made by Cohen et al. (2003), and strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) offered by Oxford (1990) were used with worksheets scaled from 1 to 5 – 1. never, 2. usually not true of me, 3. somewhat true of me, 4. usually true of me, 5. always true of me. Cohen et al.'s learning style survey consists of 32 learning styles belonged to 11 different style categories – how to use physical senses (visual, auditory, & tactile), how to expose to learning situation (extraverted & introverted), how to handle possibilities (random-intuitive & concrete-sequential), how to approach tasks (closure-oriented & open), how to receive information (global & particular), how to further process information (synthesizing & analytic), how to commit material to memory (sharpener & leveler), how to deal with language rules (deductive & inductive), how to deal with multiple inputs (field-independent & field dependent), how to deal with response time (impulsive & reflective), and how to literally take reality (metaphoric & literal). Oxford (1990)'s SILL suggests 6 learning strategies – memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy.

5. Results and Discussion
5.1 Individual learner differences

Many individual variables affecting learning outcomes have been suggested by different researchers (Altman, 1980; Skehan 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Although different researchers have admitted the importance attached to individual differences, they haven't classified them coherently. In the present study, a) the starting point of learning English, b) the nature of the prior learning, c) class presentation rates, d) motivations, and e) studying hours are classified as individual differences which bring about different fluency among Korean learners.

In this section, the correlations among these 5 individual differences, between 5 individual differences and proficiency, between 5 individual differences and learning styles, and between 5 individual differences and learning strategies will be examined.

5.1.1 The correlations among 5 individual differences and proficiency

First of all, there were no significant correlations among the five individual differences, except the significant correlation between d) motivation and e) studying hours (.329**) – learners, with more integrative motivation, invest more time to learn target language. Rather, there is a strong negative correlation between c) class presentation rates and e) studying hours (-.464**), as shown in table 1. This indicates that the students who spend more time learning English do not necessarily make voluntary presentations more often in classrooms.

Table 1. The correlations among 5 individual differences and proficiency

	a	b	c	d	e	Fluency
a	1	-.050	-.050	-.205	-.038	-.204
b		1	.172	.088	-.196	-.069
c			1	-.241	-.464**	-.163
d				1	.329**	+.295*
e					1	+.482**
Fluency						1

** p < .01

Regarding the correlations between 5 individual factors and fluency, no correlations were found between a) learning starting point and fluency (-.204), and between c) the rate of classroom presentation and fluency (-.163). This result along with the result concerning the negative correlation between c) class presentation rates and e) studying hours (-.464**) substantiates the idea of 'silent speaker' suggested by Reiss (1985). That is, many successful classroom learners rehearse and practice silently in classrooms while listening to others. Moreover, the finding about the non-significant correlation between a) learning starting point and fluency (-.204) supports the recent claim that early language education doesn't necessarily lead into better fluency. On the other hand, not surprisingly, there was a significant correlation between e) studying hours and fluency (.482**). Besides, there was a positive correlation between d) motivation and fluency (.295*). This tells that the learners spending more time in learning the target language, and learners with integrative motivation rather than instrumental motivation, perform better in speaking English.

5.1.2 The correlations among 5 individual differences and learning styles

The correlation among the 5 individual differences and learning styles were significantly confirmed only in two individual differences. First, significant correlation were found between the learning starting point and five learning styles – visual (.271*),

concrete-sequential (.276*), analytic (.397*), leveler (.324*), and reflective (.257*). This indicates that the learners who began learning English at middle school rely on the sense of sight (books, video, chart, etc.) rather than depend on listening or doing projects, and they prefer to have step-by-step instruction and to focus on grammar to process information when they compared to the learners who start learning English at earlier ages. When committing material to memory, they clump material together by eliminating differences. As regard to response time, they tend to think things through before taking action compared with those starting learning English earlier. Secondly, there was a significant correlation between motivation and random-intuitive (.285*) & impulsive styles (.250*). This tells that learners having integrative motivation are more future-oriented and like to speculate about possibilities in exposing themselves to learning situation (table 2). And they have tendency to act and speak quickly in terms of response time (table 2).

Table 2. T-test on motivation, random-intuitive style, and impulsive style

	Motivation	*n*	*mean*	*SD*	*t*
Random-Intuitive Style	Instrumental	34	3.3284	.62830	-2.399
	Integrative	3	3.6869	.59330	-2.401
Impulsive Style	Instrumental	34	2.9804	.70085	-2.078
	Integrative	33	3.3535	.76802	-2.076

P <.05

5.1.3 The correlations among 5 individual differences and learning strategies

In terms of the correlation between individual variables and 6 learning strategies, there were not any significant correlations among them, except between motivation and 2 learning strategies, memory (.262*) and metacognitive strategies (.407*), as shown in table 3. This implies that the learners with more integrative motivation employ strategies to remember thing more effectively, and to organize and evaluate ones' own learning.

Table 3. T-test on motivation, memory strategy, and metacognitive strategy

	Motivation	*n*	*mean*	*SD*	*t*
Memory strategy	Instrumental	34	2.7451	.41441	-2.189
	Integrative	3	2.9933	.50989	-2.183
Metacogntive strategy	Instrumental	34	3.0359	.67875	-3.589
	Integrative	33	3.6768	.78043	-3.582

P <.05

5.2 Learning styles

Learning style is the characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment (Keefe, 1979). According to the statistical results in the present study, there were mostly no significant correlations between the 32 learning styles and learners' fluency.

However, some learning styles had very close relations with learning strategies. First, extroverted style had a significant correlation with metacognitive (.276*) and social strategies (.291*). This indicates that the learners who enjoy social and interactive learning tasks such as games, conversation, discussion, debates enhance learning by organizing process for themselves and learning with others. Second, closure-oriented learning style and 4 learning strategies – memory (.310*), cognitive (.327*), compensatory (.471*), metacognitive (.501*), and social strategies (.346*) had a close correlation each other. That is, the learners who focus on all learning tasks and plan ahead for assignment use all learning strategies with less use of compensatory and affective strategies. Thirdly, global style and memory (.254*) & cognitive (.333*) strategies had close correlations, too. This suggests that the learners, who enjoy getting the main idea and are comfortable with communication even if they don't know all the word or concepts, have a tendency of taking memory and cognitive learning strategies. The significant correlations between particular learning style and all learning strategies (memory: .449**; cognitive: .289*; compensatory: .247*; metacognitive: .331*; social: .265*; affective: .247*), and between synthesizing learning styles and 5 learning strategies (memory: .290*; cognitive: .250*; compensatory: .364*; metacognitive: .361*; social: .357**), except for affective strategies, reveal that the learners who focus on details, remember specific information about a topic well, and enjoy summarizing material, employ all learning strategies significantly often.

In addition, there were many correlations found with significance: deductive style and cognitive strategy (.278*), field-independence style and cognitive (.285*) & social (.382**) strategies, impulsive styles and cognitive strategy (.273*), compensatory (.260*) & social (.416**) strategies. All these results indicate that although learning styles cannot directly influence learners' proficiency, it affects learning process and finally it make differences in learning outcome by way of learning strategy.

5.3 Learning strategies

Learning strategy is an intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information. The 6 learning strategies in the preset study have positive correlations only with the motivation among 5 individual differences, and directly related with many of the learning styles. Then, what about the relationship among them and with fluency?

5.3.1 The correlations among 6 learning strategies.

The statistical results showed that there were strong correlations among 6 learning strategies except affective learning strategies (table 4).

Table 4. The correlations among 6 learning strategies

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensatory	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Memory	1	.555**	.447**	.507**	.153	458**
Cognitive		1	.520**	.584**	.219	.529**
Compensatory			1	.506**	.3488*	.390**
Metacognitive				1	.114	.436**
Affective					1	.128
Social						1

** p < .01

Unlike the other learning strategies, the affective strategy corresponds positively only with the compensatory strategy. This suggests that learner's effort to compensate for missing knowledge is made by employing strategy to control emotions by encouraging and relaxing oneself when he/she is afraid of making mistakes.

5.3.2 The correlations among learning strategies and proficiency.

Among three questionnaires given to the participants, only learning strategies, with the exception of affective strategy (-.005), showed significant correlations with fluency levels, as shown in table 5.

Table 5. The correlations between learning strategies and fluency

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensatory	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Fluency	.253*	.372**	.252*	.331**	-.005	.189

** p < .01

As table 6 below shows, as fluency level goes up, all the five learning strategies, except for affective strategy, come to be high in their mean numbers.

Table 6. Mean scores of 6 learning strategies and fluency levels

		n	mean	SD	t
Memory	Beginner	11	2.5657	.39269	.088
	Low intermediate	25	2.8466	.52172	.061
	High intermediate	21	3.0000	.42066	.039
	Advanced	10	2.9111	.50729	.313

Cognitive	Beginner	11	2.9650	.56565	.020
	Low intermediate	25	3.1392	.52938	.004
	High intermediate	21	3.5292	.84945	.002
	Advanced	10	3.7385	.57928	.838
Compensatory	Beginner	11	3.0000	.41500	.171
	Low intermediate	25	3.0397	.42461	.076
	High intermediate	21	3.2800	.52643	.041
	Advanced	10	3.3000	.47759	.662
Metacognitive	Beginner	11	2.8586	.74716	.030
	Low intermediate	25	3.1905	.93765	.015
	High intermediate	21	3.6178	.67057	.006
	Advanced	10	3.5667	.48981	.466
Social	Beginner	11	2.7730	.53945	.374
	Low intermediate	25	2.8095	.48099	.204
	High intermediate	21	3.0667	.67013	.128
	Advanced	10	3.0333	.06313	.674
Affective	Beginner	11	3.0152	.37605	.711
	Low intermediate	25	3.3016	1.1978	.859
	High intermediate	21	3.0800	.46677	.967
	Advanced	10	3.1500	.39636	.505

$P < .05$

6. Conclusion

The present study so far examines the correlations among three variables – individual differences, learning styles, and learning strategies - in language acquisition. Five individual learner differences – the starting point of learning English, the nature of the prior learning, class presentation rates, motivation, and studying hours – are not correlated each other. However, these variables classified as individual differences in this study are correlated with learning styles, but not with learning strategy and proficiency. Only motivation as a learner variable contributes to learner's proficiency and learner's use of memory & cognitive learning strategies. 32 learning styles, though they are closely related with each other and with learning strategies, are not directly correlated with proficiency levels. What is revealed is that, among the three variables which are believed to influence learning process, learning strategy – specifically, memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, and social strategies - significantly correlates with learners' fluency. This can be supported by the result that the average uses of those learning strategies are increased as proficiency levels go up.

These findings suggest that learning strategy plays a mediating role between individual variables and learners' fluency in learning English. Therefore, it is

recommended that language learners should participate in activities, which provide them with opportunities to employ various learning strategies more often to be fluent speakers. In addition, since motivation and studying hours are the only individual variables which are closely correlated with learning strategies and proficiency, and fortunately they are not fixed variables, educational training in classrooms or individual effort to change them can contribute to learners' better fluency.

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