A Study of English Majors’ Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract. This paper is a questionnaire survey on learning strategies used by English majors, including good language learners and less successful learners. The purpose of this study is to find out whether the two groups of the students used the same or different learning strategies. It was found that whether using learning strategies or using different learning strategies is the main reason for their different achievements. In addition, most good language learners like to use kinds of learning strategies, which made English not beyond their reach.

Introduction

As for how language learning is affected by various factors, eight factors have often been discussed. They are motivation, intelligence, age, aptitude, attitude, personality, first language and learning strategies: The reason why the author selects learning strategies as the focus of this paper is that other factors are impossible to change or beyond the tasks to be fulfilled within the field of language teaching and learning. For instance, intelligence, aptitude and personality are generally innate and it is difficult to exert influence on them within a short period of time.

A Review of Research on Learning Strategies

Definition of Learning Strategies

The simplest definition of language learning strategies is the one given by Oxford: Learning strategies are the steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Language learning strategies are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence (Oxford, 1990:1). Michael et al (1990) defines language learning strategies as processes that are activated in order to understand new information that is ambiguous or to learn or to retain new information, Thus language learning strategies are not only the skills that help the learner to manipulate information or the processes that are activated to encode information, they are also the learner’s knowledge about language, language learning and the factors that affect language learning. Learning strategies are better thought of as a system of different levels of all the strategies, including the more general ones and the more specific ones, the linguistic ones and the communicative ones, and the active ones, etc.

Classification of Learning Strategies

Oxford classified learning strategies as six types: 1) Memory strategies: i.e., creating mental linkage, applying images and songs, reviewing well, employing actions. 2) Cognitive strategies: e.g., practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input.3) Compensatory strategies: e.g., guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. 4) Metacognitive strategies: i.e., centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning. 5) Affective strategies: e.g., lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, taking your emotional temperature. 6) Social strategies: e.g., ask ingestions, cooperation with others, empathizing with others, becoming aware of other’s thoughts and feelings.
The Study

Purposes

The major purposes of the study were: (1) to determine if good students and less successful students adopt different strategies or adopt the same strategies but with different frequencies; and (2) to find out whether there is any relationship between language learning, testing and language learning strategy use.

Participants

The participants in this study were fifty English majors from the Second Northwest Institute for Ethnic Minorities, including twenty good language learners and thirty less successful learners. The major criterion for identifying good students (GS) and less successful students (LLS) was the score of College English Band-4 and Band-6.

Instrument

The author asked these English majors to take part in a questionnaire survey on English Majors’ Learning Strategies. There were 28 questions in the questionnaire, and each had 5 scales for responding to each question. 1 means never true of me; 2 means seldom true of me; 3 means sometimes true of me; 4 means often true of me; 5 means always true of me.

Results

Data collection in this study was conducted mainly through the questionnaire survey. The students were given about 15 minutes to finish the questionnaire. They were not allowed to take it home. All questionnaires were collected within the set time. The author found out that on average, 19% of the good students selected choice 5 (always true of me) whereas the subjects who selected choice (never true of me) take up 2%. That means 19% of the students always use some strategies while 2% never use certain strategies. From the percentages, it seems that there are more students who always use strategies than those who do not. For choice 4 and choice 3, the percentages are 32% and 37% respectively, i.e., 32% of good students often use some strategies while 37% seldom use strategies. The former is lower than the latter. Therefore, it can be seen from the combined percent-ages that altogether 12% of the subjects seldom use strategies whereas 51% use strategies frequently. That is to say, more than half good students use learning strategies. The situation for good students is so encouraging as expected.

As far as each strategy is concerned, let’s look at mean scores to determine which strategy is used at high frequency. The mean score of each strategy has been calculated and the mean score that is above 3.5 indicates high frequency in the use of the corresponding strategy while a mean score that is below 3.5 represents low frequency in the use of that strategy. The higher the mean score is, the more often the strategy is used. From the table, we can see that among the 28 strategies, there are 18 statements whose mean score is above 3.5, the percentage is 64%. It means that out of all the strategies, 18 are often used by good students. That is to say, more than half of the strategies are often used by the subjects. From the data it can be seen that English majors employ a variety of strategies.

Analysis and Discussion

General Tendency: Similarities

The general tendency of these subjects in strategy use is encouraging. The average scores on each item for both groups range from 2.5 to 4.69. In other words, these students often employ many types of strategies listed in the questionnaire. Of course, not all the mean scores of the LSS are smaller than that of GS’. Another general tendency is that the two lines twist to wards almost the same directions. At certain points, the two lines are close to close to 3, such as items 3, 5, 11, 14, 16, 19 and 21. This shows that certain strategies are used by both groups. For example, for item 3, the average score for GS and LSS are 3.88 and 3.90 respectively. This means that all the
students believe that vocabulary is very important for language learning. On item 8, the average scores for the groups are 2.69 and 2.87, both are small. This means neither GS nor LSS use the strategy of learning English by TV or radio programs. For items 17, both groups’ mean scores are over 3.5. English majors are easy to pass College English Band-4 & 6 examinations or some other proficiency tests, thus both learning and teaching are encouraging.

**Differences between Good Students and Less Successful Students**

The circle point represents the GS’ mean scores on each item in the questionnaire, and the square one is for the LSS. On the whole, the circle point shows that the GS use learning strategies better than the LSS do. From item 11 to item 28, the gap between the circle point and the square one is bigger and clearer than the gap from item 1 to item 28. Learning strategies involve many aspects of learners, such as metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and memory strategies (so called direct strategies), affective strategies, social strategies and communicative strategies (so called indirect strategies).

The biggest differences between the two groups are in the use of affective strategies. GS do better in controlling their affective factors and thus are able to adapt themselves to certain emotional situations for the purpose of language learning, GS have self-confidence, positive attitudes towards the foreign language, and they try to overcome weak points and often evaluate their progress in learning. So, we can draw a conclusion that good students and less successful students do adopt different strategies in some aspects.

Of course, the mean scores of affective strategies for both two groups are below 4. This shows that both groups cannot do quite well in regulating their emotions, motivations, attitudes, though there is some difference between them. Good language learners have a wide range of learning strategies and use a series of strategies rather than a single one when engaged in a learning task.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, English will not seem beyond students’ reach if they have a clear understanding of English study and know some learning strategies. It is true that diligence is the mother of success, but effective ways cannot be brushed aside. As long as they keep on trying, they will have a better command of English.

**References**


Appendix
A Questionnaire on English Majors’ Learning Strategies
1. Have you passed Band 4?
2. Do you always try to find how to learn English better?
3. Do you think grammar is important?
4. Do you think vocabulary is important?
5. Do you like English programs on TV, radio, etc.?
6. Do you preview your English lessons?
7. Do you review your English lessons?
8. Do you sometimes compare English with Chinese?
9. Do you focus on main idea, while reading or listening?
10. Do you care too much about grammar when speaking?
11. Do you learn new words in sentences?
12. Do you try to understand their meanings? Before memorizing new words?
13. Do you often review the words that you have learned?
14. Do you take notes in class?
15. Do you often guess the meaning of new words while reading?
16. Do you ask your teachers or classmates when you understand something?
17. Do you know the lesson for you to learn English?
18. Do you think you learn English well?
19. Do you like your English teachers and classmates?
20. Does anxiety affect your English learning?
21. Do you often think about your progress in English learning?
22. Do you try to be understood with others?
23. Do you think the English textbooks you are using can help you a lot in your learning?
24. Do you always attend your English lessons?
25. Do you cooperate with your English teachers in class?
26. Do you like the English language and the English-speaking people?
27. Do you always read new words aloud?
28. Do you enjoy teacher-centered teaching method?