

Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition

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Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Learning strategies play essential roles on students' understanding information and solving problems. Not being aware of learning strategies and how to use them may lead to students' failure. Since conducting research on learning strategies is difficult as they are not observable directly and selecting a reliable method is an issue, this paper aims to investigate the significant contribution to the development of learning strategies within Second Language Acquisition studies through reviewing three research-based related articles to adapt the findings to new research. Regarding different sections of this paper, it explains the learning strategies related to the new study and describes its pedagogical context. Moreover, it discusses the articles research strategies, research designs, methods of data collection and data analysis, validity, reliability and ethics separately. It also considers their shortcomings and suggests some solutions. Furthermore, conclusion and general implications for the new research project are discussed. Finally, it decides to conduct a case study design, employ mixed method research to collect more reliable data, apply action research and administer Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire, use descriptive and content analysis and cross-check the findings in order to recognize students' learning strategies usage.

INTRODUCTION

Learner characteristics or individual differences (IDs) play leading roles in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Factors such as aptitude, cognitive functioning, motivation, emotion, learning strategies, and other demographic variables are significant factors in language learning. Among these factors, the focus of the current paper is on learning strategies. A large number of important studies and research have been conducted in this area by renowned researchers in SLA to show that individual learning strategies play principal roles in language learning. Moreover, scholars have written and edited many books on language learning strategies. As everybody is unique, learning strategies vary from person to person. One learner may learn a word by breaking it down into components; the other might learn a sentence by dividing it into chunks and another learner may learn a paragraph by reading it aloud several times. In addition, one group of learners avoids details in learning strategies while the other group searches for minor details. Although some prefer group work, others learn more effectively when working alone. The identification of learning strategies empowered the learners to manage their own learning because learning strategies are considered extremely powerful learning tools ^[1]. Effective learning occurs when learners often use organizing, assessing, and planning which are the meta-cognitive strategies taxonomy and accompanied by cognitive strategies such as analyzing, reasoning, transferring information, taking notes, and summarizing. It can be monitored that efficient learners have effective control over their learning. Successful language learners have noticeable characteristics and they are also highly motivated. They are sociable, hard-working, good guessers and are not scared of making mistakes. They are able to apply all these factors in their language learning. Comparing good language learners and those who are less successful, it can be observed that the latter has not recognized the way they learn yet, while the former have control over their learning strategies. Accordingly, it is essential for the learners to learn how to learn and teachers are responsible to facilitate learning besides awaken curiosity and inspire creativity in learners. I studied Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Iran and I had to teach English as compulsory units in a high school for two semesters to receive my bachelor degree. It was the time I understood why Iranian students cannot learn English well ^[2,3]. However, they have been taught English for more than six years. Among fundamental issues, lack of paying attention to students' learning strategies bothered me seriously. Teaching and learning English in Iran looks like a complicated problem which needs a scientific and technological revolution. Nonetheless, the learners may not acquire it well. Having taught children and adults, I always tried to be an eclectic teacher to improve my students' learning and satisfied them. Since learner-centered classroom is preferable, I am

interested in individual differences and learning strategies. I would like to help the learners to be as autonomous as possible, so I will conduct some pieces of research in this field. I will be a member of a research group in my country and do some research on Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) in Iran and England to collect data, compare the data and find the effective variables. I hope the English teaching system in high schools in Iran will benefit from the result of the forthcoming research. Drawing on the helpful aspects from existing research, I have chosen three articles. It has been studied that students in Hong Kong while two other groups studied students in Iran. They studied LLSs in different contexts so that I can analyze, discuss and criticize them in order to adapt their procedures and findings for my own research ^[4-6].

CONTEXT

The educational system in Iran seems to follow the banking model of education, although it is changing gradually. Teachers deposit information and skills to students who are taught to pass the test, therefore the emphasis is on memorization. There is no critical thinking in the classroom. Banking education never makes the learners critical thinkers. Teachers are the absolute authorities over students. They may act as well-trained robots with no emotion ^[7]. Teachers are dictated by the educational system and students are taught strictly. The least crucial agenda is learner's needs and learning strategies. This system prefers obedient learner, not critical thinker. On the other hand, the political atmosphere in Iran is trying to replace English language with Arabic, although the considerable need for English and its development in industry, economy, science and education is extremely obvious. As a result, carrying out more research and proving conclusively the result may convince the authorities of the educational system to induce some changes in the system to help both learners and teachers to improve English language learning and teaching. In fact, I am eager to do some pieces of research in this field to help English language learners in my country. My study will be conducted in a university setting in Iran. Participants will include thirty students, eighteen females and twelve males, ranging in age from 20 to 25 years old. All of whom will be native speakers of Persian and studying TEFL, so English is their foreign language. The study will investigate some learning strategy variables including cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social strategies. I consider the typical classification of learning strategies and my aim is to provide a general recognition of current use of these variables among Iranian TEFL students. Accordingly, I want to investigate how the learners employ the strategies in their learning and to what extent they are aware of it and the investigation will emphasize on if these strategies can be taught and how the use of them should be improved ^[8,9].

LEARNING STRATEGIES DEFINITION AND TAXONOMY

Definition

The study believes LLSs are referring to conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors that learners used to improve their knowledge and understanding of a target language. Although I think learning strategies are the conscious use of efficient techniques to understand new information, link it to the related existing data, and use it to learn effectively ^[10-12].

Taxonomy

Learning strategies can be classified into different variables, and every scholar and linguist has their own categories. It categorizes LLSs as cognitive, meta-cognitive and social-affective strategies. It classifies language learning strategies into cognitive, meta-cognitive, mnemonic or memory related, compensatory, affective, social, and self-motivating strategies. It classifies them into cognitive, memory-related, compensatory, meta-cognitive, affective and social. There are also other classifications. It focuses on the development of learning strategies since the 1970s. He compares learning strategies classification with classifications of learning strategies and reveals that Oxford's is complete and detailed. It divided learning strategies into direct and indirect categories ^[13-15]. Direct classification, which is related to the use of language, consists of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. In addition, indirect classification, which underpin language learning, are meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies. The cognitive strategy is a mental process and when learning, it helps the selection of relevant information and rejection of irrelevant one. It relates to recognizing, comprehending, organizing materials, summarizing, repeating, translating, using formulas and patterns, problem-solving and interacting in the target language. The memory strategy helps the learners to store and retrieve information. Moreover, it is involved in semantic mapping, grouping, representing sounds and images. Another strategy is the compensation strategy which is employed when learners need to continue the communication despite the gap in their linguistic knowledge. It helps them to make up the missing knowledge by adjusting the message, combining words or switching to the mother tongue. It categorizes these three strategies as direct strategies. The meta-cognitive strategy involves in thinking about the mental process that is engaged in the learning process. In addition, it controls and regulates the learning, plans and decides how to learn effectively, monitors and then evaluates it. Being able to use affective strategy, learners can control the level of anxiety, increase the motivation and positive thinking and improve their self-esteem. The affective strategy is involved in emotional, motivational, attitudinal, and personal characteristic aspects of the learners. The last but not the least in the categories is the social strategy that is quite crucial because languages are social phenomena and are learned to communicate with others. It is involved in interacting with the speakers of the target language to improve the language, cooperating with peers and developing cultural understanding. Moreover, those who do pair-work and group-work in a classroom make use of social strategy. It classifies these three as indirect strategies ^[16-18].

THE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The study, one hundred and ten undergraduate university students in Hong Kong to find different learning strategies among seventy-seven more effective and thirty-three less effective learners regarding their scores on a standardized proficiency test. They consider mental and communicative strategies learners adopt in order to acquire the language. The focus of their study is mostly on the relationship between the learners' individual differences and learning strategies and if effective learners share their strategies or not. Furthermore, they concentrate on if it can be possible to teach the strategies precisely, and if so, to what extent it can influence second language acquisition. They also focus on the learners' usage of the strategies outside the classroom. It implements a quantitative method and carries out survey design. They collect data through conducting two-part online surveys. In the first part, biographical and attitudinal information is gathered while, in the second part, students rate thirty-item questionnaire on a four-point scale to indicate their attitude regarding in-class and out-of-class strategies. They use a chi-square analysis and the result shows that more effective learners use communicative oriented strategies such as learning by watching or listening to the native speakers, watching television in English and conversing. However, less effective learners use authority-oriented strategies like teacher's correction, teacher's help and having their own textbooks. In addition, study indicates more effective learners are really eager to study the language out of the class. Furthermore, seventy-eight percent of more effective learners enjoy learning English while just twenty-seven percent of less effective learners enjoy it. Accordingly, twenty-four per cent of the latter does not like it at all. As a result, it can be beneficial to teach the less effective learners the strategies underlying their learning since they become more motivated to learn. Effective learners are highly autonomous and motivated, so they consider the language as a tool for communication to be acquired not as a subject to be learned. To be taken into consideration, every task in the language learning environment needs special learning strategy, and when the appropriate strategy can be deployed, learning will happen effectively. For those who are aware of what strategy to use to become fully involved in, learning can be joyful. Moreover, these learners are more motivated than those who are unconscious of the process underlying the learning. As a matter of fact, less effective learners ought to be helped to learn how to recognize their learning strategies, so learning how-to-learn curriculum should be added to a course in order to assist the learners identify their learning strategies^[19,20]. This research reveals that successful learning process is dependent on the ability to recognize, deploy and control learning strategies in their learning process. It seems unlikely that the research result can be reasonably reliable because of some shortcomings. First of all, there is no balance between the proportion of more effective and less effective learners. Then, an online survey may not be reliable as there is no evidence under what circumstance the participants answer the questionnaire. Moreover, the method of data collection does not support the reliability of the data because just applying questionnaire has not supported collecting accurate data in identifying LLSs (ibid). I really matter the shortcomings of this research in my study to reduce unreliability. As an English teacher, I am deeply worried about the language learners in my country, because individual learning strategies are rarely taken into account by teachers. Accordingly, learners are not taught to become aware of these strategies. On second thoughts, it is the educational system responsibility to review and revise the teaching and learning English language underlying policy time to time^[21-23].

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Learners undertake a study to discover to what extent undergraduate students in Iran use learning strategies and which variables affect the choice of these strategies. Memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies have been considered in the study, which is Oxford's validated category. They choose one hundred and ninety-six undergraduates EFL students, seventy-nine males and one hundred and seventeen females who are between eighteen and twenty-five years old. They all are the native speaker of Persian from three classes of two universities in Iran. After administering the TOEFL to all of them, participants are divided into high-proficiency (top 27%), low-proficiency (bottom 27%), and mid-proficiency learners. They apply quantitative method and survey design, and collect data through administering the SILL questionnaire. They measure the reliability of the questionnaire by the test-retest method. Descriptive statistics is employed to report the result. It is understood that the learners are the medium strategy users. However, the use of meta-cognitive strategy shows significant difference with all other strategies. Then compensation, affective and cognitive strategies, which do not show any noticeable difference with each other but are, used more frequently than social and memory strategies. Finally, social and memory strategies show notable differences with all other strategies as they are used less frequently than other strategies^[24-26]. The study shows that high-proficiency language learners are highly motivated in using learning strategies and tend to be autonomous while the low-proficiency language learners are dependent on their teacher; mid-proficiency language learners are in between. In fact, Iranian language learners are seldom aware of language learning strategies; therefore, they should be taught how to identify their learning strategies. They learn the language for the usage, not the use. They learn the language in the classroom and outside of the classroom there is no chance to use it in the real world. The Educational System policy pays little attention to the needs analysis that is a part of curriculum development and is essential in syllabus design. A reform ought to be done at the earliest stage of language learning. These three pieces of research contribute significantly to the necessity of applying learning strategy training syllabus to the curriculum. Critically speaking, this collaborative research contains notable aspects which I will apply to my study such as classifying participants as high, mid, and low proficiency level as well as administering the test-retest to estimate the reliability. However, the research method and design that I will adapt should be more thorough^[27].

DISCUSSION

The three aforementioned articles investigate different strategies used among undergraduate and postgraduate students in Hong Kong and Iran. I have studied them in detail in order to consider their method, design, method of data collection and data analysis adapt for my research. One of the important factors which affect the use of learning strategies in learning is motivation that has been not considered in these three pieces of research. If the learners are expected to employ the learning strategies in their learning, they should be motivated. The quantitative method has been applied in these three articles. However, I will choose a mixed method design as it can be more valid to do quantitative and qualitative method research to find more accurate learning strategies and variables affecting the strategies to help learners who are not able to identify their learning strategies. On the other hand, applying just a quantitative method in this type of research can reduce the validity. Regarding these three articles, survey design has been applied that may not assess fully what the researchers expect to, so I will employ action research and case study design to conduct more valid research. Although their methods of data collection are to some extent valid and the questionnaire is standardized, administering the test-retest is crucial to enhancing more reliability. Moreover, adding other appropriate instruments is necessary to collect more reliable data. I will also administer SILL questionnaire and interview the learners while they are doing tasks and record video when they are thinking aloud to add to the reliability of my research as much as possible. I need statistics, content and discourse analysis to analyze the data as discourse analysis will be more reliable and useful. In whole, these three articles have lightened my way to conduct my study better.

Some solution explores issues to language learning strategy research through analyzing existing research. It can be beneficial to do mixed method research to find more learning strategies and variables affecting the strategies to help learners who are not able to identify their learning strategies. It cannot happen through observation because the mental process is not observable. The possible way can be learners' reports and the validity is related to how the learners can be truthful. Language learners usually write diaries and journals, answer the questionnaire, are interviewed, and think aloud to help researchers explore more about their LLSs. However, each of them has its inaccuracy and shortcoming. Researchers try to do their best to come to a desirable result. As an example, a questionnaire that is the most frequent and efficient method, cannot sometimes be reliable, because the learners may not remember the strategies they have used in the past. Furthermore, interviewing cannot be valid, because the learners may forget some details of their thought processes. The thinking-aloud protocol is another instrument to collect relevant data. The learners describe what they are doing while working on a task one at a time. These thinking aloud protocols tend to reveal on-line processing and it can assist in doing more reliable and valid research in the area. Having class discussion exactly after doing a task and eliciting the individual current strategy applied to doing the task is another tool for collecting information. This can be a tactic to discover the rich variety of practical strategies. In addition, it tends to help other learners as well and motivates them to be critical thinkers. It states the strategies vary regarding the language learning objectives; therefore, learners should be taught especial strategy used for the main objective. LLSs can be taught in L1 because it is essential for the beginners to acquire them in order to use it and become highly motivated to continue learning the language. However, it suggest that learners should stay in the target language and learn whatever they need in L2 though code switching can be used for beginners. Oxford states that according to recent research results, among learning strategy variables, meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies are considered two essential strategies in language learning. Nonetheless, the importance of affective and meta-affective strategies is noticeable in the learners at the lower level of proficiency. The careful investigation reveals that less research has been conducted in these areas. Furthermore, enough attention should be paid.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed learning strategies, in particular, cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social variables through investigating three studies. To some extent, I have clarified the educational system in Iran. I have also reviewed their findings to adapt their method to my study. I have discussed different issues in defining learners learning strategies. This field needs more research and investigation, because as a teacher the more I know about the learners' individual strategies, the better I can help them. Unfortunately, TEFL faces some problems in my country due to the educational system policy. The study of LLSs in SLA can develop innovative methodological approaches to this field. Theoretically speaking, identifying LLSs seem to be a solution for SLA issues. Revising the traditional way of learning is not an easy task and conducting more research may lead to recognizing the variety of strategies learners can use to learn effectively. Furthermore, new strategies may be discovered. Accordingly, language classrooms ought to focus on teaching and developing learning. The implication for teaching is that learners need to explore their LLSs according to their objectives. Moreover, teachers need to explore what strategies the learners use for each objective. Teachers should try to train as autonomous learners as they can. Autonomous learners are able to evaluate the practicality of a strategy critically. They can also choose the appropriate strategy for a task and successfully transfer it to a new task. In Sum, I will conduct mix method research and apply a series of instruments including standardized proficiency test to categorize the participants as low proficiency, mid-proficiency and high-proficiency without addressing them. I will apply questionnaire, interview and record video to collect more reliable data. I will analyze the gathering data through statistics, content data and discourse analysis. Through discourse analysis, I can transcript and interpret the qualitative data in order to achieve useful findings in the use of learning strategies underlying the learners' techniques.

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