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Self-reports in Vocabulary Learning Strategy Research

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1. Introduction

There are a series of psychometric mechanisms widely used in the field of foreign language learning. One of these mechanisms is administering and analyzing *self-reports*, which have been the focus of controversy for many decades due to reliability concerns.

This article is aimed at providing evidence of the inadequacy of self-reports to measure—on their own—the use of vocabulary learning strategies and their efficiency. The first section of this work provides a general description of the notion of self-report, along with its main advantages and disadvantages. The second section presents the methodology and results of a small-scale study with Japanese older learners (60 years old and over) of Spanish, which reveals a certain degree of confusion in learners when approaching this kind of questionnaire. This article suggests that the lack of clear operational definitions of the constructs addressed in self-reports, along with a general lack of self-knowledge in learners, may reduce their reliability.

2. What are self-reports?

Self-reports constitute a psychometric mechanism commonly used in research in psychology and education which has been the target of criticism for many years (see Barker, Pistrang & Elliot, 2002; Paulhus & Vazire, 2009). This mechanism entails measuring a certain behavioral phenomenon based on the manner individuals perceive that phenomenon. For instance, teenagers may assess how well the statements in a questionnaire about social anxiety apply to them (e.g. *I feel uncomfortable in parties; I prefer reading rather than meeting with my friends*). This is an example of self-reporting called *direct self-rating*. Other kinds of self-reports include *indirect self-reports*, wherein the constructs being measured are obscured or the participants are misled, and *open-ended self-descriptions*, which are free of restrictions and allow for all kinds of observations (Paulhus & Vazire, 2009).

Several problems have been associated with self-reports—particularly with direct self-rating—, and these have cast doubts on the reliability of these mechanisms. First,

self-reports reflect the participant's *perceptions*, which may or may not accurately reflect reality. This may be due to an underdeveloped or lack of self-awareness concerning the topic addressed in the self-report. Also, individuals may want to put forth a positive image of themselves or their group of participants. This is usually avoided—or buffered—by means of *anonymous* self-reports. These may help participants feel that their integrity and reputation is protected, no matter what their answers are, although they would not necessarily hinder the attempt to protect the group's reputation. In addition, individuals may attempt to “help” the researcher by providing answers that are seemingly consistent with a certain image with which they identify (Chang, 2014). For instance, in a study regarding procrastination, a participant who perceives himself as “prone to procrastinate” may attempt to evidence this trait through his answers, even if not all of his “procrastination-consistent” answers are actually applicable to him.

Despite all these reliability concerns, it has been claimed that self-report data could be valid in certain contexts (such as in indirect self-reports) and that open-ended self-descriptions may provide data that otherwise would be inaccessible. Also, it is believed that self-reports are the only psychometric mechanism able to measure constructs such as self-efficacy and self-esteem (Paulhus & Vazire, 2009). In this regard, I argue that self-report mechanisms are insufficient even for constructs such as self-efficacy, and that they should be complemented with observation-based analyses. This is because there seems to be a gap between the participant's answers to a questionnaire and his perceptions and opinions. I will address this issue again in the following section.

Finally, self-report mechanisms are relatively simple to administer and interpret, inexpensive and fast (Paulhus & Vazire, 2009); consequently, they can include large sample sizes. In contrast, observational-data mechanisms may require more time and financial resources, which may limit the sample size and generate reliability concerns.

In the following section, I describe a study aimed at defining the reliability of self-reports with regard to the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) in learning a foreign language and their efficiency.

3. Inconsistency of self-reports: Reported use of vocabulary consolidation strategy versus efficiency of vocabulary consolidation strategies

3.1. Objectives and motivations

The original objective of this study was to describe the use of VCSs¹ of Japanese older learners of Spanish and to determine these learners' beliefs regarding the efficiency of

these strategies. This study was part of a larger research project centered on VLS use by older adults. However, in this article I will focus on the set of results that provided interesting insights regarding the reliability of self-reports².

This study was based on the work of Tseng and Schmitt (2008), who developed a model for vocabulary learning strategy use. This model comprises six latent variables: (i) Initial appraisal of vocabulary learning experience, which refers to intention formation, goal-setting and intention of enactment; (ii) self-regulating capacity (SRC) in vocabulary learning (VL), which relates to the learner's ability to control his psychological states and the environment during the learning task; (iii) strategic vocabulary learning involvement, which relates to the frequency and number of strategies used by the learner; (iv) mastery of vocabulary learning tactics, which refers to how effectively the learner uses the chosen strategies; (v) vocabulary knowledge, which is defined as *if* and *how well* the learner knows the lexical item; and finally, (vi) post-appraisal of vocabulary learning tactics, which involves a critical retrospection and evaluation of the learning process. Among these variables, I will focus on the measurement of (iv) *mastery of vocabulary learning tactics (MVLT)*.

As mentioned above, MVLT is defined as how well learners use strategies to increase their vocabulary knowledge. In order to measure this variable, Tseng and Schmitt administered a self-report questionnaire to 210 Chinese and 49 Taiwanese college students, who had had six years of English education and had a variety of majors. The questionnaire included 32 VLSs³, and the participants were required to indicate how often they used the strategy and whether they used it efficiently by selecting one option from a 5-point Likert scale (see Carifio & Perla, 2007), from "1: never used" to "5: yes, with lots of mastery". In other words, both questions (i.e., "how often do you use this strategy?" and "how efficiently do you use it?") were to be answered with a single rating. The present study, however, separated each item on Tseng and Schmitt's questionnaire into two questions because combining both questions was considered to be misleading. The following sections describe the administration of these two questionnaires and their results.

1 Schmitt (1997) established two categories for VLSs: vocabulary discovery strategies (VDSs), which include those strategies used to determine the meaning of a new lexical item; and vocabulary consolidation strategies (VCSs), which refer to the strategies used to make the new lexical item available for future use (i.e., memorization).

2 For all the results related to this study, see Ramírez Gómez (2015).

3 The entries were created based on Schmitt's (Schmitt, 1997) and Gu and Johnson's (Gu & Johnson, 1996; see Tseng & Schmitt, 2008) classification of VLSs.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

The participants included 45 older adults (60 years and over)—26 female and 19 male—, all of them native speakers of Japanese. The participants were students of a Spanish course organized as part of a research project on foreign language learning in older adults.

3.2.2. Procedure

As mentioned above, this study involved the administration of two self-report questionnaires. These were anonymous and comprised 35 entries regarding the use of different VCSs (both questionnaires contained the same VCSs; see Appendix for the list of items). These entries were extracted from a Japanese version of the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990), which was translated by Kato (2013) in a study on LS use among Japanese college students of Spanish.

The first questionnaire was aimed at accounting for older learners' frequency of use of VCSs, and the participants were required to mark one option from a 5-point Likert scale (from "1: *I do it often*" to "5: *I never do it*"). The second questionnaire focused on the participants' perceived efficiency of the VCSs in the questionnaire, and the participants were required to assess each strategy in a 5-point Likert scale (from "1: *very efficient*" to "5: *very inefficient*"). This questionnaire also included a sixth point in the scale for those strategies that had never been used by the participant ("*I don't know because I have never used this*").

The questionnaire on strategy efficiency was administered two months after the one on strategy use. Due to time constraints, the participants were required to take the questionnaires home and bring them back the following week.

For a simplified analysis, the 5-point Likert scale used in the first questionnaire was reduced to two categories: *used* and *not-used*⁴; and the 5-point Likert scale in the second questionnaire was reduced to the categories *efficient* and *inefficient*⁵. This last questionnaire also included a third category—*unknown*—for those strategies that had never been used by the participant.

4 *Used* strategies included Likert-scale points 1, 2 and 3, and *not-used* strategies included points 4 and 5.

5 *Efficient* strategies included Likert-scale points 1 and 2, and *inefficient* strategies included points 3, 4 and 5.

3.3. Results

The first phase of the analysis was to contrast each participant's answers regarding reported use of VCSs with the answers on VCS efficiency. A code was assigned to each contrasting pair: one code for those VCSs reported as *used* and *efficient*; another code for those reported as *used* and *inefficient* or *unknown*, another for those reported as *not used* and *efficient*, and so forth. Then, means of strategies that received each code per participant were calculated and are presented in the following chart.

Not used - efficient VCSs	Mean	10.97
	sd	10.35
Not used - inefficient or unknown VCSs	Mean	15.21
	sd	10.29
Used - efficient VCSs	Mean	46.86
	sd	18.69
Used - inefficient VCSs	Mean	12.01
	sd	10.81
Used - unknown VCSs	Mean	2.18
	sd	3.72

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of VCSs coded according to use and efficiency per participant

According to Table 1, there is a certain level of inconsistency in participants' answers: although some VCSs were reported as being *used* and considered *inefficient*, others were reported as *not used* and considered *efficient*, and a third group of VCSs was reported as *used* in the first questionnaire and as *never been used* in the second questionnaire.

A third phase of the analysis grouped theoretically consistent (*used-efficient* and *not used-inefficient* or *not used-unknown*) and inconsistent (*used-inefficient* or *used-unknown* and *not used-efficient*) answers.

Consistent answers		Inconsistent answers	
Mean	sd	Mean	sd
61.73	16.56	24.32	13.13

Table 2: Means and standard deviations of consistent and inconsistent answers

According to this analysis, although inconsistent answers were much fewer than consistent answers, the former were almost 40% as frequent as the latter.

3.4. Discussion

The comparison of the reported use of strategies and their reported efficiency showed that participants are relatively inconsistent in their answers. Logically, a learner who tries a strategy and finds it efficient will incorporate it in his strategic repertoire; at the same time, a learner who tries a strategy and finds it inefficient will not. It was unexpected then to observe that many participants reported to use strategies that they find inefficient, and that many do not use strategies that they find efficient.

There are a few possible explanations for this phenomenon: First, the participants may not be sure about what strategies they actually use, i.e., they may lack self-awareness in this regard. Also, they may not be able to recognize or match their used strategies with the entries in the questionnaire. These two reasons indicate that there could be a gap between what learners do, what they *consciously* do, and how well the entries of a questionnaire represent what they do. Another possible explanation is that their perception of efficiency of strategies varies depending on the context of use, which may be linked to their definition of *efficiency*. Finally, participants may have forgotten to include or to exclude certain strategies. Therefore, the results of a self-report may be greatly affected by the mental state—e.g. being distracted—of the participant at the time of answering the questionnaire.

This study shows that self-report mechanisms may be unreliable by themselves in the measurement of vocabulary learning strategy use. According to the discussion above, validity may be affected by different kinds of biases (e.g. making the group look good; helping the researcher). The data presented in this study adds to these concerns the fact that many participants may not truly understand some entries, may not be able to match them with their own behavior, may confound the operational definition of the constructs being measured, or may be distracted at the time of answering the questionnaire.

There are a myriad of factors that cast doubts on the validity of self-reports. Nonetheless, instead of discarding the use of this psychometric mechanism, I believe it is important to complement it with additional self-reports that measure the same construct in a different manner, with clear operational definitions, and also, with observational data-collection mechanisms. Combined, these measurement tools may show a more complete representation of a certain behavior while also revealing

subjacent phenomena.

4. Conclusions

This article supports the criticisms of self-reports as psychometric mechanisms for behavioral constructs. A study on the use of vocabulary consolidation strategies and their perceived efficiency—conducted by means of self-reports—showed that learners are not consistent in their answers. It was observed that many participants reported in one questionnaire using strategies that were considered inefficient in a second questionnaire; some participants reported not using strategies that were considered efficient; and others reported using strategies that were not judged in their efficiency in a subsequent questionnaire because “they had never been used before.”

This inconsistency may be the result of several factors (e.g. distraction, lack of clarity regarding operational definitions, lack of self-awareness), and it suggests that there is a gap between the behavior being measured and the participants’ reports with regard to such behavior.

The study presented in this article was developed unexpectedly. The first objective of the study was to describe the use of VCSs through self-reports, a mechanism that many researchers commonly use to measure behavior. The results, however, clearly showed that self-reports are not a reliable source of data by themselves. Nonetheless, they have shown to be extremely useful in some contexts; therefore, I believe that they should be utilized with caution and complemented with alternative self-reports that measure the same behavior from a different perspective, as well as other kinds of data-collection tools. This would certainly elevate the reliability of the whole study and also reveal different aspects of the behavioral phenomenon under observation.

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Appendix⁶

1	例文ごと覚える。
2	何度も書いてみる。
3	日本語の似た語感のものと結びつける。
4	単語帳や単語カードを使って覚える。
5	単語のイメージを思い浮かべ、覚える。
6	声に出して言ってみたり、リズムに乗せたりして覚える。
7	同義語・反意語などをセットで覚える。
8	日本語や自分が知っている他の言語の知識を使って覚えようとする。
9	覚えたい部分を、動作を使って演じたり、ジェスチャーを使って覚える。
10	しばらく時間をおいてからもう一度やって、繰り返しながら覚える。
11	単語の一部分から意味を推測する。(例えば、 corazonada という単語の意味が分からない時、単語に含まれている corazón から意味を推測する)
12	絵を利用し、覚えようとする。
13	自分の経験に関連づけて、覚えようとする。
14	大きな声で単語を何回も繰り返す。
15	単語を分類し、グループで想像し、覚えようとする。
16	単語をノートなどに分類し書いて、覚えようとする。
17	単語で話を作って、その話で単語を覚えようとする。
18	単語のつづりに注目し、覚えようとする。
19	単語の発音に注目し、覚えようとする。
20	勉強しながら、大きな声で話す。
21	習いたい単語を母語の単語と音で連想し、外国語の単語と母語の単語のイメージを想像する。
22	単語の目録を作成する。

6 Entries (26) and (30) also included a drawing explaining the strategy more clearly. These drawings have not been included here due to format constraints.

23	単語の意味をよく覚えたかどうかを自分で確認する。
24	一番目の文字に下線を施す。
25	日本語の似た語感のものと結びつける。
26	関係している単語を分類し、特別なパターンで書いて、覚えようとする。
27	新しい単語とあまり関係がない単語を含め、歌を作って、覚える。
28	自分がよく知っている場所を思いだし、新しい単語のイメージを頭の中で実際に置いているように覚える。
29	単語の形を思い浮かべ、覚える。
30	単語に沿って線を書いて、その形を覚える。
31	意味を知っている言葉で説明して、覚える。
32	勉強している言語の他の単語を使って、新しい単語を覚えようとする。
33	新しい単語で表を書いて、覚えようとする。
34	何度も頭の中で繰り返してみる。
35	日本語の単語を見ながら、外国語で何というか自分で確認する。
36	その他：