

Language Learning Strategies of Hong Kong And Malaysian Students

Andrew Yau-hau Tse

Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Malaysia

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 university students in Hong Kong and in Malaysia. Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) was used as the research instrument. The findings reveal that Hong Kong students use compensation strategies (medium use) and Malaysian students adopt memory strategies (low use) in learning English. To conclude, Hong Kong students used LLS in medium use, with no high use; whereas Malaysian students used LLS in low use, with no high or medium use. Finally, recommendations on LLS are proposed for ESL teachers.

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

INTRODUCTION

Language pedagogy has shifted its focus from teacher-centred to student-centred classroom learning in the 1970s and 1980s. New teaching methods, such as 'communicative language teaching' and 'task-based teaching', were employed 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 learner's perspectives (Rubin, 1987).

During the last twenty years, a growing interest in learner's characteristics has developed. This focus has led to an increased number of studies examining how learner differences influence language achievement. Learner differences include gender, personality, language anxiety, motivation, aptitude, learning styles, and learners' beliefs. At the same time, researchers have focused on a new area of research in language learning strategies which involves how learners internalize 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 crucial 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 and Malaysia context. The present work focuses on exploring the use of language learning strategies. The survey was conducted in the specific cultural context of Hong Kong and Malaysia, therefore, it provides a contribution to the realm of language learning strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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). Basically, 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.

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) expanded 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).

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). 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) or invisible (thoughts, mental processes) ; and d) language learning strategies involve information and memory (vocabulary, knowledge, grammar rules).

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. Only a few researchers have surveyed unsuccessful language learners (Hosenfeld, 1977; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chamot & Kupper, 1989).

Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies

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.

Methodology

Subjects

220 undergraduate students from a public university in Hong Kong and a public Malaysian technical university participated in this study. Their mother tongue is Chinese (Cantonese) and Bahasa Malayu respectively. Students in Hong Kong start learning English in nursery schools and English is used as the teaching medium in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutes. In Malaysia, the situation is quite different. Now Bahasa Malayu is used as the teaching medium in all sectors of education resulting in the decline of English proficiency, especially university graduates. All students receive no training in the use of language learning strategies.

Procedure

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, one university in Hong Kong was randomly selected. A total of 20 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, metacognitive, social, affective, compensation, and memory. Apparently, this outcome is similar to Oxford's direct and indirect strategies.

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. The standard for significance adopted in this study was $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptive statistics was used to understand the language learning strategies used by university 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 Hong Kong students in this study was 3.34, medium use of language learning strategies. According to factor analysis, Hong Kong students used six dimensions of language learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, social, memory, compensation, and affective strategies. Referring to Table 1 (appendix), the highest among the six dimensions was compensation strategies, with a mean of 3.34. This shows that Hong Kong students used compensation strategies (medium use) in learning English. These students used language learning strategies all in medium use, with no high use. On the other hand, the mean score of Malaysian university students was 2.37, low-level use of LLS. With reference to Table 1, they used memory strategies most, with social strategies the least, to learn English. These students used LLS all in low use, with no high or medium use.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research examined the LLS used by undergraduate students in Hong Kong and in Malaysia. 220 university students, 110 males and 110 females, participated in this study.

Oxford's (1990) SILL (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*) was used as the research instrument. The findings revealed that the mean score of Hong Kong university students in this study was 2.91, medium use of language learning strategies; with 1.94, low use of LLS for Malaysian university students.

According to factor analysis, students used six dimensions of language learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, social, memory, affective, and compensation. The highest among the six dimensions was compensation strategies, with a mean of 3.34 for Hong Kong students; memory strategies for Malaysia students, with a mean of 2.37. According to the findings, Hong Kong students used affective strategies least, medium use; Malaysian students used social strategies least, low use. We could conclude that students in Hong Kong used language learning strategies, all in medium-use levels, with no high use; Malaysian students used LLS all in low-use levels, with no medium or high use.

This study proposes the following measures for ESL teachers/ lecturers in Hong Kong and Malaysian universities:

- 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 knowledge of the student's 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) 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 student use of language learning strategies.

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 university students in Hong Kong and in Malaysia.

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Appendix

Table 1 Summary of the six dimensions of language learning strategies

<i>Hong Kong university students</i>		<i>Malaysian university students</i>	
<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Compensation	3.34 (medium use)	Memory	2.37 (low use)
Metacognitive	3.15 (medium use)	Cognitive	2.26 (low use)
Cognitive	2.98 (medium use)	Compensation	2.07 (low use)
Social	2.76 (medium use)	Metacognitive	1.99 (low use)
Memory	2.63 (medium use)	Affective	1.78 (low use)
Affective	2.59 (medium use)	Social	1.14 (low use)
*1.0-2.4=low use; 2.5-3.4=medium use		3.5-5.0=high use	

