What Should English Language Teachers Know About Language Learning Strategies?

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Abstract

This study aims at providing English language teachers with an essential knowledge of language learning strategies (LLS) and some related issues. The article focuses on clarifying four fundamental considerations as follows: (1) stereotypes or preconceptions about Asian learners' LLS, (2) teachers' perceptions of their students' use of LLS, (3) the correlation between language proficiency and the strategy use, and (4) the relationship between gender and the use of LLS. At the end of the article, the authors come up with some pedagogical implications for the improvement of the EFL teaching quality through the training and learning of LLS.

Keywords: language learning strategies (LLS)

Introduction

Language learning strategies are used consciously and/or subconsciously when the learners process the target language "input" and produce their "output". Sadtono (1996)

indicates that differences in achievement in second language learning are often related to differences in strategy use. Many projects have tried to identify whether it is possible to facilitate English language learning with certain LLS, or whether English language learners can modify their own strategies and learn new ones that are more productive (Hedge, 2000). According to Carter and Nunan (2001), Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) and LoCastro (1994), there are many factors affecting the learner's strategy use such as age, gender, motivation, learning environment, learning style, personality, cultural background, and career orientation. For the purposes of generalizing a more thorough picture of LLS, this article revisits and investigates stereotypes about Asian learners' LLS, teachers' perceptions of their students' strategy use, the relationship between the use of LLS and the target language proficiency, and the influences of sex differences on the strategy use.

Language Learning Strategies

According to Hedge (2000), researchers who wish to investigate the literature on LLS should be aware of the following facts. First, there have been various labels given to strategies, such as "language processing strategies", "tactics", "plans", and "techniques", with no easy equivalences among them. Second, since the early studies of the good language learners' characteristics by Frohlich, Naiman and Todesco (Hedge, 2000, p. 5) in the 1970s, different authors have clarified and discussed different ways of classifying LLS, and various frameworks have been developed, such as those of Chamot, Ellis, Kupper, O'Malley, and Oxford (Hedge, 2000, p. 5).

Kumaravadivelu (2006) notes that it is only during the 1970s that researchers began to study systematically the learners' explicit and implicit efforts to learn a second language. Rubin (1975) defines learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p. 43). Besides, Rubin (1987, p. 23) states that LLS "affect learning directly" and "contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs". Focusing on the competence, the goal of any language learning, Tarone (1983) defines LLS as "an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language" (p. 67). Looking at the consciousness characteristic of LLS, Cohen (1998) defines LLS as "the steps or actions selected consciously by learners either to improve the learning of a second language or the use of it or both" (p. 5). The term

language learning strategies now refers to what learners know and do to regulate their learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

According to Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, LLS are "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information" and "specific actions…to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more efficient, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Oxford categorizes LLS into direct strategies (including *memory strategies*, *cognitive strategies*, and *compensation strategies*) and indirect strategies (including *metacognitive strategies*, *affective strategies*, and *social strategies*). *Memory strategies* help learners store and retrieve new information, for example, using rhymes or flashcards to remember new words in the target language. *Cognitive strategies* are devices applied by learners to better understand and produce the target language, such as writing notes, messages, letters or reports in the target language. *Compensation strategies* are intended to make up for missing knowledge while using the language, such as making guesses to understand unfamiliar words in the target language. *Metacognitive strategies* allow learners to control their own cognition including the planning, organization, evaluation and monitoring of their language learning, for example, looking for opportunities to read as much as possible in the target language. *Affective strategies* refer to the methods that help learners regulate their emotions, motivations and attitudes, such as trying to relax whenever being afraid of using the target language. *Social strategies* include the ways of interacting with other people in the context of language learning, such as asking a speaker to slow down or to repeat something in the target language**.**

Stereotypes or Preconceptions about Asian Learners and Their Language Learning Styles and Strategies

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) and Hird (1995), working in the Chinese context, spoke of a culture or tradition of language learning, which might determine students' strategies and behavior in English language classrooms. When Cortazzi and Jin asked Chinese students what made a good learner, surprisingly the highest scoring category from the list of eleven points was "hard-working". Hird (1995) was impressed by the traditional Chinese class, in which individual interpretations were not fully appreciated and the students were considered to be in class to receive the target language rather than construct it. In other words, these learners were considered as passive and rote learners.

However, the study by Watkins, Reghi and Astilla (1991), comparing the responses to learning process questionnaires by Filipino and Nepalese students to those previously reported by similar aged Australian and Hong Kong students, showed that a similar structure of learning processes was reported in each culture. Little evidence was found to support the conception that Asian learners were more prone to rote learning than the Australians were. It was amazing that the Nepalese students tended to employ higher levels of both deep and achieving approaches to learning than the other students did.

Similar findings were presented by Littlewood (2000) who examined some common preconceptions about Asian learners and their learning attitude, in particular, the belief that they see the teacher as an authority figure and as a fount of all the knowledge. From the responses by students in eight Asian and three European countries, Littlewood (2000) indicated that there was actually less difference in attitudes to learning between Asian and European countries than between individuals within each country. His article underlines the need to explore in greater depth the nature and extent of cultural influences on learning in general and language learning in particular.

Findings of many other investigations conducted in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Australia show that Asian learners in general are not passive and rote learners who always stick together, adopt surface strategies to learning, and lack the skills for analysis and critical thinking. A great number of Asian students of English are described as motivated, effective and strategic learners (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Hess & Azuma, 1991; Hollaway, 1988; Kember & Gow, 1989; Marton, Dall'Alba & Tse, 1993; Tang, 1993).

Teachers' Perceptions with regard to their Students' Use of LLS

Although issues related to individual learner factors and learner variables have received much attention, issues related to teachers have not been researched thoroughly (Griffiths, 2007). According to Cortazzi and Jin (1996) and Hird (1995), Asian teachers traditionally expect the learning output to be error-free, and they greatly value memory strategies. Some other researchers pointed to the influence of teachers on modifying usual stereotypes of Asian learners. Howe (1993) and Lewis and McCook (2002), with their studies in Vietnam, addressed the popular misconception of passivity among Asian students

by suggesting that whether EFL learners were passive or active in class depended more on their teachers' expectations than on culturally-based learning styles and strategies.

Examining teachers' perceptions of their students' strategy use, Chalmers and Volet (1997), Griffiths (2007) and Nguyen (2007) all discovered that the teachers' beliefs and the students' actual strategy use were not well matched. Chalmers and Volet (1997) stated that while teachers considered South-East Asian students studying in Australia as rote learners adopting surface strategies to learning, most of these students were strategic learners adopting effective LLS. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2007) revealed significant discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and students' self-report on strategy use. While Vietnamese teachers believed that their students were "medium" strategy users overall, five out of six LLS categories were reported to be used less frequently than in the teachers' views. Moreover, Griffiths (2007) pointed out a high level of disagreement between strategies that students reported using frequently and those regarded as very important by teachers. Griffiths found that students did not frequently use one of the three LLS that teachers considered highly important.

In conclusion, the results from all above investigations of the intersection between teachers' and learners' perceptions of strategy use prove that students' actual use of LLS has been at variance with their teachers' assumptions. All teachers of English, therefore, instead of guessing how their students learn English, should do their own research to improve the teaching and learning situations.

The Correlation between the Use of LLS and the Target Language Proficiency

Much research has been conducted to link the use of LLS to learning outcomes. The studies by Cohen (1998), Oxford (1990, 1993), Ehrman and Oxford (1989) show that greater strategy use is often related to higher levels of English language proficiency. Gardner and Macintyre (1992) state that the more proficient learners indeed employ strategies that are different from those used by the less proficient. Many predictive studies in the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency have employed Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). In these predictive studies, the use of LLS explained more than a half of the variability or differences in English proficiency scores (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 170).

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2007) investigated her second-year-EFL students' perceived use of LLS, including the six strategy categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social) as well as the fifty individual strategies appearing in Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Her research results showed that the Vietnamese students of EFL were "medium" strategy users overall. As for specific strategy use, while employing compensation strategies with a relatively high frequency, these learners reported their use of metacognitive, cognitive, affective, social and memory strategies with a medium frequency. In addition, Nguyen's article reveals that there was a positive correlation between the frequency of strategy use and the academic achievement, but this result appears to be unconvincing, and the researcher needs to provide more persuasive evidence. One more thing missing from this study is that Nguyen did not explore possible reasons for her students' use of such LLS in the learning context of Vietnam.

In Taiwan, Lai (2009) investigated LLS used by his EFL learners and looked for relations between learning strategy use and the patterns of strategy use based on language proficiency. In general, the participants reported using compensation strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently. While the most frequently used individual strategies involved guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in using English, the least used items involved speaking and writing to others in English. The findings indicated that proficiency level has a considerable influence on strategy choice and use. The more proficient students tended to employ more LLS. They used metacognitive and cognitive strategies most frequently and memory strategies least frequently. On the contrary, the least proficient learners preferred social and memory strategies to cognitive and metacognitive strategies. After analyzing individual strategy items, Lai (2009) found that the strategies used more often by the more proficient learners were arranging and planning their learning, using analytical and reasoning skills, and practicing their pronunciation and speaking. The strength of this research is that based on the learning context of Taiwan, the researcher did explain why the participants employed such LLS. However, because of this study's limited sampling of the data, the findings cannot be generalized to other language learners with different mother tongues, learning settings, or socio-cultural backgrounds.

Although the two above-mentioned articles by Nguyen (2007) and Lai (2009) provide different detailed information regarding the use of individual LLS, they reveal to

some extent the differences between more proficient and less proficient learners in choosing LLS. The differential success of English language learners suggests a need to explore in detail what LLS the more proficient students employ (Brown, 2000; Richards, 2002). According to Oxford (1990), many investigations comparing more successful language learners with less successful peers reported that the former, compared with the latter, employed more LLS and did so with greater frequency and awareness. Moreover, Oxford observed that the more successful learners often had better ability to describe their employment of LLS. They typically understood which strategies fitted the particular language tasks they were attempting, and they were better at combining LLS as needed.

In order to describe good language learners in detail, Rubin (1975) and Sadtono (1996) made a list of these learners' characteristics in terms of strategy use as follows: Good language learners often productively combine the use of metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. They use memory strategies to recall what has been learnt. They employ socio-affective strategies to control their emotions, to remain motivated, and to cooperate. They learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence. They willingly and accurately guess, take advantage of all practice opportunities, and monitor their own speech. Besides, they are eager to communicate, focus on both form and meaning, and are uninhibited about mistakes. Sadtono (1996) also finds that most of the successful language learners think in L2, and 'orchestrate' strategies that seem to be the most beneficial. Rubin (1975) suggests that teachers can start to help their less successful students improve their performance by paying more attention to the LLS already seen as productive.

On the other hand, Vann and Abraham (1990) argued that there were no factors consistently distinguishing between more and less effective language learners. Vann and Abraham (1990), and Sadtono (1996) stated that the less successful learners mainly differed from the good ones in terms of organization and orchestration. The former used LLS unsystematically, without careful orchestration and without targeting the strategies to the task. They did not construct a well-ordered system of L2, but they retained an untidy combination of unrelated fragments.

According to Vann and Abraham (1990), conflicting findings yielded by research on LLS generated limited success in learner training, and the problem might be rooted in inadequate knowledge of the actual strategies used by unsuccessful learners in contrast to

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what they reported doing. Vann and Abraham's case study probed the LLS of two unsuccessful learners, two Saudi Arabian women enrolled in an academically oriented intensive English program (IEP), as they completed four activities: an interview, a verb exercise, a cloze passage, and a composition. Their paper successfully offers a detailed and insightful picture of LLS, providing counterevidence for the claim that less proficient learners are inactive. These unsuccessful learners were reported as active strategy users though they sometimes applied LLS inappropriately.

The Relationship between Gender and the Use of LLS

After examining the relationship between sex differences and language learning performance, many researchers conclude that gender has a real and profound influence on language learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Green & Oxford, 1995; Gu, 2002; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Wen & Wang, 1996).

In most of the studies where sex differences emerge, females have been reported as using LLS more often than males (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Hashim & Sahil, 1994; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Oxford, 1993; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Sy, 1994, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Females not only employ more LLS but they also employ these strategies more effectively (Ellis, 1994; Erhman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993). As for the use of particular LLS, females tend to use more social strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Politzer, 1983), and more memory and metacognitive strategies (Khalil, 2005; Wen & Wang, 1996) than males do. Furthermore, Goh and Kwah (1997), and Gu (2002) find that females show more frequent use of compensation and affective strategies than their male counterparts do.

However, the sex-difference-findings supporting greater strategy use by females may be influenced by the context and culture of language learning. Some studies (Carter & Nunan, 2001; Tercanlioglu, 2004; Tran, 1988; Wharton, 2000) show that male learners use more LLS than females do in certain categories. Tran (1988), in his study of adult Vietnamese refugees in the USA, finds that males are more likely to use a variety of LLS than females. Wharton (2000), using Oxford's 80-item SILL with a group of 678 tertiary students learning Japanese and French as foreign languages in Singapore, reports that males often employ a greater number of LLS than females. Besides, looking into the strategy use

by foreign language learners at a Turkish University, Tercanlioglu (2004) points out significant sex differences in favor of males' greater use of LLS.

Not all projects examining strategy use between the two sexes find significant differences. Young and Oxford's (1997) study on LLS used by native English-speaking learners of Spanish shows no important differences between males and females. Ma (1999) states that gender has no significant impacts on the choice of strategies, such as Memory, Metacognitive and Affective. In addition, Griffiths (2003) finds that neither gender nor age really affects the learners' strategy use. Congruent with the findings by Ma (1999), Young and Oxford (1997) and Griffiths (2003), Shmais (2003) do not report any statistically significant differences in strategy use among tertiary students because of sex differences.

In short, the relationship between gender and the use of LLS is not explicit due to different results generated by much research. Even in the same context of EFL in China, studies by Ma (1999) and Wen and Wang (1996) yield conflicting results. Therefore, more studies need to be conducted to verify the role of sex in determining language learning strategies.

Conclusion

Studies of language learning strategies have made a valuable contribution to the field of English language teaching by highlighting the fact that Asian learners have the possibility of becoming autonomous in their English learning. Although no single set of LLS guarantees success for everybody, the use of language learning strategies is evidently related to the learner's proficiency. As for the influences of gender on the use of LLS, differences of strategy use between males and females are apparent. Besides, the literature shows that many English language teachers tend to depend much on their subjective assumptions to guess what LLS are being employed by their students.

Griffiths and Parr (2001) suggest that EFL/ESL teachers should do their own research and should not depend on other projects conducted in other contexts to guess how their students learn English. According to Oxford (1990), the more teachers know about their students' current language learning strategies, the more effectively they can attune instructions to specific students' needs. Once the teachers find out about their students' different LLS, they can understand how these strategies operate for different individuals

and groups, and they can reflect upon this in their own teaching contexts. Besides, it is incumbent upon the teachers to make the students aware that there may be some other better LLS from which the students can choose the most appropriate.

Pedagogical Implications

Learning may not and should not necessarily happen inside the classroom only. EFL teachers should introduce new LLS to their students and the students can "teach" themselves when the teachers are not around. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), strategy training offers practical suggestions to make learners become more autonomous participants in their own learning, and to make teachers more sensitive to learner diversity and learning difficulties. When the teachers understand the use of strategy training, they can make more "informed" decisions to help their students develop more effective LLS.

To make a strategy generally applicable, learners obviously need to be convinced of its significance and be taught to evaluate its use (Vann & Abraham, 1990). In other words, studies of strategy training should provide learners with specific information about why, when, and where each language learning strategy should be applied. It is suggested that EFL teachers consider some basic principles as follows. First, the new LLS should be taught explicitly and the students see the rationale for learning about them. Second, the teaching of LLS can be done separately or together with each lesson, though most of the literature on strategy training suggests that LLS be taught integratively with every lesson (Sadtono, 1996). Third, according to Rubin (1975), even though LLS are teachable, time constraints may intervene in the training process, and prevent the learners from the internalization of the new strategies; therefore, students should be given hands-on experience to experiment and to see how the new strategies work.

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