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Learner Difficulties and Strategy Choice when Learning to Read in a Genetically Related Language: The Case of a Ukrainian Language Learner

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Abstract

In both academic studies and anecdotal reports, there is widespread consensus that learners tend to learn a language more easily if it is linguistically close to another language in their repertoire, particularly if the languages are genetically related (i.e. belonging to the same linguistic family tree). While there is evidence for such statement to hold true thanks to the phenomenon of transfer, there seems to be an unspoken overarching assumption that the process of learning a genetically related target language is natural and without major problems, and the role of language learner strategies (LLS) is somewhat undermined in such contexts. In light of this issue, this study purports to investigate two areas within the specific skill of reading: (a) learner difficulties that emerge when learning a genetically related language at beginner level and (b) the underlying mental processes that govern corresponding strategy choices. Taking the form of a single case study under a qualitative, constructivist paradigm, this research depicts the self-studying journey of a male Taiwanese individual, who, as a former Russian language learner, learns to read a closely related language—Ukrainian. With data from reading task sheets, stimulated recalls, and a semi-structured interview, the findings identify four learner difficulties that surface when starting to read in said context, thus problematising the aforementioned general claim that a genetically related target language is largely straightforward to learn. The data also shed light on thinking processes fundamental to the decision of strategies, advocating a critical convergence between the fields of language learner strategies and second language acquisition in the discussion section. Finally, the contributions, pedagogical implications, and limitations of the study are addressed in detail.

Resumen

Tanto en estudios académicos como en informes anecdóticos, existe un consenso generalizado sobre el hecho de que los estudiantes tienden a aprender un idioma más fácilmente si el mismo está lingüísticamente cerca de otro idioma que ya el estudiante tenga en su repertorio, particularmente si los idiomas están relacionados genéticamente (es decir, pertenecen al mismo árbol genealógico lingüístico). Si bien existe evidencia de que tal afirmación es cierta gracias al fenómeno de la transferencia, parece que hay una suposición general tácita de que el proceso de aprendizaje de una nueva lengua genéticamente relacionada con las que ya dominamos, es natural y transcurre sin mayores problemas, viéndose el papel de las estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas (EAI) algo socavada en tales casos. A tenor de este asunto, este estudio pretende investigar dos áreas dentro de la habilidad específica de la lectura: (a) las dificultades del alumno que surgen cuando se aprende, a nivel principiante, un lenguaje genéticamente relacionado con los del alumno y (b) los procesos mentales subyacentes que gobiernan las opciones estratégicas correspondientes. Tomando la forma de un estudio de caso único bajo un paradigma constructivista cualitativo, esta investigación describe el viaje de autoaprendizaje de un individuo taiwanés que, como antiguo estudiante de ruso, aprende a leer un idioma estrechamente relacionado: el ucraniano. Con datos de hojas de tareas de lectura, recuerdos estimulados y una entrevista semiestructurada, los hallazgos identifican cuatro dificultades de aprendizaje que surgen al comenzar a leer en dicho contexto, lo que problematiza la afirmación general antes mencionada de que el aprendizaje de una nueva lengua genéticamente relacionada con las del repertorio del estudiante es en gran parte fácil de aprender. Los datos también arrojan luz sobre los procesos de pensamiento fundamentales para la decisión de estrategias, y la sección de discusión se aboga por una convergencia crítica entre los campos de las estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas y la adquisición de una segunda lengua. Finalmente, se abordan en detalle los aportes, implicaciones pedagógicas y limitaciones del estudio.

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Language learner strategies, genetically related languages, reading, learner difficulty, Ukrainian language

Palabras Clave

Estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas, idiomas genéticamente relacionados, lectura, dificultad de aprendizaje, idioma ucraniano

ملخص

في الدراسات الأكاديمية والتقارير القصيرة هناك توافق واسع النطاق في الآراء بأن المتعلمون يميلون إلى تعلم لغة ما أكثر سهولة فيما إذا كانت هذه اللغة قريبة إلى لغة أخرى متواجدة في مخزونهم، وخاصةً إذا كانت هذه اللغات متصلة وراثياً (أي تنتمي إلى ذات الأسرة اللغوية). وفي حين أن هناك أدلة على أن هذا البيان يصدق بفضل ظاهرة النقل، يبدو أن هناك افتراض شامل غير معلن بأن عملية تعلم لغة مستهدفة ذات صلة وراثياً تكون طبيعية و من دون أي مشاكل رئيسية فإن دور استراتيجيات التعلم اللغوي قد قوض إلى حد ما في هذه السياقات. وفي سياق هذه المسألة، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في مجالين في إطار المهارة المحددة للقراءة: (أ) صعوبات المتعلم التي تنشأ عند تعلم لغة ذات صلة وراثياً على مستوى المبتدئين و (ب) العمليات العقلية الأساسية التي تحكم خيارات الاستراتيجية المناظرة. و يأخذ شكل دراسة حالة واحدة في إطار نموذج نوعي و بناء، يتضمن هذا البحث رحلة الدراسة الذاتية لشاب تاينواني والذي يتعلم ، بصفته أحد متعلمي اللغة الروسية السابقين، قراءة لغة ذات صلة وثيقة اللغة الأوكرانية. و بالتالي، فإن البيانات المستوحاة من قراءة أوراق المهام، الاستدعاءات المحفزة، و المقابلات الشبه المنظمة مع النتائج، تحدد أربعة صعوبات متعلم والتي تظهر عند بدء القراءة في سياق ما، مما تثير إشكالية الادعاء العام المذكور أعلاه، بأن أي لغة مستهدفة ذات صلة وراثية تنتم بأنها بسيطة و سهلة إلى حد كبير بالتعلم. كما تسلط البيانات الضوء على عمليات التفكير الأساسية لقرار الاستراتيجيات، و الدعوة إلى تحقيق تلاقح حاسم بين مجالات استراتيجيات التعلم اللغوي و اكتساب اللغات الثانية في قسم المناقشة. و أخيراً، يجري تناول المساهمات و الآثار التربوية و القيود التي تفرضها الدراسة بالتفصيل. الكلمات الرئيسية: استراتيجيات التعلم اللغوي، اللغات المتصلة وراثياً، قراءة، صعوبات المتعلم ، اللغة الأوكرانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

استراتيجيات
التعلم اللغوي،
اللغات المتصلة
وراثياً، قراءة،
صعوبات المتعلم،
اللغة الأوكرانية.

Introduction

A general outlook in language education holds that due to cross-linguistic similarities, learners find it easier to acquire a target language that is genetically related to another language in their existing repertoire (for example, the case of Spanish speakers learning Portuguese or Russian speakers learning Ukrainian). This is understandable from the theoretical perspective of linguistic transfer; however, an unwarranted assumption is that the navigation through these cross-linguistic similarities is straightforward, and whether any learner difficulties emerge in the process remains an under-researched matter in literature.

I am quite intrigued by this topic myself. As a speaker of Spanish, I was able to make alphabetical, phonetic, lexical, and grammatical connections when learning Italian and French. Although cross-linguistic similarities among Romance languages appeared to facilitate these associations, I did experience learner difficulties that emerged as a result of those striking similarities, and I perceived my learning to entail more intricate thinking procedures than what existing research seemed to suggest. I saw the need to empirically identify the difficulties that emerge when learning genetically related languages; more so, I believed it was fundamental to examine the conscious development of language learner strategies (LLS) in correspondence to these difficulties.

In response to the above, I conducted an in-depth, qualitative, single case study of a Russian speaker and his initial experience with the Ukrainian language. I specifically opted for a reading context due to the multiplicity of linguistic elements involved with the skill itself. With task sheets, stimulated recalls, and semi-structured interviews, the study was set out to explore the learner difficulties and corresponding strategies when learning to read in a genetically related language. I was also keen to unravel the use of these strategies from a broader perspective, so I inquired into the underlying thinking processes that govern strategy choice.

I commence this study with a literature review. I present the field of language learner strategies, its close connection with transfer, and why it is pivotal to explore strategies in the context of beginner-level reading in a genetically related language. I then proceed with an overview of the study's methodology, touching upon three areas: my decision to adopt a case study under a constructivist paradigm; my choice of participants and context; as well as my selection of data collection methods. I elaborate on matters of trustworthiness and ethics in the study, followed by a display of findings and a critique of how the findings add to the existing body of knowledge. Finally, contributions and limitations of the study are discussed.

Literature Review

Language Learner Strategies (LLS)

This study is situated under the overarching theoretical framework of language learner strategies (LLS)—a field that has garnered scholarly attention due to its association with language learning success (Oxford, 2017). LLS is conceptualised as “processes and actions” applied to “learn or use a language more effectively” (Rose, 2017, p. 38)¹, and the element of *consciousness* is regarded as a defining element that distinguishes learner strategies from automatised, proceduralised learning processes (Cohen, 2007). Inspired by O'Malley & Chamots' taxonomy (1990), research has traditionally examined LLS in relation to core skill areas (i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and translation) and function (i.e. metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies).

Trending areas of interest within the field of LLS have evolved exponentially over the past five decades. In the 1970s, LLS pioneers such as Rubin (1975) had concerned themselves with “the good learner” and what we could learn from their language learning habits. However, researchers in later periods have attempted to move away from controversial labelling of “good” versus “weak” learners, focusing instead on the *dynamics* and *effectiveness* of strategies (Grenfell & Harris, 2017). Under this shift of interest, there have been fewer concerns over the technical question of *what* strategies are used and more engagement in the deeper inquiry of *how* to develop useful strategies in accordance with the learning task.

¹ Examples of strategies may include, for example, “practising grammar through initiated conversations”, “revising note cards” etc. among many others. For a comprehensive list, see the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990).

Following Vivian Cook’s introduction of multicompetence (2009) as well as the rise of the multilingual turn (May, 2013), there is now increasing focus on the role of *multilingualism* in LLS—that is, how one’s pre-developed knowledge of languages may scaffold the learning of a new one. This school of thought has scaffolded a multiplicity of studies on *transfer*, which concerns how “a language learner incorporates certain elements of her source language in her production and/or comprehension of the target language” (Xia, 2017, p. 238). Naturally, transfer is dependent on a learner’s *perceived similarity* (Kellerman, 1977, 1983) between the target language (TL) and other languages previously studied, and on an item-based linguistic level, this perceived similarity can be conceptualised into three different types of cross-linguistic relations (Ringbom, 2006), as seen in table 1 here:

Table 1

Summarisation of Ringbom’s (2006) Cross-linguistic Relations (p. 37)

Type of Perceived Similarity	Description of Relation	Example
Similarity Relation	“the learner is able to establish a one-to-one relationship with another unit, usually in the L1”	Cognates <i>Transfer of linguistic items from one language to the other</i>
Difference Relation	“the learner can perceive both similarity and difference” between background languages and the target language	L1 Swedish speakers noticing that unlike Swedish, German features not two, but three grammatical genders
Zero Relation	“the learner cannot relate the target language aspect to previous linguistic knowledge”	English speakers learning about grammatical gender in German—a concept non-existent in their previously established language repertoire

Beyond the above-depicted *item-based linguistic transfer*, recent work has been placed on transfer at a *metacognitive* dimension as well (Forbes & Fisher, 2018), which generally points to higher-order thinking about learning. Researchers in this area are predominantly intrigued by how learners use such metacognition to transfer their strategies from one language learning context to another (for example, transferring the strategy of “keeping a written journal” from

the English to the Mandarin learning experience). Strategy transfer engages students in a mindful exploration of their previously accumulated learning experience, having them contemplate how habits from prior experience may facilitate current learning (Mitits & Gavriilidou, 2016). Owing to the broadness of transfer on both linguistic and metacognitive levels, Hu (2013) thus defines the term as “how previous learning influences current and future learning” (p. 732).

As implied above, transfer and LLS are strongly intertwined concepts. It therefore comes as a surprise that conceptual relations between the two have not been determined. As it currently stands, we may argue that any act of transfer— be it at a linguistic or metacognitive dimension—assumes the same nature as strategies when applied *consciously*. It is thus safe to reach two conclusions: (a) any instances of transfer under conscious terms may be classified as *strategy* in its very own right, and (b) any strategy that does not originate from linguistic or metacognitive transfer can be logically categorised as a newly developed strategy.

Integrating concepts of transfer and LLS, I hereby devise a conceptual model in figure 1 below—one that will be helpful for the illustration of my data in the findings section:

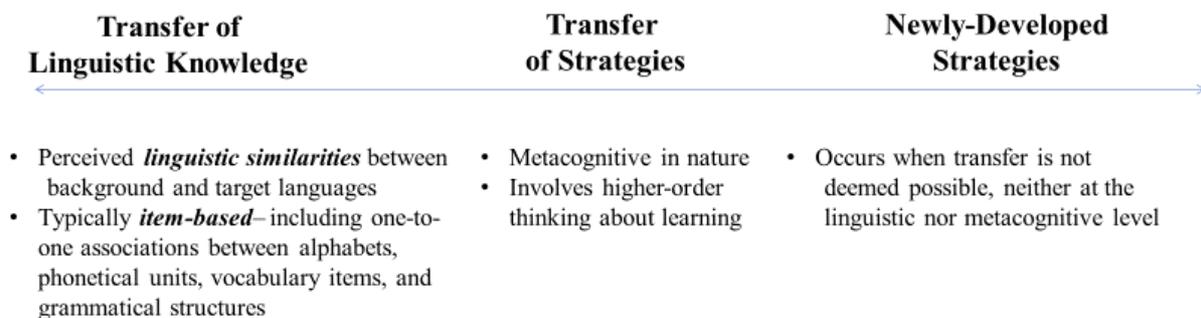


Figure 1. A conceptualised model of LLS and transfer

The Role of LLS when Learning Genetically Related Languages

Unsurprisingly, scholars have continuously reiterated the helpfulness of transfer when learning a target language that bears similarity to other languages known to the learner. Oftentimes, this refers to *genetically related languages*² usually belonging to the same language families³. Such thinkers unanimously subscribe to the idea that because the target language is so linguistically comparable to previously acquired tongues, learners will be naturally inclined to develop cross-linguistic transfer and easily acquire the target language. This same idea has heretofore been discussed in a plethora of key theoretical and empirical studies since the 1980s (for key examples in lexical transfer see Cenoz, 2001 and De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; for structural transfer see Odlin, 2015 & Wach, 2016; for verb production see Gibson et al., 2001; for intercomprehension in reading see Smidfelt & Van De Weijer, 2019).

Although there is veracity to this widely endorsed claim, one critique surrounding it concerns a disregard for cognitive difficulties that may arise while learning these languages with shared genetic origins. Scrutinising the above mentioned papers, there appears to be a pre-assumed idea that the learning of a genetically related language unfolds naturally and without struggle, because transfer—at least at the linguistic dimension—is usually *intuitive*. I, however, concur with Leont’ev (1981) that all forms of language learning are complex, and in that sense, the process of learning genetically related languages calls for deeper investigation, especially at *beginner* level where target language mechanisms are initially being explored and analysed. Delving into what has already been researched, we may see that an emerging question concerns *whether difficulties arise* when beginning to learn a genetically related language, and *how strategic mechanisms are formed* to counter them.

Reading as a Skill Focus

The literature review so far points to *learner difficulty and strategy choice when learning a genetically related language* as a promising scholarly niche, particularly at *beginner* level

² On a relevant note, it is helpful to distinguish between languages that are *genetically related*, *typologically similar*, and *psychotypologically similar*. While there may be some overlapping between the three, Falk & Bardel (2010) make an insightful explanation that genetically related languages are typically those under the same family tree and verified to share genetic roots from the perspectives of comparative and historical linguistics. Typologically similar languages, on the other hand, are languages that share similarities without being directly related historically (such as German and Greek sharing the use of accusative cases). Finally, psychotypologically similar languages pertain to similarities between languages that learners subjectively associate in their mind, which may or may not align with objective measures of language relatedness nor typology. In my study, I focus on “genetically related languages” rather than “typologically similar languages” because I would like to examine a language pair that is as similar as possible from an objective perspective, and the main means to achieve this would be to look at a language pair that is not only typologically similar, but genetically related as well.

³ The closely related Romance languages serve as a vivid illustration: when Spanish speakers learn Italian, for instance, the item “sempre” (meaning “always”) may have learners make direct mental connections with the Spanish word “siempre”.

where linguistic mechanisms of the target language are initially explored. A potential skill focus within this topic pertains to *reading*, reasons for which are manifold. As the first consideration, reading is considered as a fundamental entry-level skill in any formal language education, perfectly matching the intended level focus of this study (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). It also suffices to say that reading is acknowledged as a complex skill that actively triggers strategic learner behaviour, as one is compelled to juggle, in simultaneous fashion, a comprehensive range of linguistic features—the writing system, script, orthography, phonetics, lexicon, and the syntactic layout of the target language (Stevenson, 2015). It would hence be revealing to investigate such rich, multidimensional processing in the context of reading in a genetically related target language, whereby the phenomena of transfer expectedly strive.

Synthesising the review above, the two core questions below will guide this study:

1. What learner difficulties arise when learning to read in a genetically related language, and what corresponding strategies are employed to tackle these difficulties?
2. What are the underlying thinking processes that govern strategy choice?

Research Design and Context

Epistemological Paradigm

Epistemological paradigms refer to philosophical stances about the nature of reality and how they are constructed in research (Creamer, 2018). They are fundamental to determine, as they hugely shadow the data collection tools, modes of analysis, and the study's overall scheme of interpretation. Evaluating the stance of my inquiry as well as the nature of the knowledge it aims to produce, I purport to adopt a *constructivist* paradigm in this research. Aligning tightly with Creswell's (2013) depiction of constructivism, this study investigates a learner's self-interpretation of a phenomenon (i.e. subjective choice of strategies) constructed amid the complexities of his lived experiences (i.e. difficulties that arise when learning a genetically related language). In constructivism, subjectivity is the expected norm, and realities are dynamic (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Phakiti & Paltridge, 2015). This speaks to my study's goal of investigating what the learner subjectively perceives as processing difficulties and potential corresponding strategies—both of which assume a dynamic development depending on how learning unfolds.

Research Strategy—Case Study

Under a constructivist paradigm, this project takes on a qualitative, single case study. In Yin's (1994) terms, case studies seek to investigate “the how and why of a complex human situation” (p. 16), purporting to gain theoretical insights from an in-depth perspective rather than to generalise findings (Casanave, 2015). The goal of case studies is to unspool the complexity of

context in a setting and to examine how its surrounding factors contribute to educational outcomes (Thomas, 2011). Collectively, these echo with the objective of this study: through an in-depth case, it sets out to investigate how difficulties are perceived, how corresponding strategies are devised, and how thinking processes are formed when learning a genetically related language. The point here is to produce preliminary conceptual findings, owing to how the matter at hand has not been explicitly covered in literature. Additionally, given that no two genetically related languages are related in the same fashion, the adoption of a case study would be ideal as it allows for learning outcomes to be thoroughly explained via specific contextual factors.

There is also the need to justify the use of only one single case, as it is commonplace for researchers to adopt multiple case studies for comparison of data. While many single case studies are conducted due to the inherent uniqueness or extremity of the case in question (Thomas, 2011), here my case is a *revelatory* one (Yin, 2009). That is, it is a gateway to examine an issue that has not been formally researched heretofore, with thicker, more refined detail than multiple-case studies.

Participant and Research Context

The case here features the learning trajectory of one learner, hereby given the pseudonym Ben⁴, during his first experience self-studying the Ukrainian language at beginner level. Ben is an adult learner in his early thirties and he currently works as a Spanish teacher at an extramural language school in Taiwan. He speaks Mandarin Chinese as a first language and possesses a B.A. in Spanish. After graduation, he took interest in the Russian language and attended private lessons for two years, and he described his Russian level as “conversational”, being a little above the A2 level of the CEFR⁵. Ben recollected his experience of learning Russian as “challenging but rewarding”—pointing particularly to difficulties in understanding Russian grammatical cases and remembering Russian vocabulary (as words tend to be quite long). He claimed that the Russian experience had led him to heavily experiment with strategies, and at present, he learns Ukrainian to expand his understanding of languages in eastern Europe. Ben’s current language learning fits well into the context of this study, given how Russian and Ukrainian are closely related Slavic languages (Cubberley & Sussex, 2006). Both languages adopt the Cyrillic script (albeit with some minor differences) and are mutually intelligible to a considerable extent.

Mention-worthy here is the choice to focus on a one-day intensive self-study session. For this study, I am most interested in the revelation of learner difficulties and corresponding strategy choices at *the absolute beginning phase* of target language exposure. Thus, I have reason to

⁴ A pseudonym here is given in light of ethical considerations.

⁵ This refers to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and it is a widely acknowledged assessment framework for the learning of foreign languages.

believe that the very first exposure would be an ideal timing during which to position my research, as this is when the learner does a fresh, foundational exploration of the new language and how it relates to previously acquired languages in his repertoire. The decision to opt for a self-study session is also inspired by the recently growing recognition of self-directed language learning beyond classrooms (Reinders & Benson, 2017) as well as the relatively meagre research on self-studying learners heretofore. For data collection, Ben was given the first two chapters of a trending Ukrainian textbook *ЯБЛУКО* (“Yabluko”) and asked to self-study to the extent that he preferred (but covering at least seven pages of his choice) within the date that we agreed upon⁶. In the end, Ben was able to finish a considerable proportion of the given materials—covering the topics of script, pronunciation, greetings, numbers, age, family members, and occupations.

Equally pivotal to address is my decision to feature Ukrainian as the target language. The inspiration for this is threefold: (i) my personal interest in Slavic languages; (ii) the growing prevalence of Ukrainian language programmes I have observed in Taiwan, the U.S., and the UK; as well as (iii) the tendency for applied linguistics research to unjustifiably overlook studies on non-mainstream languages. I myself have studied Ukrainian, and I judge my knowledge of the language to be sufficient for this study’s data analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Looking closely at data collection methods in previous LLS studies, I opted to adopt reading task sheets, stimulated recalls, and semi-structured interviews for this study. Prior to data collection, I gave Ben an oral briefing about what strategies were and encouraged him to talk through strategies he had previously used in the Russian learning context as a “warm-up” (so as to facilitate his articulation of strategies for this study, and to lessen any potential biases).

Reading Task Sheets

Task sheets have been known to gather particularly practical insights in the area of LLS. It was first introduced in Macaro’s (2001) writing study, whereby participants were asked to engage in a usual writing task, marking wherever a strategy was employed and indicating what that strategy was in an adjacent space. Essentially, it proved to be a data collection tool that captured cognitive processes in action, which is helpful given the mentalistic, non-readily observable nature of strategies. Similar success with task sheets was also evinced in Forbes & Fisher (2018).

For this study, I adopted task sheets within the skill of reading. Ben was asked to read through the textbook material (all presented in Ukrainian) as he would naturally do and to choose at

⁶ Also important to note here is that due to geographical constraints as well as restrictions of the Covid-19, data collection was completed online.

least seven pages from the two chapters given to serve as “task sheets”, marking linguistic items on which he used a strategy and explaining how he used the strategy in a separate space. Noteworthy here is that Ben was learning only at beginner level, and hence, any processing that pertained to reading—be it at word, phrase, or sentence level—was included as data for this study.

Stimulated Recalls

Stimulated recalls are a genre of introspective methods that investigates learners’ mental processes with the aid of a *stimulus* (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This tool has been evaluated as particularly resourceful in the realm of LLS research (Rose, 2013; Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmidt, 2006), and stimuli could flexibly assume the form of learner notes, tests, and textbook materials (Rose, 2015).

Stimulated recalls served the purpose of eliciting Ben’s mental processes when reading in Ukrainian, and the task sheets (textbook pages) served as stimuli. They were adopted for two purposes: (a) to clarify any unclear details in the task sheets, and (b) to triangulate data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). To avoid issues of ill retrieval and poor instruction, the stimulated recall was conducted shortly after the task sheet and with sufficient guidelines (Vandergrift, 2010).

Semi-structured Interview

After the task sheet and stimulated recalls, Ben was invited to participate in a concluding semi-structured interview. I believed it was crucial to conduct an interview on top of the stimulated recalls because in essence, stimulated recalls concerned more the technical choice of strategies, whereas an interview allowed Ben to evaluate his own learning from a relatively metacognitive, panoramic perspective. As a case study, an interview was also integral because it had potential to encapsulate contextual factors that shaped learning outcomes (Holliday, 2015). Finally, in similar fashion to the stimulated recalls, the interview also served the purpose of integrating and triangulating data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

As this was a one-day study, the task sheets were submitted online immediately after Ben concluded his study session. After a brief look through the task sheets, the stimulated recall was conducted, and the interview took place after a break so that Ben had some time to step back and think through his learning process. The interview was around forty minutes in total; it was recorded in Ben’s first language (Mandarin) but subsequently transcribed verbatim and translated. As with all strategy research, it is pivotal to mention that since strategies and thinking processes are sometimes instinctive and proceduralised, all emerging data could only be regarded as the learner’s *perceptions*—aspects of his learning that he was conscious of.

Data Analysis

Mirroring most qualitative case studies in education, data analysis here consisted of data-driven (bottom-up), thematic coding. *Open coding* (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) was employed to identify any mentioned instances of learner difficulty and any strategies used. Thereafter, *axial coding* (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) was used to concretise intersections between the two—that is, the underlying thinking processes that governed strategy choice. A coding framework is as illustrated in figure 2 below:

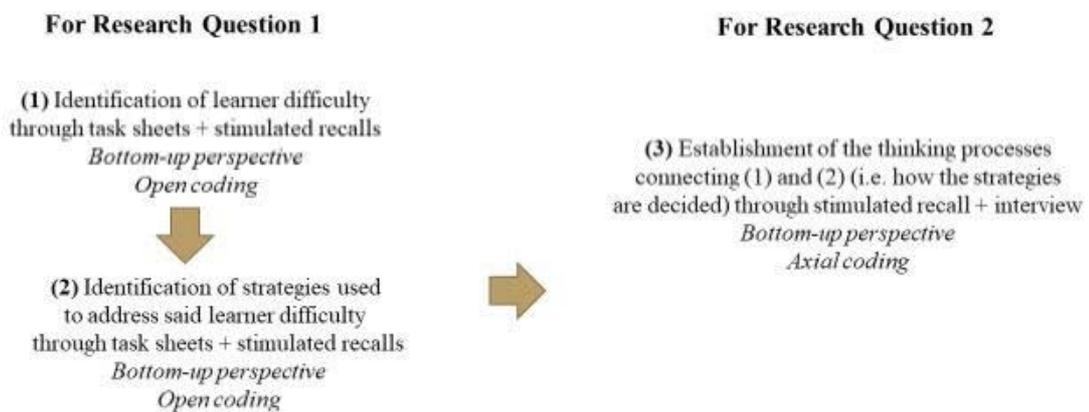


Figure 2. Coding framework

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is pivotal for ensuring the rigour of qualitative research (Houghton et al., 2013) and in line with Lincoln & Guba's (1985) principles of naturalistic inquiry, trustworthiness can be discussed in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I have taken several measures to enhance trustworthiness in my study through these four aspects in table 2:

Table 2

Measures Taken in the Study to Enhance Trustworthiness

Element	Measures Taken in the Study
Credibility	Credibility concerns the degree to which results are precise and credible. In this study, multiple data collection methods were used for triangulation, which hopefully helped increase data precision and credibility.
Transferability	Transferability concerns the extent to which the study's findings may be transferable to other contexts. Here, I included a thick description of the context as well as my data collection tools. Readers may then decide the extent to which the study's findings are applicable to other contexts of interest.
Dependability	Dependability is relevant to member-checks and the effort to ensure that findings are reported objectively. I have conducted rigorous member-checking during and after data collection to honour this.
Confirmability	Confirmability pertains to the degree to which findings are based on the participant's actual narratives rather than the researcher's own biases. Having learned both Russian and Ukrainian myself, I was aware of my potential bias in data collection and analysis, and to that end I remained reflexive throughout the study, carefully avoiding leading questions and unsupported assumptions. That is, I positioned myself as a researcher rather than an ex-learner.

Ethical Procedures and Considerations

Prior to conducting this study, all ethical procedures enacted by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) were carefully examined and implemented. The study commenced only after gaining consent from the participant and data were stored only up until right before the submission of this paper. While the focus of this study is cognitive in nature and does not touch upon vulnerable populations nor sensitive topics in applied linguistics, it is still pivotal to think through any ethical concerns specific to this project. With closer contemplation, the main ethical issue pertains to *intrusion* into the participant's learning space. While Ben claimed that he did not mind any of his data being reported, he did prefer for me to not publish actual scans of his task sheets and to just have them described instead, which I respected throughout the write-up of this study.

Findings

Overview of Findings

Overall, thematic coding from the data reveals four major learner difficulties. These difficulties, along with details of Ben's corresponding strategies, are illustrated in figure 3 below:

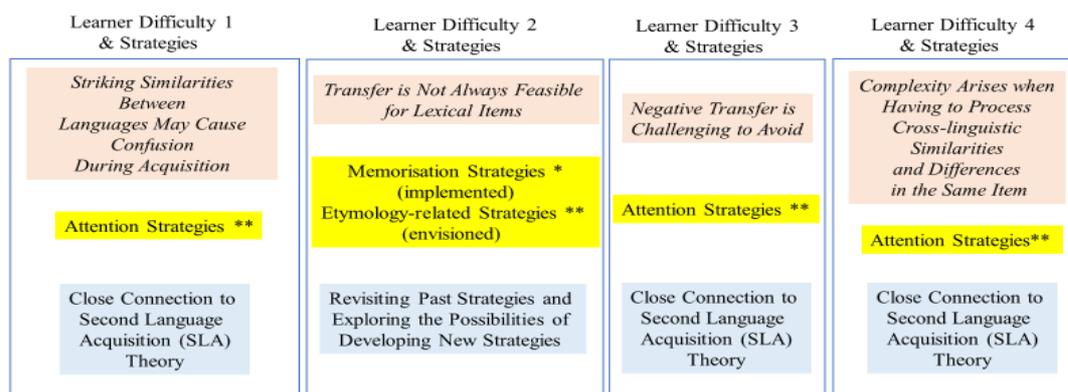


Figure 3. An overview of findings (one asterisk * refers to *transfer of strategies*, whereas two asterisks ** refer to *newly-developed strategies*—see figure 1).

In a general sense, Ben reported that with his prior knowledge of Russian, he gave little effort to comprehend basic level texts in Ukrainian. In the interview, he attributed this to cross-linguistic similarities in script, pronunciation, syntactic structures, and parts of vocabulary:

I've heard that Ukrainian and Russian are similar in many aspects—although not all—and what I've learned so far testifies that. The Cyrillic alphabets in Russian and Ukrainian are nearly the same, and that significantly facilitates the building of my Ukrainian reading skills from the start... The grammatical logic between the two languages is identical, and many words I read are easily comparable in the two languages as well... Overall, I can read and understand easily.

(Semi-structured interview)

This reflects a large proportion of item-based linguistic transfer in Ben's processing of the Ukrainian language, largely corresponding to the left end in figure 1 (see literature review). Nonetheless, throughout this learning, Ben ultimately did encounter four major learner difficulties—among which he was able to articulate corresponding strategy choices. Results from Ben's data were organised into themes (addressing research question 1) followed by an elaboration (addressing research question 2).

Learner Difficulty 1: Striking similarities between Russian and Ukrainian cause confusion with regard to acquisition

Despite general ease in reading, Ben noticed a distinction between reading for *comprehension* and reading for *acquisition*. This point is well-illustrated through his *attention strategies*—he circled Ukrainian items spelled similarly to Russian but with subtle vowel changes, such as the following: “Добрий день”, “вечір”, “скільки”, “привіт”, and “теж” (see table 3):

Table 3

Ukrainian-Russian Comparison Chart (1)

Ukrainian Item (Marked by Ben in Textbook)	Corresponding Russian Item	Meaning of Item
Добрий день (<i>dobryy den</i>)	Добрый день (<i>dobryy den</i>)	Good day
Вечір (<i>vechir</i>)	Вечер (<i>vecher</i>)	Evening
Скільки (<i>skil'ky</i>)	Сколько (<i>skolka</i>)	How much
Привіт (<i>privit</i>)	Привет (<i>privet</i>)	Hello
Теж (<i>tezh</i>)	Тоже (<i>tozhe</i>)	Also

His strategy choice was explained in detail in the stimulated recall:

Researcher (myself): I see that you circled some letters here. For example, the vowel “и” in “Добрий день”. And some others on this page, like the “і” in “вечір”. Can you tell me why?

Ben: Yeah, these words that I marked are just so similar to Russian. There are really small differences, usually concerning spelling or pronunciation... I mean, “Добрий день” in Russian is “добрый день” with the shorter “ы” sound instead of “и”. And the “вечір” is just tricky as you know, in Russian it’s “вечер” with the “е”. I find it easy to confuse.

Researcher: I see. And I realised you’ve marked all the vowels that more or less correspond to the English vowel “i”. Can you explain why that is?

Ben: I certainly struggled with that in Ukrainian. As we know, in Russian there is “ы”, “й”, and “и” which all sound similar to the English vowel “i”. In addition to all these, there is the “і” and “ї” in Ukrainian, and I tried to watch out when to use each vowel.

(Stimulated recall)

Ben continued to elaborate on such ideas in the interview:

Although I can infer from context and understand Ukrainian words without problem, I feel like I’m not learning the language properly if I don’t try to take note of the very small differences between some Russian and Ukrainian words. So, it’s like...I cannot

accurately speak or write in Ukrainian unless I pay attention to the small details where they differ from Russian... It's actually taking up a lot more effort than I thought.

(Semi-structured interview)

In relation to this learner difficulty, Ben replied in the interview that an attention-based, “spot-the-difference” type of noticing strategy was what he deemed necessary to acquire the language:

When I saw those small differences amidst large similarities, my first instinct was to just find a strategy that involves paying attention to them. In this self-study situation right now, this means circling those small differences and giving effort to remember them. But if I had the chance, I would use these words with my Ukrainian friend next time I see her, so that I can commit these differences to memory more easily.

(Semi-structured interview)

Integrating Ben's data, we may see that he presented criticality in multiple dimensions—(a) pinpointing the issue in learning, (b) deciding a strategy in relation to “what works” from a second language acquisition perspective (in this case, he infers Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990)), and (c) implementing strategies realistically feasible in his given context (a self-studying environment as opposed to a social environment).

Learner Difficulty 2: Transfer is not always feasible for lexical items

Although Ben could read and understand most Ukrainian words at a basic level, there were certain lexical items that came as a challenge as they did not bear much resemblance to Russian. In his reading task sheets, Ben marked several unfamiliar words—“звати”, “дуже”, “будь ласка”, “дякую” alongside several others (table 4)—with the comment “guessing meaning from context” and “memorising word from scratch” as corresponding strategies:

Table 4
Ukrainian-Russian Comparison Chart (2)

Ukrainian Item Marked by Ben in Textbook with Pronunciation	Corresponding Russian Item	Meaning of Item
Звати (<i>zvati</i>)	Зовут (<i>zavut</i>)	Call (3 rd person plural)
Дуже (<i>duzhe</i>)	Очень (<i>ochen</i>)	Very
будь ласка (<i>bud' laska</i>)	Пожалуйста (<i>pazhaluysta</i>)	Please
Дякую (<i>dyakuyu</i>)	Спасибо (<i>spasiba</i>)	Thanks

His thinking was described as such:

Like I said before, I can read these short texts very easily, but that's not to say that I know all the vocabulary. In fact, there are quite many Ukrainian words that I just don't recognise at first sight because there seems to be no obvious link to their Russian equivalent. I just guess their meaning from context or I just look them up online.

(Stimulated recall)

When asked about his strategies with regard to this learner difficulty, Ben reflected that despite extensive foreign language experience in English, Spanish, and Russian, he was nonetheless still in the process of figuring out the most suitable strategy for remembering new vocabulary, especially as in such situations where cognitive, cross-linguistic transfer is not deemed not readily feasible:

Here, I'm just trying to just remember these words by rote memorisation—nothing special at all. I guess from experience, I just try to analyse the new word anyway and see if there are any interesting mnemonics. But overall, honestly, I'm still trying to figure out the best way to learn new vocabulary. It's actually a very difficult task.

(Semi-structured interview)

This reflection suggests that while strategy transfer from other languages remained a choice, it might not always be helpful in the new context. Ben continued to figure out whether to transfer from old strategies or develop new ones—such as understanding lexical differences through etymology:

I am very interested in Slavic languages, and so it interests me how come there are some lexical items that don't share the same roots as Russian. Logically, perhaps an introduction into the etymology of these Ukrainian words would be helpful. This is a new strategy that I might use if I could get some resources for this.

(Semi-structured interview)

Learner Difficulty 3: Negative transfer is challenging to avoid

The third challenge that Ben faced pertained to instances of *negative transfer* under the similarity effects of Russian and Ukrainian, which he appeared to be quite wary of himself. On his task sheets, there were constant markings of the consonant “T”. Ben gave an account of why that was in his stimulated recall:

The Ukrainian alphabet is so similar to that of Russian. Most of the letters sound the same so I don't think so much when pronouncing them. However, I sometimes mistakenly pronounce Russian sounds when I read in Ukrainian. It's just intuition and I don't realise it. The most obvious example is the letter “T”. I'm always

pronouncing it like Russian “g” instead of Ukrainian “h” and I need time to remind myself of this.

(Stimulated recall)

This example vividly illustrates the downside of an overreliance on item-based linguistic transfer when learning a genetically related language. Here, Ben showcased once more reflexive identification of a learning issue as well as an attention-based strategy that corresponded to the second language acquisition theory of noticing.

Learner Difficulty 4: Complexity arises when having to process cross-linguistic similarities and differences in the same item

Finally, Ben voiced out the unexpected complexities of having to process cross-linguistic similarities and differences at multiple levels for the very same phrase. In the stimulated recall, he concretised this difficulty with a lucid example—expressions of age.

Ben: When I read this, I immediately understood that this was about age. It’s just structurally equal to Russian. This example here in Ukrainian *мені 28 років* means “I am 28 years old”, and I instinctively grouped it with the Russian structure *мне 28 лет*.

Researcher: Okay, could you go more into detail about how you processed this grammatical item?

Ben: Like *мені* and *мне* are first-person dative cases in Ukrainian and Russian respectively—that’s obviously the correct grammatical case to address age. What I found confusing was that, while I had to register in my brain the similarities of grammatical structure, at the very same time I also had to remember that the *лет* equivalent in Ukrainian is *років*. Many details to process at the same time here, it could be confusing.

Researcher: Alright. I see. And how do you choose your strategies here?

Ben: I need to actively observe and remember similarities and differences, like a game. The best bet is to pay close attention.

(Stimulated recall)

This reflection depicts the inherently multi-faceted linguistic dimensions to attend to when reading a genetically related target language at a beginner level. It goes to show how the learner may be filtering both cross-linguistic similarities and differences simultaneously, and much like Ben’s previously identified issues, noticing strategies appear particularly straightforward for addressing this specific issue.

Discussion

By and large, Russian-speaker Ben's general ease in reading Ukrainian partly echoes the multiplicity of key studies suggesting facilitated learning of linguistically similar languages (Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis, 2005; De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; Lindqvist & Bardel, 2013; Odlin & Jarvis, 2004; Ringbom, 2007). Nevertheless, the four learner difficulties that emerged in Ben's case clearly imply that, somewhat contrary to these studies, the process of learning to read in a genetically related language is not without challenges. It is thus pivotal to analyse how the current findings sit with previously established ideas in the field, as well as how the data present novel food for thought in scholarship.

Firstly, Russian-Ukrainian linguistic similarities had eased Ben's Ukrainian language *comprehension* but complicated his *acquisition*. I concur with Grabe & Stoller (2011) that this *comprehension* versus *acquisition* distinction appears to be under-explored in the realm of reading strategies—a point that is also evinced by the sole focus on reading *comprehension* in landmark reading strategy inventories such as the renowned Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002) and the Survey of Reading Strategies (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Because reading constitutes a pivotal source of input for language learning (Stevenson, 2015), I see a pressing need to investigate *acquisition-related* strategies in addition to *comprehension-related* strategies. As the data suggest, it would be promising to research the former by associating reading strategies with established theories in second language acquisition. We are also compelled to consider whether O'Malley & Chamot's (1990) classical taxonomy of strategy function (i.e. cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective) may accommodate the additional categories of comprehension and acquisition.

Secondly, the existence of non-readily-recognisable Ukrainian vocabulary items implies that breakdowns in linguistic transfer and changes to perceptions of linguistic distance may occur even in closely related languages. That is, by applying Ringbom's (2006) types of cross-linguistic relations (see table 1), it is confirmed that “difference” and “zero” relations may surface in dynamic fashion even in a similar language pair. In these cases, learners are compelled to use strategies *beyond* item-based linguistic transfer, and how these strategies may be effectively developed is another complex matter of discussion. This proves that the time is ripe for the field to expand beyond broad, theoretical depictions of facilitated linguistic transfer among genetically related languages, and I advocate stronger attention on the *strategic learning* processes that take place in the absence of cross-linguistic similarities.

Thirdly, learner difficulty 3 demonstrates negative transfer (Lado, 1957) from Russian to Ukrainian. Such a learner difficulty compelled Ben to pay special attention to highly subtle cross-linguistic differences amidst general similarities between the two languages. Overall, this speaks to Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouses' (2018) review of how, in an effort to reduce negative transfer, old audiolingual teaching methods (i.e. listening and speaking) placed emphasis on contrastive analysis between the target and background languages. This process, however, is far from straightforward in this study's reading context, as Ben was forced to simultaneously

note similarities and differences of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and other decodable linguistic elements such as word structures, spelling, and phonetics (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014). This intricacy of learning a genetically related language with a skill as multifaceted as reading has yet to be further examined in scholarship.

Finally, Ben's critical reflection on his vocabulary strategies in other languages suggests that strategies are not always readily transferable to a new context, partly since learners may continuously be evaluating the helpfulness of old strategies. This triggers further contemplation on the nature of strategy transfer. While scholars such as Aghaie & Zhang (2012) and Mitits & Gavriilidou (2016) have reported successful transfer of strategies from one language context to another, I believe there is still room to explore learner perceptions on the transferability of strategies—particularly the metacognitive ones.

Conclusion: Contributions, Implications, and Limitations of the Study

This single case study presents a line of findings in relation to learner difficulties and strategy use when learning to read in a genetically related target language. Having also discussed the positioning of these findings in existing literature, I delineate the contributions and limitations of this study, highlighting some implications in between.

The contribution of this project is manifold, touching upon questions specific to this study and beyond. It pinpoints four learner difficulties that arise when learning to read in a genetically related language—a matter of high pedagogical relevance yet overlooked in existing literature. The examination of findings pinpoints areas for future research—namely, the distinction between acquisition and comprehension strategies in reading; developmental trajectories for strategy transfer; as well as the theoretical revision of cross-linguistic processing when learning a genetically related target language. The focus on Ukrainian—an under-represented language in applied linguistics—likewise contributes towards the diversity of insights in this vibrant field.

As with all research papers, it is pivotal to honestly acknowledge any limitations in the project. As a case study featuring one metalinguistically-aware learner with focus on one target language, I caution that the findings of this project may not be widely generalisable to other educational settings. Nevertheless, I should reiterate that there is no attempt to generalise from this study; rather, the aim is to gather preliminary in-depth, theoretical insights into a matter that has yet to be researched in detail, from where readers should critically determine if the findings might appropriately transfer to contexts of concern to them. Should this topic be of interest to readers, any future attempts to conduct this study in another setting is warmly welcome.

While this has been the journey of only one learner, it is my sincere hope that this study has offered an additional perspective on the learning of genetically related languages. The field of LLS, after all, currently seeks to converge with multilingualism—which is what this study has passionately aimed to achieve.

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