

A study on language learning strategies among the instructed EFL learners*

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Abstract: Based on empirical research and qualitative analysis, this paper aims to explore the language learning strategies use of instructed EFL learners. The implication of the findings is that language strategy training is necessary and EFL instructors may facilitate their students to become more effective learners by encouraging them to employ a variety of language learning strategies.

Key words: language learning strategies; strategies use; EFL learners

1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, in the field of second language learning and teaching, there has been a prominent shift in the research from the method of teaching to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a second language. Much research has been focused on ascertaining the characteristics of successful language learners and identifying the learning strategies they use so as to benefit the less successful language learners. For the purpose of defining and classifying language learning strategies, considerable progress has been made in developing definition and taxonomies (Rubin, 1981; O'Malley, et al., 1985a; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998). Many strategy training studies have been conducted, most of which have been proven successful. Research in language learning strategies shows great potential in the field of second language acquisition. However, the educational context, learning goals and task requirements of Chinese students learning English are different from the educational settings of the students previously studied. Can the findings of western research apply to Chinese students?

In China, research on English from learners' perspective like learning strategies, motivation, etc., has increasingly been a focus, with the purpose of exploring effective and efficient ways to improve the teaching and learning of EFL (English as a Foreign Language). However, most of the subjects in these researches are English majors, and the sample of non-English majors seems not representative enough, especially in terms of the differences in region and the subjects' English proficiency. In the context of instructed EFL learning, as a study financed by Qingdao University of Science and Technology, there is a need to investigate the learning strategies of instructed EFL students again so that we will have a better understanding of what strategy training they may need to achieve their learning goals.

2. Research method

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Researches regarding learner strategies and especially researchers dealing with metacognition in second language learning have demonstrated that learners are able to describe their choice of strategies, their setting of priorities, and the way they evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. This study relies on the students' ability to provide basic information regarding the set of strategies they use in English learning.

2.1 Subjects

The 128 subjects under study were selected randomly from 1st-year undergraduates of non-English majors in Qingdao University of Science and Technology where the researcher worked. The subjects including 59 males and 69 females were from 4 classes, in which 2 classes were majoring in editing, the other 2 in automation.

2.2 Instrument

In this study, the instrument used to elicit and collect information was in the form of questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire is on language learning strategy use. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Version 7.0 (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) was translated into Chinese, so that the students would have no difficulty in understanding them. The SILL contains 24 items, each having 5 choices ranging from "the statement is never or almost never true of me" to "the statement is always or almost always true of me". Based on the strategy classification system put forward by Oxford (1990), these 24 items belong to the following 6 categories: memory strategies cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

2.3 Procedures

First, the 128 subjects participated in the English learning strategy survey in a large classroom. Before the survey, the students were told that, though they should sign their name, sex, age, major, ect., the results for each student would not be used for grading or for any negative purpose, but to gather information and help them become better learners. They were allowed 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Then, the raw data in the study was inspected and to the researcher' surprise, the entire 128 questionnaire were valid.

To further analyze the characteristics of the strategy use of the subjects, based on the scores of their final exam, 15 subjects (80 and above 80) were selected to form the high score group, and 26 (below 60) were the low score group, then a comparative study was conducted.

And the raw data were carefully typed into the SPSS in order to gain the desired analysis.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Frequencies for strategy use

The frequencies analysis provided learners with the strategies frequently used and less frequently used by all the subjects. Table 1 showed the descriptive statistics of the 6 types of learning strategies.

The subjects in the study used compensation strategies (mean=3.055) most frequently. Some researchers also found that Asian students used compensation strategies most frequently. Perhaps this is a characteristic of Asian students, trying to make up for their lack of knowledge by other means, such as paraphrasing or guessing when learning English as a foreign language. According to Oxford (1990), compensation strategies—guessing when the meaning is not known or using synonyms or gestures to express meaning of an unknown word or expression—are the heart of strategic competence. Although memory strategies help language learners to store and retrieve new information in this study, memory strategies were the least reported (mean=2.522). This finding was consistent

with those in Nyikos and Oxford (1987) that although memory strategies can be powerful contributors to language learning, university students report using memory strategies infrequently. It might be that students simply do not use memory strategies very much, especially beyond elementary levels of language learning. However, an alternative explanation might be that they are unaware of how often they actually do employ memory strategies. Metacognitive strategies were the second least reported in this study (mean=2.541). Metacognitive strategies “deal with pre-assessment and preplanning, on-line planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities and of language use events”. Such strategies allow learners to control their cognition by coordinating the planning, organizing and evaluating of the learning process (Cohen, 1998). The result showed that most students may not effectively control their learning behavior. Affective strategies were the third least reported in this study. Chamot, et al (1987) found that the powerful affective strategies are woefully underused—reported by about 1 in every 20 language learners. This was, perhaps because that few studies have examined the frequency of use of affective strategies, and also because learners are not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings as part of the L2 learning process.

Table 1 Frequencies for strategy use

Strategy	N	Mean	Std. deviation
A	128	2.522	0.632
B	128	2.875	0.635
C	128	3.055	0.735
D	128	2.541	0.538
E	128	2.607	0.684
F	128	2.885	0.611

Notes: A=Memory; B=Cognitive; C=Compensation; D=Metacognitive; E=Affective; F=Social.

3.2 Comparative study for strategy use

In order to analyze the strategy use of the students in depths, a comparative study between high score group and low score group was carried out. Table 2 showed the two-sample t tests and regression analysis of the strategy use between the two groups.

Table 2 Comparative study for strategy use

	Two-sample t tests			Regression analysis	
	Mean		P-value	R-square	P-value
	H-group	L-group			
A	2.99	2.28	0.001	28.1%	0.001
B	3.46	2.66	0.003	28.0%	0.001
C	2.90	2.91	0.870	1.0%	0.559
D	3.09	2.28	0.003	30.8%	0.000
E	3.16	2.48	0.005	22.5%	0.003
F	3.12	2.47	0.002	15.7%	0.013

Notes: A=Memory; B=Cognitive; C=Compensation; D=Metacognitive; E=Affective; F=Social.

Table 2 indicated that apart from compensation strategy (H-group=2.90, L-group=2.91, $P>0.05$), there was a significant difference between the two groups in other strategies. That is to say, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective and social strategies were all the important impact factor on the EFL

learning. In terms of the degree of impact, Table 2 showed that memory strategy was 28.1%, cognitive strategy was 28.0%, while compensation strategy was 1.0% (uncorrelated), metacognitive strategy was 30.8% (the highest), affective strategy was 22.5% and social strategy was 15.7%. It revealed that metacognitive, memory and cognitive strategies were the most significant impact factors on the grades of the EFL learners.

4. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

From the results and discussion above, the following conclusions may be arrived at:

(1) The non-English major undergraduates were able to describe their use of a wide range of learning strategies. The most frequently used strategies in the study were compensation strategies, and the least frequently employed strategies were memory strategies.

(2) Cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory strategies, affective and social strategies were all the important impact factor on the EFL learning and demonstrated significant correlation with the learners' English proficiency.

(3) Metacognitive, memory and cognitive strategies were the top strongest positive factors of language proficiency.

So EFL instructors may facilitate their students to become more effective learners by encouraging them to employ a variety of language learning strategies, such as effectively planning, monitoring and evaluation; creating mental linkage and review well; practicing, analyzing and reasoning; guessing intelligently, asking questions, self-encouraging and cooperation, etc. This kind of language learning instruction can be embedded into daily lessons so that it becomes an integral part of the regular class routine, rather than a supplementary activity so as to enhance the EFL learners' learning effect and efficiency.

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