Relative cultural contributions of religion and ethnicity to the language learning strategy choices of ESL students in Sri Lankan and Japanese high schools

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Abstract

Ethnicity and religion have been shown to be significantly associated with the use of metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies by Sri Lankan high school students learning English as a second language (Liyanage, 2004) In order to further examine the role of ethnicity and religion in determining the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) of ESL students, survey responses from a sample of Japanese high school students visiting an Australian school was added to those from the Sri Lankan sample. The composite sample comprised four ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Tamil, Sri Lankan Muslim, and Japanese. Sinhalese and Japanese participants were Buddhists, and Tamil and Muslim participants were Hindus and Islamists respectively. The choices of learning strategies across these four groups appeared to be associated with religious rather than ethnic identity. The notion that language learning strategies are cultural in nature needs to be carefully reviewed to allow for specific preferences associated with learners' ethnoreligious affiliations. Further study is needed to investigate the advantages of capitalising on instruction based on natural preferences compared to the culturally broadening educational advantages of exposing children to non-preferred strategies.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Culture, Religion, Ethnicity

Introduction

Although modern interest in understanding human thought processes and the way in which human beings learn through mental processes can be traced to the late 19th century (Wenden, 1987), the topic of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) has drawn the attention of researchers since the 1960s. Since then, researchers have tried to (a) identify strategies employed by good language learners, (b) define and list strategies used to learn languages,

and (c) to identify factors that affect learners' LLS choices (Wenden & Rubin, 1987). As demand for formal instruction in second languages by students from countries, cultures, and ethnic communities seeking global access to educational and economic opportunities has increased, scholarly investigation has become increasingly relevant and purposeful.

Out of the many factors affecting learners' LLS choices that has been identified in the literature, cultural backgrounds of learners have been shown to have an effect on the use of LLSs. Oxford (Oxford, 1996b; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989) asserted that culture and national origin strongly influenced the kinds of strategies used by language learners. Studies from various parts of the world have shown learner strategy choices to be related to cultural background (Levine, Reves, & Leaver, 1996; Oxford, 1996b; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Rubin, 1975). Most of these studies have adopted quite loose groupings of learner identity associated with the students' country of origin and reported general findings linked to these existing descriptions.

For example, different studies have examined strategies used by Japanese students in learning English. For example, Politzer and McGroarty (1985) studied Asian ($n = 18$, mainly Japanese) and Hispanic ($n = 19$, mainly Latin American Spanish speakers) students in the United States. They found that the two groups of students belonging to two nationalities used different learning behaviours. For instance, the Asian participants were found to be using learning behaviours that facilitate greater gains in linguistics and communicative competence, while the Hispanics showed learning behaviours that facilitate overall auditory proficiency and auditory comprehension. They explained their differences in terms of students' different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, Oxford (1996a) reported that Japanese students used strategies aimed at precision and accuracy, whereas Hispanic students relied on learning strategies such as predicting, inferring, and working in groups. That is, Japanese students preferred to work alone rather than together in groups, and they based their judgements on reason rather than on personal interactions through group work (Oxford, 1996a).

Levine et al. (1996) investigated the extent to which language learning strategies are related to the learners' educational background. These researchers compared recent immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union and long-term Israeli residents. They observed a clear difference in the application of strategies. Immigrant students showed a preference for traditional strategies such as memorising grammar rules, rote learning, using lists of words in translation, doing grammar exercises from a text book, and translating verbatim into the native language. Long-term Israeli residents employed strategies tending towards more communicative approaches. The differences of strategy application between the two groups were attributed to contradictory learning habit infusions caused, in turn, by different instructional systems.

An implicit assumption has arisen in such studies suggesting cultural differences in how people choose language learning strategies. That is, national or geographical classifications have been regarded as criteria for differentiating cultures. Important elements contributing to this broad notion of culture have remained ambiguous. Specifically, these studies have tended to investigate strategy preferences of students in a particular country rather than considering these students' ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Hence, the summary profiling of language learning strategy preferences reported in different countries has not explored strategy preferences of specific cultural groups, marked by their ethnolinguistic or ethnoreligious variables within a country.

Moreover, the instrumentation used to measure strategies has been a further challenge to comparability of language learning strategies between countries. The definition and classification of LLS have been problematic from earlier days of LLS research (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The existence of distinct LLS taxonomies with no common consensus has continued to cause such difficulties (Oxford, 1994). Out of the range of LLS taxonomies designed and used with different cultural groups, the taxonomies of Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and his colleagues (1985) have occupied a prominent place in LLS research in that

they acknowledge and classify strategies according to different practical or theoretical processes involved in second language learning. The 62 strategies in Oxford's LLS descriptive taxonomy provided a rich practical platform for researchers and practitioners assessing strategies used in second language learning to generate items for a questionnaire.

Chamot and colleagues (Chamot, Kupper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1987; Chamot & O'Malley, 1993; O'Malley & Chamot, 1993) criticised atheoretical description of the learning and memory processes of learners. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) pointed out that Oxford's classification of strategies attempted to include every strategy that has been cited in the learning strategy literature to that point in time and that it had lead to the generation of several new taxonomies. Hence, they argued that strategies most important to learning could not be prioritised in the Oxford taxonomy and that the boundaries of some of its subcategories are not clear and tend to overlap. O'Malley et al., (1985) classified strategies in terms of how and at what level learners process new information—metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective—based on a cognitive theory (Anderson, 1996, 2000, 1981). Chamot et al. (1987) designed a 48-item LLSI to elicit learner strategies used by students of Spanish and Russian as foreign languages. They gathered information about 16 different strategies with this LLSI but discovered 10 more strategies for which no questions had been framed, at the end of the study. Liyanage (2004) adapted the LLSI designed by Chamot et al. (1987) to embrace these 10 strategies and to include 16 questions on these strategies. The adapted 63-item LLSI comprised a total of 26 strategies clustered into metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective headings (20 items measuring metacognitive strategies, 34 items cognitive strategies, and 9 items social affective strategies). Participants used a 4-point Likert response scale to rate how often they utilized ('never' to 'very frequently') the behaviours described in each of 63 items.

Sri Lankan example

Liyanage (2004) reported that the combination of ethnicity and religion in Sri Lankan students significantly influences the selection of language learning strategy types (metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective). The three distinct subcultures in Sri Lanka were Sinhalese, Tamil, and Sri Lankan Muslims. The Sinhalese used Sinhala as their first language, and the Tamils and Muslims used Tamil as their mother tongue. In these samples, participant ethnic identity coincided with religious identity: That is, the Sinhalese were Buddhists, the Tamils were Hindus, and the Muslims were Islamists.

Liyanage used the adapted LLSI to collect Sri Lankan data on strategy preference from school-age participants studying English as a second language. He adapted the original inventory to the cultural context but retained its structure. He made changes at lexical, phrasal, and sentential levels in order to localise the inventory for application in the Sri Lankan context. The inventory was translated into two languages of Sinhala and Tamil in line with the two respective mother tongues used in the country. Scale scores for the three metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective strategy types were obtained by summing across items and then dividing by the number of items. As might be expected, reliabilities for both versions of these three scales tended to be better for the two scales with larger numbers of items. (For a detailed discussion on reliability, see Liyanage, 2004.)

Liyanage (2004) reported a pattern of differences for Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim students. Amidst a host of other variables, a demographic variable involving a mix of ethnicity and religion was centrally and significantly related to language learning strategies. However, the close identification between ethnicity and religion in the Sri Lankan study made it difficult to discern whether language learning strategies were selected on the basis of ethnicity or religion. These two demographic markers of Sri Lankan culture were confounded with each other.

Religion and ethnicity

Cultures have been described as unitary entities (Hall & Hall, 1990) within which cognitive and behavioural elements exhibit strong interdependent relationships. Little work has been done to investigate how learners have organised their behaviour and thought to engage in learning to meet culturally valued goals. Liyanage (2004) showed that the variables of religion and ethnicity had strong relevance to the variety of cognitive and social-behavioural elements mediating how school learners organised their thinking and acting during second language learning. Investigation of cultural aspects of language learning in that study, however, could not unpack the relative influence of these overlapping variables on strategy selection.

Membership of a religious grouping could be expected to interact with the learning strategies adopted by ESL learners. Religion has served as an important behavioural element in the culture of a given community (De Waal Malefijt, 1968; Eliot, 1962; Geertz, 1968; Howard, 1996; Lawson & McCauley, 1990; Vernon, 1962). Turner (1991) argued that religion binds people into a sacred community and, therefore, has the power to make social groups into religious groups. Religion has played a part in all known societies (Bowker, 2002). Moreover, religion has functioned as a force that interacts with cultural institutions such as family, law, marriage, politics, and education (De Waal Malefijt, 1968) and, thus, has shaped the operation of these institutions (Vernon, 1962). It has been claimed more generally that the expression of religion in value systems, morals, and ethics has shaped how people perceive the outer world and interact with one another (Eliot, 1962; Howard, 1996). The strength of the fusion of religion and culture has stimulated both literary writers (e.g., Eliot, 1962) and social scientists (e.g., Vernon, 1962) to emphasize the indivisible nature of these two variables. 'We do not talk of religion and culture…but rather emphasize that religion is culture' (Vernon, 1962: 39). 'The culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture' (Eliot, 1962: 15).

Ethnicity has been recognised as another important element in the culture of a given community (Bedell & Oxford, 1996). A common culture has been a force binding people together into particular ethnic groups. Ethnic groups have typically used languages associated with ethnic identity (Fishman, 1999; Howard, 1996) and, where possible, have signalled their ethnicity by the language they use. Religious differences have entered into the formation of ethnic identity, marked signature features that define one ethnic identity relative to the other, and helped to shape the boundaries between ethnic identities (Howard, 1996).

However, ethnic variation has not always applied to all people in a given community. For example, ethnicity and religion has worked together for most Sri Lankans. Although the Sinhalese ethnic community in Sri Lanka has remained predominantly Buddhist, that community has included a few Christians and Hindus. In the same way, some members of the predominantly Hindu Tamil community in Sri Lanka have adopted other religious affiliations as Christians and Hindus. However, the overlapping of religion and ethnicity as cultural variables has made it difficult to distinguish which of those two variables makes the stronger contribution to culture.

Aim

Therefore, the present study sought to identify whether ethnicity or religion are more important in determining the language learning strategies of ESL students. For the purposes of this study, a sample of Japanese high school students visiting an Australian school was used in conjunction with the Sri Lankan sample. The rationale for including the Japanese students was that, whereas, for the Tamil and Muslim participants, ethnicity and religion are confounded, the Japanese students differ from the Sinhalese in terms of ethnic identity but are similar in terms of religious identity. Should Japanese and Sinhalese participants select similar strategies, this shared preference would indicate the relative importance of religious identity. On the other hand, marked differences between the Japanese and ethnically Sri

Lankan participants would indicate the relative importance of ethnicity.

Methodology

The sample for the present study comprised four ethnic groups, with LLSI responses from 1,027 participants included in the analysis. Of these participants, 14% ($N = 141$) were Japanese students, 30% ($N = 303$) were Sinhalese students, 28% ($N = 283$) were Tamil students, and the remaining 29% ($N = 300$) were Muslims. The percentage of Japanese female students (57%) was more or less equivalent to that in other groups (Muslims = 53%, Sinhalese = 50%, Tamil = 49%). Members of these four subsets were similar in terms of age range (16-18 years) and in terms of the length of time that they had studied English (approximately 10 years).

To facilitate the collection of data from the Japanese sample, the adapted LLSI used with the Sri Lankan study (2004) was translated into Japanese (English to Japanese) by a competent translator. Data collection took place in two locations. A convenience sample of Japanese high school students visiting a state high school in Queensland, Australia was used to collect the additional data. Data from the Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim groups were collected in government-run high schools in Sri Lanka (Liyanage, 2004).

Results

The analysis involved a combination of descriptive and inferential data that distinguish the two cultural variables of religion and ethnicity. First, cross-tabulations indicated the binary composition of the sample on these variables, and means for the three LLS categories were then generated from binary combinations of religion (Buddhist - not Buddhist) and ethnicity (Japanese - not Japanese) made possible by the addition of the Japanese sample. Then, linear regressions of the relative contributions of these cultural variables on the use of each language learning strategy were made.

Descriptive statistics

This merged sample included students from two countries and three religious groups. One of these religious groups, the Buddhists, included students from Japan and also from Sri Lanka (the Sinhalese). This combination of samples provided the opportunity to clarify the relative influence of religion and ethnicity on language learning strategies.

Table 1 presented the cross-tabulations. The addition of the Japanese sample made it possible to compare the effect of (a) religion, in terms of whether or not the students were Buddhists to those of (b) ethnicity, in terms of the relatively broad ethnic distinction between Japanese and Sri Lankan students. This cross-tabulation was then used to clarify the important issue of the extent to which language divisions (i.e., whether students spoke Japanese, Sinhalese, or Tamil) overlap with the analysis in terms of ethnic identity.

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of religious and ethnic identity

| | | Ethnicity | | | | Total |
		Japanese	Sinhalese	Tamil	Muslim	
Religion	Buddhist	141	303	0	0	444
	Hindu	0	0	283	0	283
	Muslim	0	0	0	300	300
Total		141	303	283	300	1027

Figure 1 (left-hand figure) indicated that non-Buddhist students obtained higher scores on the three language learning strategy types than the Buddhist students. That is, the combined scores of the Tamil and Muslim students in Sri Lanka were higher on all three learning strategy types. Figure 1 (right-hand figure) also indicated that Sri Lankan students obtained higher scores on the three language learning strategy types than did Japanese students. These data indicate that both ethnicity and religion are contributing to selection of language learning strategies.
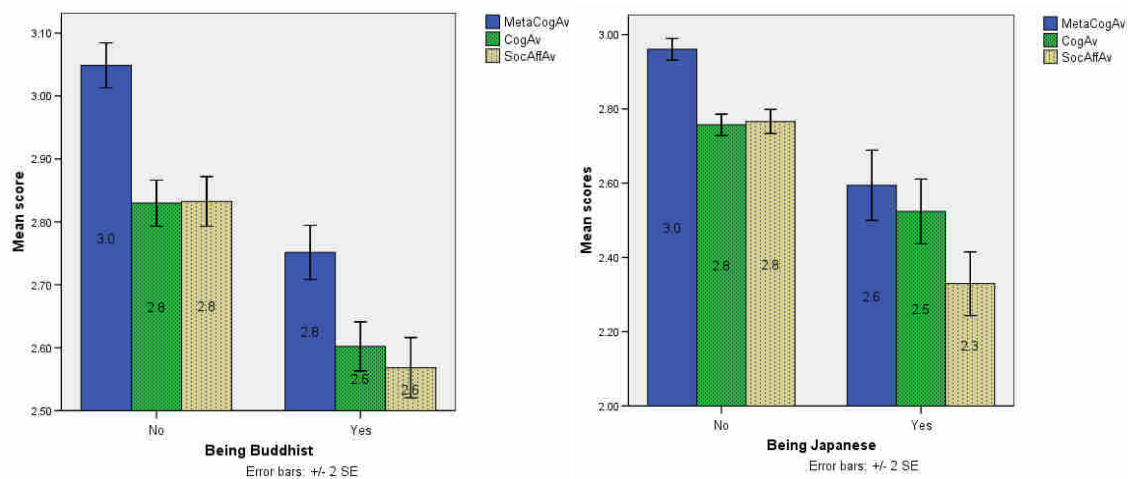
Figure 1. The association between religious group (left-hand) and ethnicity (right-hand) and scores on the three learning strategy types

Inferential statistics

The relative contribution of religious identity and ethnic identity were entered as dummy variable IVs or independent variables) on three separate linear regression procedures for metacognition, cognition, and social-affective scores (as DVs, or dependent variables). In each of the three analyses, both variables were significantly associated with the outcome variable. However, religious identity (whether or not students were Buddhist) contributed far more strongly than did ethnic identity (whether or not students were Japanese). For two of the three outcome scores (Metacognition, Cognition), the contribution of religion, as estimated by the size of the beta weight, was more than twice the size of the contribution of religion.

Table 2. Beta values for religion and ethnicity in relation to the three strategy type outcome scores

Outcome score/Predictor	Metacognitive β	Cognitive β	Social Affective β
Not being Buddhist	0.296	0.257	0.215
Not being Japanese	0.126	0.058	0.207

Discussion

What emerges with the addition of the Japanese sample is the relative importance of religion regardless of ethnic origin. To be more specific, Japanese and Sinhalese Buddhist students obtained significantly lower outcome scores than did the non-Buddhist Tamil or Muslim students. One interpretation is that the pattern of group differences found in the Sri Lankan study extends to Japanese students in a conceptually sensible manner. That is, the pattern of group and gender based differences for metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective average scores are such that the two groups with common religious values (i.e., Japanese students and Sinhalese students) differ in similar ways from Tamils and Muslims. This common pattern is consistent with religious identity rather than ethnic identity being most important in determining the selection of learning strategies. It follows that religious rather than the ethnic aspects of culture play the more active role in shaping the cognitive and behavioural organisation of language learning strategies.

What previous studies of LLS have failed to recognise is the fact that each country has people who have different religious and racial affiliations and different first languages, all of which create different subcultures. Sometimes, fallacies of definition have filtered through even the few studies that have attempted to go beyond the national and geographical descriptions. For example, Grainger (1997) investigated the influence of ethnicity on the strategies used to learn the Japanese language by students from Australia, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Germany, the United States, and Malaysia. His use of mother tongue to determine ethnicity or cultural affiliation was questionable, especially in countries where several ethnic groups share the same first language. For example, in the case of Sri Lanka, Tamils and Muslims sharing the same first language belonged to two distinct ethnic groups.

It has also been argued that previous research has paid little attention to the learners' religious backgrounds when describing the language learning strategies of different cultures. Many relationships have been found between learners' cultural backgrounds and language

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learning strategies in a number of studies. These studies, however, have considered learners' geographical location (country of origin) as the single most important criterion for delineating cultural contexts but have excluded any possible impact of religion on individuals' culture.

It appears, therefore, that students' language learning strategy preferences need to be identified not only at a macro level where cultures are demarcated by their geographic boundaries but also at a micro level where aspects such as religion and ethnicity contribute to the formation of those cultures. This layering is seen as important because the strategies identified on macro levels may not necessarily be applicable to learners on micro levels. With respect to second language learning strategy instruction, when the strategies that are being taught to the students differ from students' strategy preferences based on their ethnoreligious affiliations, the results of that instruction may be counterproductive (Liyanage, 2003; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985).

Therefore, it is seen as appropriate that pedagogical approaches should grow within the socio-cultural contexts of the learners. Pedagogy needs to be sensitive to material and rhetoric indigenous to the particular ethnoreligious affiliations to which the students belong. The aim of such approaches would be to maximise and benefit the process of target language learning through strategies naturally preferred and sought by the students. There may be instructional value in showing students strategies that are outside their natural preferences, insofar as exposure to less preferred strategies can broaden the students' macro awareness of different ways of learning languages. However, teaching models based on strategies that are not naturally favoured by students cannot be expected to be as instructionally effective or efficient as those that fit with their ethnoreligious affiliations.

Conclusion

Based on the current findings with the Sinhalese and Japanese students, it seems evident that the religious identity of the learners is more important in determining the selection of learning strategies than ethnic identity. Replication studies are needed in various other contexts (e.g., with ethnically different Muslim and ethnically different Hindu students). Nevertheless, the conclusion reached in the present study has potentially serious implications for various contexts. In particular, it should signal the need for care to be exercised in ESL teacher training programs to avoid the exclusive focus on Western methodologies that may be inappropriate in contexts where long-standing religious influences have predisposed learners to prefer particular culturally determined learning strategies.

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