

A Comparison of Language Learning Strategies Adopted by Secondary and University Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLS) that help learners enhance their language competence have played an important role in language learning; their spectrum has become one fertile area of research in second language acquisition (MacIntyre, 1994). The objective of this study is to investigate the LLS used by secondary and university students and the background variables influencing their use of LLS. An individual background questionnaire and the Language Learning Strategy Inventory (LLSI) were used as the research instruments. The LLSI was modified by the researcher from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The findings reveal that grades 12-13 students use memory strategies (medium use) and first year university students adopt compensation strategies (medium use) in learning English. To conclude, grades 12-13 students in Hong Kong used LLS in a low to medium use, with no high use; whereas university students used LLS in medium use, with no high use.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics

1. Introduction

Language pedagogy shifted its focus to student-centred classroom learning in the 1970s and 1980s. New teaching methods, such as 'communicative language teaching' and 'task-based teaching', were explored by language instructors, and there was a growing focus on the learners themselves. Within this period, 'learners have become the main figures in language classrooms where learning tasks have been conceptualized and approached from the learners' viewpoint' (Rubin, 1987).

During the last twenty years, a growing interest in learners' characteristics has developed. This focus has led to an increased number of studies examining how learner differences affect language achievement. Learner differences include gender, personality, language anxiety, motivation, aptitude, learning styles, and learners' beliefs. Simultaneously, researchers have concentrated on a new area of research in language learning strategies which involves how learners internalise language processes. Language learning strategies have been defined as "steps taken by the learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, or use of information" (Oxford & Crookall, 1989:404). Oxford expands the definition further as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (1990:8). Language learning strategies have played a very significant role in understanding language processes as well as the skills that learners develop in learning a foreign or second language.

Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) is used as the research instrument in this study because the researcher wants to see if the SILL is appropriate for the Hong Kong context. The present work focuses on exploring the use of language learning strategies and the relationships of these strategies to individual variables such as gender, age, English learning experience, students' self-rating of English proficiency level, and students' perceptions of ESL teacher's teaching method and the English language curriculum. The survey was conducted in the specific cultural context of Hong Kong, and thus provides a contribution to the realm of language learning strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Language Learning Strategies

Many researchers have defined language learning strategies since they became an area of the research interest in second language acquisition (SLA). Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought in these definitions: the elements and the purposes (Tamada, 1997). The former refers to the features of the strategies themselves, while the latter shows the purposes for which learners intend to use these strategies.

Although there is little agreement on the definition of learning strategies, Wenden et al (1987) perceived language learning strategies as “techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, basic skills, functional skills, cognitive abilities, language processing strategies, problem-solving procedures” (p7), whereas Ellis (1994) viewed them as “a mental process, and both observable and unobservable behaviours”.

Bialystok’s (1978) definition of the purpose of learning strategies centres on enhancing language competence and Chamot’s (1987) on facilitating language learning. Later, Oxford (1990) elaborated the definition by saying that the use of learning strategies could have an affective purpose, such as making language learning more enjoyable. Hence, the purpose of developing language learning strategies “has changed from becoming good or successful learners who speak a second language fluently, to becoming intelligent learners who know very well about how to learn a second language more successfully” (Tamada, 1997:4).

Without limiting the definitions of language learning strategies, MacIntyre (1994) held a different view:

The definition of learning strategies...is sufficiently broad to encompass elements that might be better considered as other types of variables, such as personality or situational factors. It will be argued here that the theory and research related to language learning strategies should pare down the definition of ‘strategies’ to focus on techniques to facilitate language learning that are deliberately chosen by the learner. Personality and social factors can be included in a broader system that describes strategy use and the factors that influence it (p185).

This notion has given an impetus to linking language learning strategy studies with the social and psychological domains: it also has connected language learning strategy studies with other variables.

2.2 Characteristics of Language Learning Strategies

Some researchers use the term “learner strategies” (Wenden & Rubin, 1987), others “learning strategies” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Chamot & O’Malley, 1994), and still others “language learning strategies” (Oxford, 1990, 1996). Nevertheless, there are a number of characteristics in the generally accepted view of language learning strategies. Lessard-Clouston (1997), in his survey of the literature, found the following to be widely accepted characteristics of learning strategies: a) language learning strategies are learner generated; they are steps taken by language learners; b) language learning strategies promote language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner’s skills in listening, speaking, reading, or writing the L2 (=second language) or FL (=foreign language); c) language learning strategies may be visible (behaviours, steps, techniques etc) or invisible (thoughts, mental processes) and d) language learning strategies involve information and memory (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules etc).

Undoubtedly, there are similarities and differences between the taxonomies of the characteristics of language learning strategies. These characteristics are proposed by Wenden & Rubin (1987), Cohen (1990) and Oxford (1990). MacIntyre’s (1994) features of language learning strategies are more limited than Oxford’s. This can be seen in MacIntyre’s social-psychological model of strategy use. Apart from characteristics, researchers have tried to find out the strategies used by good and less effective language learners.

2.3 Good Language Learners

Many researchers have investigated successful language learners and their strategies. The major finding by Oxford (1989, 1993) is that successful language learners, by and large, use more and better learning strategies than do poorer learners. This result was consistent with those in other L2 learning strategy studies (Rubin 1975; Naiman et al 1978; Oxford 1989). Oxford (1989) suggested that good language learners cope with their own learning process through metacognitive strategies, such as paying attention, self-monitoring and self-evaluating. They control their feelings and attitudes through affective strategies such as anxiety reduction and self-encouragement. They also work with others to learn the language by using social strategies like asking questions and becoming culturally aware. In addition, they use the language directly by employing cognitive strategies such as practicing naturalistically, analyzing contrastively and summarizing. Eventually, they overcome knowledge constraints through compensatory strategies, like guessing meanings intelligently and using synonyms or other production tricks when the precise expression is not known. Only a few researchers have surveyed unsuccessful language learners (Hosenfeld, 1977; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot & Kupper, 1989). Three distinct points were found in these studies regarding the strategies of less effective L2 learners.

The first notion is that less effective learners do not know what strategies they are using; they cannot describe their strategies (Nyikos, 1987). The second view is that such learners use fewer strategies than more successful learners and employ non-communicative or rather routine strategies such as translation, rote memorization and repetition (Nyikos, 1987). The final perspective is that many ineffective learners are conscious of their strategies and use just as many as the more effective learners do--but they apply these strategies in a random and desperate manner, without targeting the strategies to the task. Further, they do not show the careful orchestration and creativity shown by more effective learners (Vann & Abraham, 1990). These findings may be correct for at least some less effective learners, but, probably, L2 learners who are less successful are not all alike in their uses of learning strategies. Some of them might be limited in the number and quality of strategies; others might use them unconsciously; and still others might use a substantial number of strategies that lack coherence. Hence, more research is needed to compare less effective learners with their more successful counterparts.

2.4 Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies

A taxonomy, according to Richards, Platt and Platt (1992), is the classification of items into classes and sub-classes. In second language acquisition, language learning strategies have been classified by many scholars [Tarone (1980), O'Malley et al (1985), Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990), Stern (1992), Cohen (1998)]. A key distinction made by Oxford is that between direct and indirect strategies. Strategies are tabulated under these two superordinate headings in order to show that, although there are differences between the particular strategies identified by different researchers, there is general agreement about the overall nature of learner strategies. Although most strategies are 'positive' in their orientation, many researchers have identified a compensatory element: for example, Tarone (1980) talks about 'avoidance strategies', Oxford (1990) about 'compensation' and Cohen (1998) about 'cover', whilst communication strategies are seen by some researchers as compensatory too.

In order to better understand the classification of strategies, the major strategy taxonomies are compared and discussed below. O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) strategy system, which has received considerable attention since its appearance, distinguishes three broad types of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective (also called social affective). Basically this classification grew from Brown and Palincsar's (1982) and Anderson's (1995) cognitive psychological concepts. For cognitive development, most secondary school teachers in Hong Kong teach phonics and, therefore secondary students have the opportunity to practise the sounds of English. As a socio-affective strategy, students write down their feelings in their diaries or in the journal writing exercise books. However, metacognition is not obvious for grades 12-13 students in Hong Kong.

To conclude, we can see that there are problems in classifying language learning strategies. Almost all L2 strategy classifications have been divided into the following groups: 1) systems related to successful language learners (Rubin, 1975); 2) systems based on psychological functions (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); 3) linguistically based systems dealing with guessing, language monitoring, formal and functional practice (Bialystok, 1981); 4) systems related to separate language skills (Cohen, 1990); and 5) systems based on different styles or types of learners (Sutter, 1989). The existence of these distinct strategy taxonomies is a major problem in research on L2 learning strategies as there is a lack of a coherent, well accepted system for describing them. Yet, these attempts to classify learning strategies have provided an initial framework for a further survey of learning strategies. Also, efforts to define learning strategies provide a well-defined framework for learning strategy training research and on variables affecting the choice of learning strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Subjects

In this study, the researcher chose students from three different schools in three different areas in Hong Kong and 110 first year university students as the research sample. There are 501 government subsidized secondary schools in Hong Kong, which are categorized in three bandings. Band 1 recruits the best students, Band 2 has average students, and Band 3 has the weakest ones. Students of these three bands were chosen because the researcher wanted to survey the LLS used by advanced learners within these categories. The present study does not compare the students' English proficiency or general academic abilities since the Hong Kong government allocates these students according to their performance in Chinese, English and Mathematics when they are in Primary schools. School A is a Band 2 school in the New Territories using Chinese as the medium of instruction. The school population is 1160. 92 grade 12 students (43 males; 49 females) and 101 grade 13 students (50 males; 51 females) were chosen as subjects.

The first language of these students is Chinese and they receive no training in the use of language learning strategies. School B is a Band 3 school in Kowloon using Chinese as the medium of instruction. The school population is 790. 107 grade 12 students (74 males; 33 females) and 130 grade 13 students (89 males; 41 females) were chosen as subjects. The first language of these students is Chinese and they receive no training in the use of language learning strategies. School C is a Band 1 school on Hong Kong Island using English as the medium of instruction. The school population is 896. 97 grade 12 students (50 males; 47 females) and 101 grade 13 students (50 males; 51 females) were chosen as subjects. The first language of these students is Chinese and they receive no training in the use of language learning strategies.

For university students, 110 first year students (55 boys + 55 girls) of various study disciplines from a local university in Hong Kong participated in the present study. All of them are Chinese by nationality and their mother tongue is Cantonese. They receive no training in the use of LLS.

3.2 Procedure

The original English and Chinese versions of the Background Questionnaire and LLSI were reviewed by a number of bilingual educators. A pilot study was conducted in order to revise the questionnaire items, check testing procedures, determine the anticipated length of time needed to administer the survey, and check the reliability of the questionnaire. In the pilot study, two secondary schools and one university in Hong Kong were randomly selected. One grade 12 class and one grade 13 class in the secondary sector and one first year class in the university were chosen as subjects. A total of 162 pilot test questionnaires were distributed and collected. According to the results of the pilot test, the reliability and validity of the LLSI were established.

A factor analysis was conducted on the pilot study data so as to determine the validity of the instrument. The factor analysis surveyed the inter-relationships among the items and identified groups of items that shared adequate variation. All items had a factor loading of at least .39. According to the sequence of the percentage of variance, the researcher identified and categorized six factors, namely, cognitive, social, association, compensation, assistance and constructive. Apparently, this outcome is different from Oxford's direct and indirect strategies.

3.3 Data analysis

Each questionnaire had a reference number and all questionnaire answers were entered into a computer data file. The file was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, standard deviations and percentages were then calculated. In the 5-point Likert scale, an average score of 1.0--2.4 is defined as low use; 2.5--3.4 as medium use; and 3.5--5.0 as high use. Two measures, T-test and one-way ANOVA, were also used to determine the effects of the following background variables: gender, grades, language learning experience, self-rating proficiency level, perceptions of teaching method and curriculum in ESL education in schools, and learners' strategy use. The Scheffe post-hoc test was used to determine any significant differences. The standard for significance adopted in this study was $p < .05$.

3.4 Results

Descriptive statistics was used to understand the language learning strategies used by grades 12-13 students. If the average score is 1.0--2.4, then it is described as low use; 2.5--3.4 as medium use; and 3.5--5.0 as high use (Oxford, 1990). The mean score of 628 grades 12-13 students in this study was 2.43, low use of language learning strategies. According to factor analysis, these students used six dimensions of language learning strategies: cognitive, social, association, compensation, assistance and constructive strategies. Referring to Table 1 (appendix), the highest among the six dimensions was association strategies, with a mean of 2.83. This shows that students used association strategies (medium use) in learning English. To conclude, these students used language learning strategies in a low to medium use, with no high use. On the other hand, the mean score of 110 first year university students was 2.91, medium use of language learning strategies. With reference to Table 1, they used compensation strategies most, with constructive strategies the least, to learn English. To conclude, these students used LLS in medium use, with no high use.

4. Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

This research surveyed the language learning strategies used by grades 12-13 students and first year university students and the background variables affecting their strategy use. 628 secondary students, 356 boys and 272 girls, and 110 university students participated in this study.

Oxford's (1990) SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) was used as research instrument. Because of different cultural context, the SILL was modified by the researcher to form the LLSI (Language Learning Strategy Inventory). The findings revealed that the mean score of secondary students in this study was 2.43, low use of language learning strategies; with 2.91, medium use of LLS for university students.

According to factor analysis, students used six dimensions of language learning strategies: cognitive, social, association, compensation, assistance and constructive strategies. The highest among the six dimensions was association strategies, with a mean of 2.83 for secondary students; compensation strategies for university students, with a mean of 2.91. According to the findings, secondary students used assistance strategies least, low use; university students used constructive strategies least, medium use. We could conclude that grades 12-13 students in Hong Kong used language learning strategies in a low to medium use, with no high use; university students used LLS in medium use, with no high use.

Assistance and constructive strategies were used to substitute Oxford's (1990) memory and affective strategies because this researcher found it more appropriate to use these terms to describe the items on the LLSI. Assistance strategies mean using assistance to help and overcome the potentials in language learning, for example, the use of flashcards, physical actions, and a learning diary. Constructive strategies, on the other hand, involve learners' active and enthusiastic behaviour in language learning, for instance, inferencing and rewarding oneself. The definitions of cognitive, compensation, social and association strategies were identical to Oxford's (1990) definition. Metacognition is absent in this study because the participants are not ready to develop their cognitive development to learn and apply metacognitive strategies. It might be the problem of physical, and mental development, or social and cultural trends in Hong Kong which makes students, teachers and parents pay attention only to students' academic performance, rather than their metacognitive ability and creativity. However, it would be helpful to explore whether these students use metacognition to learn other subjects.

This study proposes the following implications for ESL teachers in secondary schools and universities in Hong Kong:

- a) Language teachers must consider the existence of language learning strategies in all learners, regardless of age. Learners are different in terms of ability and intelligence. Language teachers should recognize and make use of these differences to help language instruction;
- b) Language teachers should have a knowledge of the students' background before instruction in the target language. They need to know their language learning experience, self-rating proficiency, and perception towards the teacher's teaching method and the English language curriculum;
- c) It is indispensable for the learners to be conscious of the importance of language learning strategies. A forum on learning strategies would be helpful for students to share with, and learn from each other;
- d) The findings show significant differences between the years of studying English and the use of language learning strategies. We can infer that starting formal instruction earlier could aid students' use of language learning strategies;
- e) Language teachers should bring real-life situations to class. Role-playing and authentic living experience are recommended in language classes;
- f) Language teachers can use multimedia, for example, the internet, to interest students, to introduce different cultures and countries, and to develop their worldwide perspective.

The followings are recommendations for further research:

- a) Replication of this study should be surveyed worldwide, with different age groups and larger sample size;
- b) Casual relationship research is needed so as to understand the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the background variables affecting strategy use;
- c) More research is needed to understand the correlation among proficiency, motivation, and the use of language learning strategies for secondary and university students in Hong Kong;
- d) It is vital to find out ESL teachers' awareness and perception of language learning strategies. Only when these teachers are conscious of and have knowledge of language learning strategies would they be able to help the students with the strategies;
- e) Finally, teaching materials could promote the use of strategies. This can be seen in Ellis and Sinclair's (1989) book on helping learners to learn English. Exploration with other teaching materials is also recommended.

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Appendix

Table 1 Summary of the six dimensions of language learning strategies

<i>Grades 12-13 students</i>		<i>1st year university students</i>	
<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Association	2.83 (medium use)	Compensation	3.10 (medium use)
Constructive	2.55 (medium use)	Association	3.00 (medium use)
Social	2.54 (medium use)	Cognitive	2.99 (medium use)
Cognitive	2.37 (low use)	Social	2.95 (medium use)
Compensation	2.32 (low use)	Assistance	2.75 (medium use)
Assistance	1.98 (low use)	Constructive	2.66 (medium use)
*1.0-2.4=low use; 2.5-3.4=medium use		3.5-5.0=high use	