

# Language Learning Strategies in the Greek setting: Research outcomes of a large-scale project

Edited by Zoe Gavrilidou and  
Konstadinos Petrogiannis





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# Factors affecting language learning strategy use by learners of English at Greek secondary schools: proficiency and motivation

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## Abstract

Previous research has shown that proficiency and motivation may importantly affect the use of language learning strategies. However, there are controversial findings across relevant studies, which calls for further research. In the current paper we report on results from a pilot study that involved 703 junior secondary school learners of English in Greece. Based on answers to a questionnaire that was an adaptation of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), we found that frequency of strategy use positively correlates with (a) perceived English language proficiency, (b) importance attributed to perfect use of English and (c) instrumental and integrative motivation. However the correlation of each of the above factors with strategy use was not statistically significant with respect to all types of strategies. This implies that learners may benefit from explicit instruction and repeated practice of certain strategies.

**Key words:** language learning strategies, Greek junior secondary school learners, proficiency, integrative and instrumental motivation, EFL

## 1. Introduction: Literature review

Language learning strategies (LLSs) may be affected by a multitude of factors, among which are proficiency and motivation. We will next briefly and selectively



review research in this area (for extensive reviews see Griffiths, 2013; Psaltou-Joycey, 2010).

### *1.1 Proficiency and strategies*

Victori and Tragant (2003) and Tragant and Victory (2012) have shown that more proficient junior secondary school learners of EFL in Spain generally use strategies more frequently than less proficient ones and these findings have been replicated with secondary school EFL learners in Iran (Salahshour, Sharifi, & Salahshour, 2013) and in Greece (Kambakis-Vougiouklis, Mamoukari, Agathopoulou, & Alexiou, in press; Mitits, 2015; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2014). Importantly, however, proficiency may often affect strategies selectively: learners of higher proficiency seem to employ more frequently cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and affective strategies (Lan & Oxford, 2003), metacognitive, social, cognitive and compensation strategies (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007), cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Cohen, 1998; Lai, 2009; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2014) or only metacognitive strategies (Gavriilidou & Papanis, 2009; Vrettou, 2011). To add to this controversy, Tuncer (2009) found no effect of proficiency on metacognitive and affective strategies employed in EFL by university students in Turkey and some studies with junior school EFL learners revealed that compensation strategies were not affected by level of proficiency (Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006; Mitits, 2015; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2014). In addition, studies that involved university students in Greece have reported a curvilinear relation between strategies and proficiency, namely, that intermediate EFL learners use strategies more frequently than low or advanced ones (Kazamia, 2003) and similar results were obtained in different contexts, as, for example, in Hong-Nam and Leavell's (2007) study with Korean and Korean-Chinese university students.

### *1.2 Importance attributed to speaking English perfectly and strategies*

Although the extent to which one wishes to become a perfect speaker of a language apparently expresses an aspect of motivation, following Wharton (2000) we investigated it as a separate factor. Wharton's (2000) study with university students learning foreign languages in Singapore showed that students who considered it important or very important to become proficient in the target language employed strategies more frequently than those who reported that they did not consider it so important. However, the correlation between the two variables was significant only with respect to affective and compensation strategies. Psaltou-Joycey (2003) investigated the discussed correlation with university students who studied English language and literature in Greece. Her findings showed that the vast majority of these students considered it very important to become highly proficient in English

and the rest of them considered it important, and that the former reportedly employed strategies more often than the latter and the positive correlation found in this respect was stronger with respect to cognitive and compensation strategies. More specifically, those who considered it very important to achieve high proficiency in English had a high mean of use of cognitive strategies and a medium one of compensation strategies.

### 1.3 Motivation and strategies

According to Gardner and Lambert's (1972) seminal distinction, motivation can be of two types: *instrumental motivation*, which reflects "the practical value and advantages of learning a new language" and *integrative motivation*, which reflects "a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 132; see also Gardner, 1985). However, while this definition of integrative motivation may be suitable in research involving bicultural and bilingual communities as in Canada, it may be rather unrealistic in different contexts. Thus, there has been a call for a definition that would reflect a weaker concept of integrativeness, given also that "ownership of English does not necessarily rest with a specific community of speakers" (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009, pp. 2-3).<sup>3</sup>

The diverse results in language learning motivational research have demonstrated the importance of context. Findings from L1 English learners of French in Canada revealed a high correlation between integrative motivation and L2 proficiency, while another study in Philippines showed a high correlation between instrumental motivation and L2 English proficiency (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The latter finding was replicated in other studies that concerned foreign language learning (for example, Muñoz & Tragant, 2001). Thus, although integrative motivation was initially suggested to be a stronger predictor for L2 success than instrumental motivation, ultimately it may depend on whether the focus is either on second or on foreign language learning. On the other hand, a study that involved 314 EFL learners in Greece aged 16-18 showed that although results from the motivation questionnaire yielded a higher score for instrumental rather than for integrative motivation, there were positive and significant correlations between both types of motivation and school grades (Nikolaou, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> For this reason, in our study, items such as "I want to be able to communicate when travelling", are assumed to reflect integrative motivation (see section 2.2, Table 6).

As motivation generally relates with deciding how to reach a goal (Dörnyei, 2001) and given that LLSs have been defined as “conscious actions” (Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2011), finding a correlation between motivation and strategies would be a commonsensical expectation. Indeed, motivation may be the strongest factor positively affecting strategy use, as attested by studies in various contexts: with primary school learners of EFL in Taiwan (Lan & Oxford, 2003) and with university students in North America (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), and Japan (Wharton, 2000). Similar findings have been reported by research that took place in Greece and involved, secondary school learners (Mitits, 2015; Vrettou, 2014) as well as primary school learners (Vrettou, 2009, 2011).

However, the prevalence of the effect of motivation over other factors in strategy use has not been attested in other studies, such as the one by Psaltou-Joycey (2003). Also, in the studies with primary and secondary school learners in Greece mentioned above, statistically significant correlations were found between motivation and all types of strategies except compensation ones. Therefore, the effect of motivation on strategy use may be selective, as revealed in other studies too (Okada, Oxford & Abo, 1996; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

As evidenced by the literature review, the effect of proficiency and motivation on strategies has been the object of much research over the last several years. Still, several issues remain controversial, which merits further research.

## **2. The present study**

The research questions of the present study were the following:

1. What is the relationship between reported frequency of strategy use and perceived level of English proficiency?
2. What is the relationship between reported frequency of strategy use and importance attributed to speaking English perfectly?
3. What is the relationship between reported frequency of strategy use and motivation to learn English?

In view of previous research (see Section 1), we expected to find an overall positive correlation between frequency of strategy use and both level of English proficiency and motivation to learn English. However, we also expected to find selective effects, namely that the use of some strategies would correlate more highly with either of these variables. Also, assuming that the extent to which one wishes to speak the target language perfectly is also linked with motivation, we also hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between strategy use and this variable.

## 2.1 Method

Thorough descriptions of the method can be found in other articles of this volume.<sup>4</sup> Here we will therefore repeat only some of the methodological facts we consider necessary for the reader's convenience.

The participants in this particular study were 703 junior secondary school learners of EFL in Greek state schools from 5 different prefectures in Greece. All learners were administered a recently adapted SILL questionnaire in Greek. The instrument consisted of 57 items relevant with how frequently the participants estimated that they used the various strategy types (9 items for memory, 17 for cognitive, 7 for compensation, 9 for metacognitive, 7 for affective and 8 social strategies). Of those, 33 belonged to *direct* and 24 to *indirect* strategies: memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, are assumed to be directly linked with the process of language learning, while the rest are linked with the management of language learning and are therefore classified as indirect strategies (Oxford, 1990:14-15). The learners were asked to state how often they employed each strategy by ticking one option out of a 5-point Likert scale: (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 learners' level of English language proficiency was estimated according to self-ratings on a scale from 1 (=low) to 5 (=very good), using a 5-point response scale ranging from. However, given the low frequencies of answers to the first two choices (1 & 2), it was decided to limit the levels of this variable to three only, namely, 'low' for the response points 1-3 of the initial scale, 'medium' for response point 4 and 'high' for response point 5. Importance attributed to speaking English perfectly was estimated according to the students' response to the question "How important is it for you to speak English perfectly?" with a 3-point scale was used herewith: "not much", "important", "very important". In addition, motivation was measured via 14 questions of which 9 were considered as reflecting *integrative motivation* and 5 with *instrumental motivation*. The answers were coded as 0 or 1, depending on whether or not (respectively) the learners ticked the items they thought that applied in their case.

## 2.2 Results

Initially, it should be mentioned that the learners' mean use of strategies was found to be 'medium' level (see Oxford's 1990 scale), ranging from 2.59 for memory to 3.29

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<sup>4</sup> For a full account of the questionnaire, as well as details about its construct validity and reliability see in the current volume the article by Gaviilidou and for more information about the participants see the article by Mitits, Psaltou & Sougari; also see Gavriilidou and Mitits (in press).

for affective strategies (for more details see Mitits, Psaltou & Sougari, this volume). The analysis regarding the learners' perceived level of English proficiency showed that the most frequent answer represented the 'medium' level (40%), while the least frequent one represented the 'low' proficiency level (29%). Last, 31% of the learners estimated that they belonged to the 'high' proficiency level (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Perceived level of English language proficiency (N=690\*)

	N	%
Low	199	28,8
Medium	276	40
High	215	31,2

\*Missing answers: 13

Results showed a positive correlation between proficiency and all types of strategies. Nevertheless, as Table 2 demonstrates, this interaction was significant only in the case of metacognitive strategies ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2.** English proficiency and strategy use

	F	Sign.	Partial $\eta^2$
Memory	1,976	0.139	.006
Cognitive	2,809	0.061	.006
Compensation	1,551	0.213	.006
Metacognitive	7,974	<b>0.001</b>	.024
Affective	1,510	0.222	.005
Social	0,357	0.681	.001

With regard to the second research question, results in Table 3 demonstrate that the vast majority of learners considered it "very important" or "important" to speak English perfectly. However, this variable seems to have a significant positive correlation with all but compensation strategies (Table 4 and Figure 1).

**Table 3.** Importance attributed to perfect use of English (N=688\*)

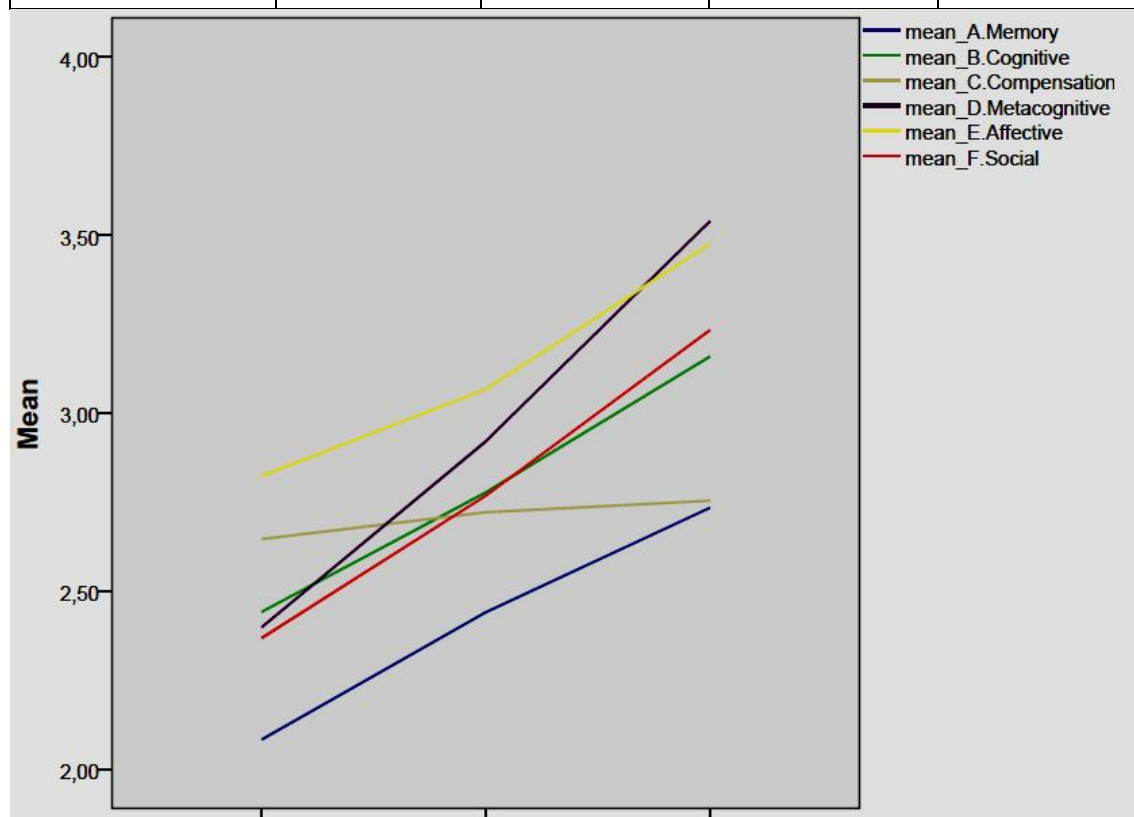
	N	%
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Not so important	50	7
Important	220	32
Very important	418	61

\*Missing answers: 15

**Table 4.** Importance attributed to speaking English perfectly and strategies

	df	F	Sign.	Partial $\eta^2$
Memory	2	46.32	0.000	0.119
Cognitive	2	63.87	0.000	0.157
Compensation	2	0.65	0.522	.002
Metacognitive	2	96.66	0.000	0.220
Affective	2	32.35	0.000	0.086
Social	2	55.13	0.000	0.139



**Figure 1.** Correlation between LLS use and importance attributed to speaking perfect English

Before presenting the results regarding the relation between motivation and strategy use, which concerns our third research question, the descriptive information about the learners' motivational profile is presented in Table 5 where the closer the values to 1.0 the stronger the tendency towards the particular motivational profile. (Recall that the learners had been asked to tick the ones that suited them and that each ticked box counted as 1, while the rest were counted as 0.) The mean obtained for integrative motivation is very similar to the mean for instrumental motivation, and a significant correlation was found between the two types of motivation ( $r=0.354, p<0.001$ ).

**Table 5.** *The learners' overall motivational profile*

Type of Motivation	N	Mean	SD
Integrative	476	0.53	0.22
Instrumental	494	0.58	0.22

In Table 6 we provide the means yielded for each of the fourteen items that concerned motivation. As it can be observed, the highest mean score (92.2) was found for one item in the category of instrumental motivation "I want to learn English because I'll need to get a job", followed by "I want to learn English because I want to be able to communicate when travelling." (82.2), an item considered to express integrative motivation. These results are rather similar with the data obtained from a survey addressed to learners of various European countries, including Greece (see Euridice, 2012). Other items with comparatively high scores, namely more than 65, can be found in both motivation categories (items 1 and 14 had exactly the same means, as well as items 5 and 13).

**Table 6.** *The learners' motivational profile (I want to learn English because...)*

<i>Integrative motivation</i>		<i>Score</i>
1.	I like the language.	68.3
2.	I'm interested in the English culture.	19.3
3.	I have English-speaking friends.	32
4.	I have English-speaking relatives.	29.7
5.	I want to live in another country in the future.	69.1
6.	I want to chat or play games online.	57.8

7.	I want to be able to sing songs in English.	59.5
8.	I want to be able to read books in English.	49.8
9.	I want to be able to communicate when travelling.	82.2
<i>Instrumental motivation</i>		
10.	it's a compulsory school subject.	40.8
11.	I'll need it to get a job.	92.2
12.	to help my parents with their job.	20
13.	to get a certificate.	65.7
14.	to study abroad.	68.3

Positive correlations were found between both types of motivation (instrumental and integrative) and strategy use (Table 7). In other words, the higher the motivation, the more frequent the reported employment of strategies. This table also demonstrates that (a) both types of motivation have a significant effect on all strategy types except compensation ones and (b) all significant correlations between integrative motivation and strategy use are stronger than those between instrumental motivation and strategy use, with the strongest ones being between integrative motivation and metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies.

**Table 7.** Motivation and strategy use

	Instrumental		Integrative	
	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Memory	0.190	0.001	0.277	0.001
Cognitive	0.198	0.001	0.308	0.001
Compensation	0.071	0.061	0.031	0,405
Metacognitive	0.160	0.001	0.349	0.001
Affective	0.152	0.001	0.190	0.001
Social	0.112	0.003	0.305	0.001



Last, a significant correlation was found between perceived language proficiency and both integrative and instrumental motivation ( $r_s(690) = .130, p < .001$  and  $r_s(690) = .247, p < .000$ , respectively)

A final point that should be mentioned herewith is that that despite the significant effects, the effect size concerning the impact of English proficiency on metacognitive strategies was small (partial  $\eta^2 = .024$ , see Table 2) and so were all of the effect sizes concerning the association between the importance attributed to perfect use of English and strategy use, with a partial  $\eta^2$  ranging from 0.086 to 0.220 (see Table 4). Also, as Table 6 reveals, in the attested significant effects of instrumental motivation on strategy use, all correlations were weak with  $r$  ranging from 0.112 to 0.198, and so were the correlations between integrative motivation and both affective ( $r = 0.277$ ) and memory strategies ( $r = 0.190$ ). On the other hand, the correlations between integrative motivation and cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies were medium (0.308, 0.349 and 0.305, respectively). Given that effect size is considered important concerning how large is the association between the target variables of the study (for example, Larson-Hall, 2010:214), the current results should be treated with caution.

### 3. Discussion

Our first research question aimed to examine the relationship between perceived level of English proficiency and reported frequency of strategy use. Results showed a positive correlation between the two variables but this correlation was statistically significant only regarding metacognitive strategies. This finding is in keeping with evidence from relevant research in Greece (Gavriilidou & Papanis, 2009; Platsidou & Sipitanou, 2014; Vrettou, 2011). Explanations offered for such a finding are based on data demonstrating that more advanced learners are better than less advanced ones at planning and monitoring their learning, at using input features and at self-evaluation, all of which relate with metacognition (see Gavriilidou & Papanis, 2009:227-228 and references therein). In fact, our data support the above explanation. Four out of the ten most favored strategies were metacognitive ones and for all four of these strategies the number of learners of medium and high proficiency that reported using them 'always' was in all cases larger than that of the low proficiency learners. We refer to the following strategies: (1) *I pay attention when someone is speaking English*, (2) *I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better*, (3) *I try to find out how to be a better learner of English*, and (4) *I have clear goals for improving my English skills* (see also Mitits et al. in the present volume).

However, other studies, such as Magogwe and Oliver's (2007) with secondary school learners of EFL in Botswana have shown that more proficient learners preferred not only metacognitive but also social, cognitive and compensation strategies more so than their low proficiency peers. Leaving aside other methodological differences across studies, the discrepancy between studies such as the latter mentioned one and those from Greece with children and teenagers may be attributed to the cultural and educational context. Psaltou, Sougari, Agathopoulou, and Alexiou (2014) found that some of the most favored strategies reportedly employed by young teenagers in Greece corresponded with strategies that were explicitly mentioned in their coursebooks. Now since proficiency usually depends on the hours of language lessons one has received<sup>5</sup>, it is possible that the more the learners are exposed to English classes, the more their strategies are influenced by the strategies promoted in their books and, presumably, by their teachers. Therefore, the orientation of EFL teaching may at least partly explain differences in findings regarding strategy use between, on the one hand, studies concerning children and teenagers in Greece and, on the other hand, studies elsewhere. Of course this is a speculation that needs to be tested empirically.

Our second research question inquired into how importance attributed to speaking English perfectly correlates with frequency of strategy use. We found that this correlation was positive and significant with respect to all types of strategies except those reflecting compensation. As already shown in the results section, learners who attributed low, medium and high importance to perfect use of English all reported use of compensation strategies almost to the same degree. This finding contrasts with evidence from previous studies where importance attributed to acquiring high proficiency in English was significantly correlated with compensation strategies (Psaltou-Joycey, 2003; Wharton, 2000). It should be mentioned, however, that 'high proficiency' involves all four main skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing), while the wish to speak English perfectly obviously pertains to oral skills only. Thus, a comparison between our study and the previous ones in this area cannot be straightforward. On the other hand, we can assume that to realize how important compensation strategies are in becoming proficient in oral English relates with experience of communication in English. The university students in Wharton's study and perhaps even more the students of English language and literature in Psaltou-Joycey's study had had more chances to

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<sup>5</sup> In Greece, besides learning English at school, many children and adolescents also attend private language institutes and therefore there are differences regarding the amount of exposure to EFL classes and, consequently, English language proficiency among learners in the same grade at school (eö, Mattheoudakis, & Zigraka, 2010).

communicate in English, hence they appreciated more the role of compensation strategies in the development of high English proficiency.

Another possible explanation is that our results are due to a methodological artifact. Specifically, of the 6 questionnaire items concerning compensation strategies one (“When I read in English I do not look up every unknown word”) may be considered irrelevant with speaking. In addition, another item (“When I cannot remember an English word I use another synonymous word or phrase”) may be construed as overlapping either with both speaking and writing activities or only with the latter. However, all of the above are speculations and clearly more research is needed to understand the correlation between the two variables discussed here.

In regard with our third research question, results showed that both types of motivation (integrative and instrumental) had a significant positive correlation with the reported frequency of all strategy types, except compensation ones, where only a near-significant correlation was attested. The resemblance of these results with those relevant with our second research question should not be surprising, given that, as already mentioned, the second research question investigated in fact an aspect of motivation on strategy use. The current evidence is in disagreement with findings attested in studies carried out in different contexts but replicate those previously attested in studies involving child and adolescent EFL learners in Greece (see Introduction).

For a potential explanation concerning the lack of correlation between motivation and compensation strategies among Greek EFL adolescents, we will venture the following hypothesis. While since 1983 the Greek national curricula concerning EFL<sup>6</sup> have supported the communicative approach to language teaching (Chryshochoos & Chourdaki, 2005), according to the present author’s experience as an EFL teacher but also as a mentor of teacher trainees in Greek state schools, EFL in Greece seems to focus more on grammatical accuracy and language usage, instead of language use. Moreover, as found by Dendrinou, Zouganeli, and Karavas (2013:74-75), while Greek EFL teachers consider speaking and listening important skills, they give priority to reading comprehension and, in addition, during English classes the interaction between teachers and learners often occurs in Greek, not in English. Given that compensation strategies are the most relevant ones with communication skills (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003:608), because of the above reasons, the learners may not have often the chance to employ compensation strategies very often or may not feel that these strategies are very useful (Cummins, 2000). Our point is that more and meaningful communication in the target language in class might foster a stronger

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<sup>6</sup> For the most recent curriculum, see <http://www.pi-schools.gr/programs/depps/>

relation between motivation to learn English and the use of compensation strategies<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our results regarding the effect of proficiency and motivation on strategy use to a large extent comply with previous relevant studies in Greece but differ from other international studies. Such similarities or differences across studies may be due to many factors, like context, types of questionnaires, and how the learners' motivation and level of proficiency were estimated.

An important issue raised by previous researchers is the causal relation between the investigated factors and strategy use. For example, do certain learners become more proficient because they use strategies more often than others, or does attainment of higher language proficiency lead to more frequent use of strategies? (Griffiths, 2003). The same question may apply to the relation between motivation and strategies: It is generally assumed that students who are more motivated than others may exhibit more frequent use of strategies. It is also possible, however, that the more learners are encouraged to use strategies, the more motivated they may become in language learning, provided of course that they find these strategies useful (Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993). Still, these issues remain largely unresolved and cannot be addressed in the present study.

Given the beneficial effect of strategy instruction (e.g. Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2011), the current results point to the need for pedagogical interventions to foster strategy use at all levels of language proficiency, since even the two strategy types (metacognitive and cognitive) employed significantly more by high-proficient rather than low-proficient learners, were ranged in a medium level. Moreover, it seems that explicit strategy instruction may enhance the learners' motivation in relation to strategy use (Nunan, 1998:172).

According to some researchers, communication strategies, which are relevant with compensation strategies may also benefit from instruction (e.g. Dörnyei, 1995). In view of our results, teachers may try to motivate learners into employing compensation strategies more often. For example, after the teacher discusses the importance of being able to compensate for words or phrases we cannot express

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<sup>7</sup> As previously mentioned, a large number of EFL learners in Greece also attend private language institutes. Although we are not aware of studies regarding EFL teaching approaches in these institutes, given that the courses offered there are mostly, if not exclusively, exam-oriented, we may assume that these courses are not more communicatively oriented than the EFL course offered at the Greek state schools.

through gestures, s/he may introduce activities that include gesture games and charades<sup>8,9</sup>. Last, a lengthy review of materials as well as suggestions relevant with teaching learners how to use strategies to compensate for gaps between what they need to communicate and their current knowledge in the target language, can be found in Faucette (2001).

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<sup>8</sup> For steps in strategy instruction, see Cohen and Weaver (2006).

<sup>9</sup> A good online source with lists of 'easy', 'medium' etc. words to act out, can be found at <https://www.thegamegal.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Charades-Easy.pdf>

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