# Older learners of German and their use of language learning strategies

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**Abstract**

In the past, studies in first and second language acquisition focused mainly on children and young adult learners. Research on older adult language learners was neglected and findings were unspecific and contradictory (Singleton & Zolt, 1995). Recently, however, a growing interest of older learners in languages has generated deliberations towards an adult language learning methodology (foreign language geragogy), with first insights into aspects of this learner group such as motivation, attitude, characteristics and expectations (Berndt, 2001a, 2003). This article reports on the initial findings of a study on the use of language learning strategies by older adult language learners (50+). The study focused on learners of German as a foreign language, investigating the following research question: *What strategies do older learners of German use?* Think-aloud protocols were employed with 15 older learners of German of various levels of language proficiency from a local University of the Third Age (U3A). This method of data elicitation was chosen to gain a better understanding of ongoing processes involved while learning strategies were applied on a variety of tasks (reading, speaking, listening, writing). The study reached the following conclusions. The research instruments applied proved resourceful for data elicitation in the context of language learning strategies involving older learners. Mainly metacognitive and cognitive strategies were applied and adopted according to the individual learner's needs. Strategy use was closely linked to the language skill, but less closely to the level of language proficiency.

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# 1. Introduction

Recently, researchers have started to investigate aspects of language learning relating to older learners (termed *foreign language geragogy*), in particular motivation, language learning biographies, specific learning difficulties and socio-economic characteristics (Arthur & Hurd, 2001; Berndt, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). However, research on older language learners (whom I define as aged over 50) has still not given sufficient attention to learning strategies, although such strategies can be valuable instruments for supporting learners' progress and increasing learners' autonomy. Examining the use of these learning strategies more closely may provide a clearer idea of the ways in which older learners approach language learning and, consequently, provide more insight into individual learner differences. Thus the main question to be investigated is: *Which language learning strategies do older students use*?

Increased insight into strategy use by older learners may be used in future to maximize the language learning potential of such students. The learner is understood to be a "problem solver", a cognitive agent trying to work out ways of learning and maintaining another language (Ellis, 2001: 76). In the wider context, such knowledge could have implications for language teaching, teaching material and learning opportunities. Consequently, older language learners can be better understood and provided for.

# 2. Background

## 2.1 Why older learners?

One might wonder what could be so special about learners over 50. Do they not simply count as adult learners? Older people in the UK can now expect to live with overall improvements in health, fitness and productivity. Their children tend to be independent without any need for further care. McNeir (2001: 22) remarks that "most people will now spend more of their lives outside the workforce than in it: a dramatic reversal of the picture a generation earlier". Social gerontologists, who theorize about older people, identify this later phase in life as different from earlier phases (based on different activities and social roles which dominate during different phases in the life course), despite certain social characteristics which older and younger people share (e.g. trends such as the importance of youthfulness or interest in travel and leisure activities). It is the concurrence of social factors such as longevity with a decrease in overall birth rates, which has led to a "greying society" and to the development of the theory of the Third Age (Laslett, 1996), which is employed in this study. This theory considers various aspects of ageing, among which learning is identified as an important factor for "successful ageing" in later life, stressing the importance of individual factors. It acknowledges that the increase of individual time after retirement usually coincides with fewer childcare responsibilities, as well as more wealth and better health, all contributing to the crystallisation of the Third Age. The period of the

Third Age now covers about a third of the lifespan. It is a time for personal fulfilment, for undertaking things which could not necessarily be enjoyed earlier as intensively as desired, such as travelling, taking up hobbies or following dreams such as learning another language. These chosen activities become "a more important part of an individual's identity and self-concept" (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004: 231). Learning is one of the many options now at our disposal.

## 2.2 Age in Second Language Acquisition

Within individual learner differences, age has been identified as a relevant factor alongside others, such as gender, and has attracted research interest (e.g. Harley, 1986; Singleton, 1989; Moyer, 2004). However, research into language learning has been unspecific. At one end, it focuses on very young language learners (aged up to about 16). At the other end are the adult language learners (16+). The latter are mainly treated as a single group of learners without any differentiation in terms of age. This bipolarity emerged from Lenneberg's concept of a critical period hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967). His hypothesis assumes that the ability to learn languages after puberty is restricted due to neurological processes which lead to brain maturation, limiting the faculty of language learning. Studies focusing on specific aspects of language learning in older age - for example, pronunciation, vocabulary or syntax - show a much more complex, at times contradictory, picture where older learners performed either equally as well as younger ones (e.g. for vocabulary) or progressed faster at the beginning (Singleton & Zsolt, 1995) than Lenneberg's critical period hypothesis would have predicted. However, the language skills investigated are fragmented, focusing on one aspect of language use/learning only, such as pronunciation, vocabulary or reading. Further, the age groups investigated did in the main not fall within the third age span (50+), or where they did, the studies were based on rather small numbers. In order to test Lenneberg's hypothesis (e.g. studies reported in Singleton & Zsolt 1995), participants were mainly around the age of puberty to either confirm or refute his assumptions, paying less attention to the growing number of older language learners above 50.

## 2.3 Language Learning Strategies

In the realm of learner autonomy and discussion around characteristics of the good language learner, a considerable body of literature on language learning strategies has developed over the past 30 years (e.g. Chamot & Küpper, 1989; Cohen, 1998; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Oxford, 2003; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). Despite variations in the identification of their nature and classification over time, and problems in their investigation (e.g. Macaro, 1997) and teaching (e.g. Hassan *et al.*, 2005), learning strategies are recognized as crucial techniques for independent learning processes to improve learning and use of a foreign language.

For the present study, I draw on Graham (1997) who based her work on O'Malley & Chamot (1990) and developed it further. Similar to O'Malley & Chamot (1990), who define learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (1990: 1),

Graham (1997) sees them as inner processes which are difficult to observe, in contrast to study skills, which Graham identifies as being more visible, overt techniques. However, this distinction between overt and covert is not as clear-cut as Graham suggests, as she also includes observable strategies such as naturalistic practice opportunities (talking to native speakers of the target language) under learning strategies. In my understanding of Graham (1997) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) the terms *strategy* and *technique* can be used interchangeably, both referring to consciously engaging in language learning, language processing and language application in the target language.

Graham (1997) classifies learning strategies into metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective and communicative. Metacognitive strategies are those which help to control, plan and evaluate language learning and language or strategy use. Cognitive strategies enable learners to work with the target language by taking certain actions, such as memorizing, inferencing and guessing from other languages. Social/affective strategies can help to control the more emotional side through strategies such as self-encouragement or seeking clarification by native speakers. The communicative category summarizes all those techniques applied to overcome any communicational breakdown by using paraphrases or code switching. One might point out that this category entails strategies more for language use than for language learning in the narrowest sense.

## 3. Methodology

Trying to find out how older learners apply learning strategies requires capturing strategies in use and getting learners to reflect on them. I decided in favour of a more interpretivist paradigm, understanding that "all phenomena can be studied and interpreted in different ways" as "realities are not abstract objects" (Burgess *et al.*, 2006: 55). This, I hoped, would then lead to a more descriptive understanding of the phenomena, allowing for and acknowledging:

- Subjectivity in participants' description of the phenomena under scrutiny.
- Understanding of the influence of the researcher on the research, acknowledging that opinions, attitudes and values play a role in the research process.

Although the overall approach is more qualitatively orientated, some quantitative aspects are included as well where instances of strategy use are counted and related to protocol length, level of language proficiency of students or the overall number of strategies used. However, generalisability and reliability of findings were expected to be limited, owing to the study taking place in a particular setting, with a non-representative sample, at a particular point in time and aiming to explore new ground.

## 3.1 Participants

A total of 15 students at three different levels of language proficiency participated, chosen mainly following the criteria of local accessibility; the majority came from a pool of learners of all language courses at a local University of the Third Age, and the remaining three from two adult education colleges in a university town in South England.

Table 1. Outline of participants

| Language class | Level of language proficiency | University of the Third Age | College 1 and 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| German | intermediate | 10 | |
| German AS-level | advanced | | 3 |
| German Conversation | near-native | 2 | |

## 3.2 Think-aloud protocols (TAPs)

TAPs were chosen as the research instrument to provide the best insight into processes of strategy use while working on certain language tasks. Observation and diaries were excluded from the present study. Observation has proved ineffective (Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Chamot, 2001) as learning strategies are rather complex inner processes. Diaries require a high level of commitment and training on the part of the participants and were therefore unfeasible. Questionnaires and interviews are successfully used in strategy research (e.g. Graham, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) and were also applied to further the present study. However, this article will only report on the TAPs. In language learning research, TAPs have been used mainly to explore reading and writing processes, or as a pedagogical tool for raising awareness of language learners (e.g. Kucan & Beck, 1997; Oxford, 1996), but also in a number of studies on language learning strategies (e.g. Graham, 1997; Rubin, 1981).

For the present study TAPs were audio-recorded only, not video-recorded, as the focus was on verbal protocols rather than body language. In addition, video-recording might have changed the behaviour of participants and produced negative feelings towards the procedure and the study. In order to minimize the effects of the presence of the researcher, students were asked to carry out the tasks at home and were provided with audio tapes on which to record their TAPs. A previous pilot study with 5 participants had concluded that the presence of the researcher during the recordings influenced the production of the TAPs to a great extent. Participants tried 'to please' the researcher by aiming to provide the 'correct answers', constantly double-checking regarding the appropriateness of their protocols produced and waiting for some form of confirmation. The involvement of an unfamiliar native speaker as a partner for the speaking and listening was also ruled out due to the substantial likelihood of an increase of anxiety, which could have impacted negatively on the participants and resulted in an unnecessary stressful situation.

Reading, writing, speaking and listening were selected as the main skills for language use. The study explored new ground by also including speaking and listening for the use of TAPs. The emphasis was on concurrent (reading, writing) and retrospective (speaking, listening) reflection whilst undertaking the language tasks, and on the way students solved the tasks rather than how well they performed. Participants could either use their first language (L1) or German (L2) to express their thoughts in order to minimize constraints on TAPs produced by their individual language proficiency and confidence.

The TAPs for each level of proficiency contained five language tasks: a warm-up reading task plus tasks relating to reading, speaking, writing and listening. A warm-up is recommended to accustom participants to the procedures involved during the protocol (Leow & Morgan-Short, 2004: 36). The underlying hypothesis was that different strategies would be triggered, depending on the language skill used. The inclusion of these four major language skills also catered for individual participants who had different skill preferences. The tasks were ordered to allow students to move from a more receptive task (reading) to the more proactive task (writing, speaking). Listening came last due to the listening extract being recorded on side B of the audio tape provided. The reasons for choosing particular tasks followed Graham (1997: 18):

- They suited the different levels of the participants,
- the general topic area accommodated individual interests,
- they were challenging enough to trigger German language production.

To facilitate comparison, speaking, writing and warm-up tasks were almost identical at all levels.

- **Warm-up reading**: Advanced and near-native speakers received the same extract on how a woman celebrates her birthday. Intermediate students were given a slightly shortened version.
- **Writing:** The task was to describe in three paragraphs what they liked and disliked about the German language.
- **Speaking:** Participants were expected to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of living in the town where the study took place, allowing students to express themselves at any level of language proficiency.
- **Reading** and **listening:** These tasks varied, depending on the students' level. Each task was intended to provide participants with topics so general and similar (on weekend activities, the ageing society, a city portrait of Wuppertal, Christmas, lifestyle), that they could be undertaken without specialist knowledge of a subject.

Consideration was given to the time required to finish all the tasks, to avoid stretching individuals' concentration over too long a period. However, tasks had to be complex enough to allow participants to think about each one. Participants were asked to summarize the German content into English to allow the researcher to understand the level of participants' comprehension of the extracts presented.

## 3.3 Analysis

TAPs recorded on audio cassettes by participants were transcribed by the researcher, providing the clearest possible transcripts for analysis. The following conventions were used:

- Punctuation was used only where pauses and direct lowering of intonation indicated a break.
- No paragraphing was used.
- The original German text was reproduced in italics to separate it visually from students' reflections and from the material they produced in L2.
- Spelling reflected how words were heard by the transcriber/researcher, even if this was not the correct spelling in English/German.
- Sentences were transcribed as expressed by participants. There was no amendment of syntax or completion of unfinished comments.

Quotations are accompanied by the speaker's pseudonym and the source specified by the task (reading, writing, speaking, listening), plus 'TAP'.

In the next phase of analysis, annotations were produced alongside the transcripts, using the following conventions:

- Identification of incidences of strategy use by underlining.
- Description of strategy use by describing key characteristics.
- Grouping of the strategies found by characteristics.
- Comparison with Graham's (1997) strategy inventory and classification system.
- Identification of differences in strategy use between the strategy inventory by Graham (1997) and the strategies found in the present study.

Once the process of transcribing and annotating all transcripts was complete, transcripts were re-visited and summarized to provide a picture of individual participants and of the general use of learning strategies. This open approach to coding was chosen as it could not be assumed that the same strategies would be used by the older participants as by the younger learners studied by Graham (1997). However, this approach identified additional strategies not listed by Graham. As strategies are applied differently by individuals, this discrepancy is not surprising. However, differences were not significant enough to indicate the necessity for a rethinking of Graham's (1997) classification system.

I acknowledge that counting incidences of strategy use does not necessarily have any bearing on their appropriateness at that time, nor does it provide evidence about the level of proficiency of their user. The classification and labelling of individual strategies depend very much on the individual researcher. As a consequence, each stage of the analysis process had its own uncertainties. However, this explorative approach aimed to provide first insights into strategy use by older language learners.

The first stage of analysis looked for any indicators of difficulties with the task. These were the basic units for analysis, "the smallest piece of information about

something that can stand by itself - that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 345).

During the second stage of analysis, when describing strategy use, the sometimes complex nature of the strategies applied meant a simple description was not always possible due to the complexity and the links involved in an individual incidence.

> So basically what I've been doing was trying to catch the odd word or phrase that I understand at the rate of which German is spoken. And then building that together with my knowledge. (Josephine, listening TAP; underlined are the incidences of strategy use, the units for analysis)

In this case, two strategies were combined, *selective attention* and *word elaboration*. That means that attention was paid to certain phrases instead of every single word and on this basis an understanding of the whole extract was created. These were treated separately, although they were combined in use. Some participants read the whole passage aloud. This counted as only one incidence of a strategy use: *reading aloud in L2*. Translation was necessary for the researcher to assess students' understanding of the reading and listening extracts. However, translation was used in different ways by the students and was therefore classified into different strategies. It was used as:

1. A thought in L1 which was then translated into L2

   e.g.: "I think the prepositions are difficult. I hope prepositions is the same, probably isn't. Prepositionen sind sehr schwer." (James, writing TAP)

2. A means for students to assure themselves that they had understood or constructed something correctly

   e.g.: "die Sprache is not so easy, die Sprache ist nicht so einfach zu verstehen, not so easy to understand" (Isabel, writing TAP)

3. A way of triggering further thinking if a word or phrase was unclear

   e.g.: "Mein Bruder das Gewohnheitstier. Breaking up the word Gewohnheitstier. Yeah, I'm still not sure what that means. Flat sharer or something like that." (Robert, reading TAP)

Similarly, Kern (1994: 44) concluded from his student TAPs that translation helped to maintain concentration and to retain information which was already understood while other problems were tackled. Further, Kern (1994: 44) added that translation supported the students' confidence: they were reassured that they had understood the text correctly when they put it into their L1.

At the third stage of analysis, the grouping of strategies relied at first on key words selected from the descriptions of strategies. For the example, in the following excerpt, the descriptive terms used were "repetition" (the action undertaken) "for grammar" (area of language identified as difficult) and "accuracy check" (reason for using repetition at this point).

> Der Preis des Häusers, des Häusers? ist sehr hoch. (Amy, speaking TAP)

One strategy had then to be identified which included these three aspects. In this example, repetition was used to monitor the correctness of the grammatical form applied. Thus, this aspect was identified as the main reason for the use of the strategy, which was initially "monitoring of grammatical form".

In the fourth stage of analysis, the strategies identified were compared with the strategy inventories of Graham (1997). This comparison allowed classification of the strategies identified in the present study into the following categories: metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective and communicative. Differences between strategy use by the older participants in this study and the younger students in Graham's (1997) study were identified at this stage.

As a research instrument, the application of TAPs in the present study raised a variety of issues which included:

- Absence of the researcher/facilitator:

  The absence of the researcher during the process of think-aloud reduced the immediate pressure on participants to produce material on the spot. By this, students were further prevented from constantly seeking confirmation or support from a present researcher. On the other hand, this absence prevented participants from clarifying any difficulties whilst undertaking the TAPs.

- Provision of instructions:

  The instructions proved not to be clear enough in some cases, although all the participants managed to produce protocols. Furthermore, some participants put themselves under pressure by wanting to perform very well. Even though it was emphasized that the tasks were not intended as tests, some participants experienced emotions as if they were sitting a test. Being asked to produce output in German without preparation highlighted the difficulties some participants experienced when speaking or writing German. One student decided to give up after feeling that she had failed the writing and speaking tasks.

- Inexperience of participants with the procedure involved/technical issues:

  The process of doing TAPs was new to all participants. In most cases the instructions were clearly understood; the difficulty lay in the practical application of the instructions to the multi-tasking involved (which included understanding instructions, understanding L2, working with the L2 provided, thinking about what one is doing and reporting about what one is thinking and doing simultaneously). Providing more than one example as a warm-up task might have given the participants a clearer idea of the procedure and what was expected of them. Another approach would have been to train participants on how to approach the think-aloud. However, either form of preparation might have led to a duplication of the versions that students had trained with rather than the production of genuine individualised TAPs.

- Tasks presented:

  As anticipated, the tasks provided enough flexibility to elicit individual students' ideas and performances and a range of language learning strategies. The background knowledge required and the text types involved proved general and approachable for all participants, at the same time allowing for some difficulties to be revealed. Difficulties ranged from identifying and understanding certain verb forms in the texts to uncertainties about the content.

- Requests to translate during the tasks:

  The translations required of participants for the reading and listening task clarified the extent to which they understood the extracts. However, the manner in which the participants complied with this request varied from very detailed translations to rather general summaries.

# 4. Discussion of the findings

No correlations could be identified between the level of participants and the intensity of strategy use, or the category of strategies applied, or the length of the think-aloud protocols produced. However, differences between learners may have been affected by:

- tasks set and the effects of reflection on the TAPs
- individual participants' preference for certain language skills
- links to personality types (analytical, outspoken, introvert, etc.)
- reasons for learning German (which did not necessarily require all four language skills included in the current study).

## 4.1 Learning strategies by language skill

The intensity and distribution of language learning strategies applied by individual participants depended very much on the skill worked on, as shown in table 2 below. (The figures presented in the tables are used to illustrate distributions and tendencies only.)

Table 2: Breakdown of strategies employed for the think-aloud protocols

| **Task / Strategy category** | **reading** | **writing** | **speaking** | **listening** | **Total:** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Metacognitive** | 37 | 74 | 31 | 26 | **168** |
| **Cognitive** | 50 | 84 | 24 | 10 | **168** |
| **Social/affective** | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| **Communicative** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total:** | **88** | **162** | 57 | 37 | 344 |

The time factor may have been relevant, as participants could undertake reading and writing at their own pace, whereas they may have felt pressure to move on when speaking and consequently not have allowed themselves much time for thinking and conscious strategy use. Also, reflection on speaking tasks was undertaken after the speaking itself, due to the difficulty of articulating thoughts relating to content and reflection at the same time. This linear protocol may have resulted in the omission of some of the thinking processes involved.

### *4.1.1 Reading task*

Reading mainly triggered the application of cognitive strategies (50 in total). Among these, some were used by the majority of the participants. These included *omission*, *inferencing* and *contextualising*. Other strategies used were *deducing* word meaning from the word stem, *deducing* meaning from previous passages in the extract or deciding to leave an unknown word aside and return to it later:

> Heutzutage is not a word I could construct myself but it is perfectly obvious what it means and I have met it before. (Josephine, reading TAP)
> And heutzutage, hmmmm, the rest of the day? Heute is today and. I don't know exactly. (Steve, reading TAP)
>
> I can manage without knowing what that means. (Jessica, reading TAP)

### *4.1.2 Writing task*

Metacognitive and cognitive strategies dominated in all skills categories, most obviously in reading and writing — the latter showing more than twice as many uses of strategies as reading. This high occurrence may have been related to the nature of the skills. Writing involves activities such as planning, structuring, searching for alternative expressions and self-correction:

> I suppose the first thing I should do is think of some ideas and then put them into reasonable sentences, I hope. (Robert, writing TAP)
>
> Deutsch zu lernen. Komma muss ich da schreiben. (Parker, writing TAP)

*Self-correction* and *monitoring* of their work was a feature of all the writing protocols: metacognitive (74 incidences) and cognitive (84 incidences) strategy use were balanced against negligible incidences of social/affective and communicative strategies. This disbalance did not come as a surprise as the format of the study without the involvement of an interlocutor did not support an extensive use of communicative strategies. Most participants tried first to think of something to write in English and to structure this before trying to translate it into German with the vocabulary and structures known. *Translation* was a strategy used by all participants, except for the most advanced one who stated: "Ich übersetze nicht, ich schreibe nur auf Deutsch (…)." (Parker, writing TAP). Thinking in the target language is one of the characteristics of the good language learner (as listed by Naiman *et al.*, 1978). The same is true for first focusing on the content and then on the language structure (Graham, 1997).

### *4.1.3 Speaking task*

For speaking, differences were evident between the most advanced participant and the others. Monitoring and expression was obviously concentrated on to achieve semantic fine-tuning in the foreign language while speaking:

> I was trying to find alternatives to schön for example but it just wouldn't come. (Parker, speaking TAP)
>
> And I tried to find words strong enough to describe the ugly landscape (…). (Parker, speaking TAP)

Intermediate-level participants mainly focused on finding any, preferably correct, vocabulary for expressing their thoughts in German:

> So I'm putting in English words between the German. (Tanja, speaking TAP)
> I wanted to say hills and I said Berg which, I think, might mean mountains, I don't know. (James, speaking TAP)

### *4.1.4 Listening task*

Listening produced the lowest number of strategy uses (37) with a clear dominance of metacognitive strategies and no use of social/affective and communicative strategies. Again this came as no surprise due to the layout of the TAPs where participants did the tasks on their own. This point is also raised in the summary/conclusion section of this article.

Time was a key factor, as information was only accessible during the time of the recording. Only Tina, one of the intermediate students, decided to control this factor herself by stopping in between sentences when she listened to the recording for the second time. The variety of learning strategies was more limited than the range for other language skills. Where strategies were used for listening, they were often metacognitive. Participants explained how they usually approached listening, such as concentrating on key words, focusing on the general context at first and then on the details at the second listening. However, if insufficient key words or not the most important ones were understood, it was more difficult to apply any learning strategies whilst listening. Further, students identified general problems they faced when listening, such as hearing difficulties.

Learners felt anxious about understanding the overall content as well as details, especially as almost all the students, including the two near-native speakers, reported having difficulties in hearing the passages. Despite the good technical quality of the recording, listening to recorded voices as opposed to a face-to-face situation exacerbated some hearing problems, limiting the understanding of participants, especially those at an intermediate level. A tape does not allow for lip-reading which accompanies every natural conversation, even between native-speakers of the same language without hearing difficulties. Eysenck (2001: 246) recognised that "visual information from lip movements is used to make sense of speech sounds because the information conveyed by the speech sounds is often inadequate". Listening to a

recording required a lot of attention and put the students under pressure as they had to carry out a variety of activities at the same time.

The pitch of a voice is another major factor in comprehension. Most participants reported that the female voice was easier to understand, it was clearer to them and, coincidentally, the questions were shorter. The male voice of the interviewee was not clearly audible throughout. Hearing ability decreases as people grow older and it becomes more difficult to make out unfamiliar sounds. As Bob explained, he applies certain tricks to deal with this disadvantage:

> I'm not able to test the nuances of quickly spoken language. So I have to rely a little bit on very, very familiar phrases and clichés. (Bob, listening TAP)

Apart from hearing, remembering to mention what had been heard during the task was again a separate matter, as James described:

> Well, part of the problem with that is trying to remember as well as to understand it. I think I certainly understood more than I remembered to say. Though I certainly didn't understand it all. (James, listening TAP)

> Some of my difficulty is, I can't remember even if I understood what he was saying. Going through my mind was I thought to remember what it is he is talking about to say back in English even if I understand, English stopped some of my concentration. (Tanja, listening TAP)

## 4.2 Learning strategies by strategy category

### *4.2.1 Metacognitive and cognitive strategies*

It can be hypothesized that the dominance of metacognitive and cognitive strategies was related to the layout of the TAPs, participants undertaking the protocols on their own without a partner to interact with. Further, it could be thought that as writing and reading were the language skills in which participants had been most intensively trained, most participants felt more confident with writing and reading than with listening and speaking. Only for Parker, the student with the highest level of proficiency in German, did speaking make no difference when compared to writing. The high occurrence of cognitive and metacognitive strategies can also be interpreted as supporting the idea of older adults learning more independently by relying more on their own thinking and problem-solving resources.

Graham (1997: 43) ascribed a more central role in learning to metacognitive strategies than, for example, communicative strategies. She identified strategies such as *planning* and *monitoring* as more important. Chamot & Küpper (1989: 17), in their study on effective and ineffective learners, emphasized that the number of strategies used by individuals was not the only criterion for effectiveness, because the adequate use of strategies in individual situations and the appropriate selection of these strategies both contributed to the effectiveness with which learners used strategies.

Among metacognitive strategies, *self-monitoring* in its various forms dominated. An item was spoken out loud, double-checked against another context, or corrected

once the right form was found. *Inferencing* was dominant among the cognitive strategies. All kinds of knowledge, in the widest sense of the term, were made use of in decoding meanings or producing an output in the target language: rules about prepositions and cases, word-stem families, known words in any other language (L1, L2, L3, etc.) or personal experiences related to travelling or family.

### *4.2.2 Social/affective and communicative strategies*

The low use of social/affective and communicative strategies was related to the participants recording the TAPs on their own without partners with whom they could interact. Consequently, the low occurrence of such strategies can be directly linked to the data collection approach. The social/affective strategies applied were mainly for *self-assurance*, *self-encouragement*, *self-talk* or indirectly addressing "another person", the researcher.

> Besonders wenn, two nns. (Amy, writing TAP)
>
> I'll have a go. (Tina, writing TAP)
>
> And I find it very difficult to think of anything I can say in German. (James, writing TAP)

## 4.3 Summary

TAPs varied from individual to individual, as did the intensity of strategy use. This result seems to be in line with other studies, involving TAPs applied to younger age groups, where no significant trends could be identified due to the variety of the layout of the studies, age groups, preparation and aims of the studies. Of all the language skills studied, listening provoked the fewest incidences of strategy use and was also rated as difficult by the majority of the intermediate-level participants, mainly related to general hearing difficulties. As with speaking, the students with the least experience of the L2 (those at intermediate level) experienced more difficulties with listening than did the advanced ones. The current study confirmed that there was a difference in strategy use depending on the language skill used. For reading and writing, the majority of students applied a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. For speaking and listening, the overall range of strategies was more limited and the number of strategies applied was lower. Various reasons can be put forward for this dominance, including the time available to undertake the tasks, or the effects of participants having received more training in these tasks, or preferring them to the others.

All participants used more strategies for reading and writing, with a majority of metacognitive and cognitive strategies and few social/affective and communicative strategies. This was partly related to the difficulty of undertaking the TAPs retrospectively for the listening and speaking, and not having had a partner to interact with. Because of the low levels of strategy use by two-thirds of the participants, no trends and special features could be identified for these.

The inventory of strategies which could be identified for older language learners in the present study was similar to that found in Graham's (1997) study of young adult learners. Individual students appeared to prefer employing a certain set of strategies in different situations, even varying these strategies rather than using other strategies. However, this might also be task-related rather than presenting a typical feature of the older learners. This could be supported by Graham (1997) who states similar findings from her study. Oxford *et al.* (1996) also report a dominance of metacognitive and cognitive strategies among their young university students of French. It could be hypothesized that these two categories are more important for improving language learning or are the most obvious ones coming to mind (perhaps being less "personal" than the social/affective strategies). The analysis indicated that age did not affect strategy use in terms of individual strategies used, their proportion, or their employment in different contexts.

# 5 Conclusions

In general, as for younger participants, TAPs proved a useful research instrument with older language students for extracting information regarding language learning strategy use. However, it was important to address certain issues in order to use this research tool successfully with older participants, especially those with low levels of language proficiency. These issues depended on the language skill studied.

For the study of listening, the quality of the recording was of central importance to compensate for any decrease in the hearing ability of older participants. For the study of speaking, an interactive opportunity would have allowed more natural communication which might have eased verbal production and triggered more incidences of strategy use. For the study of reading and writing, no special considerations related to the age of the participants were identified, except for the obvious need to choose topics of interest. Further research has to investigate whether this is a general trend among older learners or an effect related to the data elicitation method. However, so far TAPs are the research tool which provides the most direct access to those inner processes involved when learning strategies are employed. For listening and speaking this method could be further explored and refined.

The requirement to produce output in the L2 without preparation should be considered carefully, as older participants may be more conscious of their own expectations and those imposed on them by the researcher, however subtly these are presented:

> I think to do a task like that you really ought to have a little bit of preparation. Everything has flown out of my mind, if they were ever in there. (Penelope, writing TAP)

The analysis entailed a relatively high degree of subjectivity and scope for variations in the interpretation. Use of TAPs as a research instrument was dependent on the individual researcher, the interpretation and the research question. It could be useful to

analyse the same data by two independent coders (inter-rater reliability) to contrast the differences between the inter-rater and the intra-rater analysis.

However, the analysis is not claimed to be fully conclusive due to the nature of learning strategies, which makes it difficult to identify, describe and classify them. On the other hand, the diversity of the data produced presented an advantage of this instrument. In that respect, the study could support a conclusion that for research on older learners TAPs present a good research tool. Their benefit was reflected in the richness of the direct insights into the thinking processes of the participants. A mixed method approach including questionnaire and interviews with learners of various levels of proficiency and of different target languages can be expected to further minimize the effects of applying one research instrument, and further expand on strategy use by older language learners.

Despite the methodological limitations imposed by the use of any one research instrument only, the TAPs showed older language learners who appeared to:

- be aware of how they can support their progress/learning
- know how to get around difficulties they encountered during the tasks
- be eager to continue learning and practising.

Older students undertaking language learning in later life are conscious about what they do when they learn another language, and have expectations about what is required to succeed and what they want to get out of it. However, following from the current study the set of learning strategies they use does not appear to be a distinguishing factor between these older language learners and younger ones. Supporting this specific learner group in their learning requires more research in revealing how the potential and knowledge of the older learners about language learning can be best made use of.

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