Language Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Language learning strategies plays an important role in the second language acquisition (SLA). Studies on learning strategies adopt a series of methods to investigate various variables, for instance, language proficiency, gender and cultural backgrounds, which may affect language learners' strategy choice and use. Raising learners' metacognitive awareness of strategy use becomes crucial in the learning process, because less proficient learners may not know how and when to use learning strategies. Thus, training on how to employ strategies attracts researchers' attention through comparisons between more effective learners and less effective learners, which may have pedagogical implications for educators and teachers.

1. Introduction

In the past decades, language learning strategies play an important role in the second language acquisition (SLA), and many researchers define it in many different ways [1,2,3,4,5]. Strategies are mediums for "active, self-directed involvement", and contribute to the improvement of learners' proficiency and self-confidence [6]. Studies on learning strategies adopt a series of methods to investigate various variables, which may affect language learners' strategy choice and use. These variables are chosen as key elements to survey relationships between strategy use and SLA in a large number of studies, among which metacognitive strategy is constantly mentioned to enhance learners' performance on learning second language. Moreover, lower proficiency learners may not know how and when to employ strategies, even though they know many strategies. Thus, raising learners' metacognitive awareness of strategy use becomes crucial in the learning process. Meanwhile, training on how to employ strategies attracts researchers' attention through comparisons between more effective learners and less effective learners, because it may have pedagogical implications for educators and teachers, who can apply strategies of good learners into their teaching to make less effective students become more proficient in learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Language learning strategies

In the early studies, Rubin [1] examined learning strategies that good language learners employ, and described them as "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". In 1985, O'MALLEY et al. [2] pointed out that learning strategies could develop learners' second language skills. With an increasing number of studies on this topic, researchers began to adopt various methodologies to discover strategies in a thorough way. Green and Oxford [3] claimed that "language learning strategies enable students to gain a large measure of responsibility for their own progress". Furthermore, Uhl Chamot and El-Dinary [4] defined them as "mental procedures" to assist learners to acquire language. Griffiths [5] also supported this definition, identifying them as "specific actions consciously employed by the learner" to learn language.

2.2. Strategy classifications

Learning strategies have different kinds of classifications due to complicated variables. In the study on variables, Oxford and Nyikos [7] list five main strategies, which involve formal rule-related practice strategies, functional practice strategies, resourceful, independent strategies, general study strategies and conversational input elicitation strategies. However, the most commonly used strategy classification in studies reviewed here is based on Oxford's [6] Strategy Classification System, including memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective and social strategies [3, 8, 9]. In addition, Yang [10] employs six strategy factors in the study of relationship between learners' beliefs and strategy use. These factors involve functional practice strategies, cognitive-memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, formal oral-practice strategies, social strategies, and compensation strategies.

2.3. Metacognitive strategy and beliefs

Among all these strategies, metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies are widely studied [2,10,11], since they "may be two types of strategies essential for successful language learning" [9]. Wenden [11] defines metacognitive strategies as "general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning" and Yang [10] describes them as "exercising 'executive control' over one's language learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluating". In the study of strategies to learn Chinese characters, Wang, Spencer and Xing [12] prove that improving metacognitive learning strategies can enhance learners' motivational aspects of self-efficacy in the learning process. The results show that metacognitive beliefs and strategy have an effect on students' learning performance.

In terms of metacognitive beliefs about strategy use are regarded as influential elements for learners to improve learning, and "mirror [learners'] view of themselves as intentional, self-directed, and self-critical learners" [12]. Yang [10] proposes a theoretical construct of learners' beliefs, which involves "metacognitive and motivational" beliefs about second language learning, and claims that "learners' beliefs are important determinants of their behavior". The study finds that learners' self-efficacy beliefs about learning English were closely related to their use of strategies, especially functional practice strategies.

2.4. Study context and tools

Studies reviewed here are mostly conducted in ESL or EFL setting and the target language is

almost English, but there is only one study in which Chinese is spoken as a foreign language [12]. Moreover, two studies are involved in different settings. One is conducted on immersion students [4] and the other one is on intensive English program students [8]. In addition, most of studies adopt Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) as a tool to investigate learners' strategy use, but there are still other studies adopting different tools. For example, think-aloud techniques [4], brainstorming and jigsaw activities [13], interview [2, 14], questionnaire [8,10,15] and observation [1,2].

2.5. Variables affecting language strategy use

A large number of studies on the relationship between strategy use and relevant variables have been done since the 1960s. The correlation are tested in these studies, which could help learners have a better understanding of what strategies they can learn, and of which variable they need to pay attention to in order to enhance their second language learning. Thus, these variables are important for learners to familiarize even though they are complex because of individual differences, which are really hard to be measured in empirical settings.

2.5.1. Language proficiency

A large number of studies on the relationship between strategy use and relevant Language proficiency may affect learners' strategy choice and use [3,4,5,7,8,9]. The common result is that higher proficient learners employ more strategies. Lai [9] reveals it in the study of examining 418 EFL university freshmen in Taiwan through SILL to investigate learners' strategy use. Meanwhile, more proficient learners employ metacognitive and cognitive strategies, but less proficient learners use social and memory strategies. Griffiths [5] even demonstrates statistic data that the number of types of strategy advanced students frequently use is more than nine times as that elementary students use. Moreover, she mentions that strategies which higher level students used are more complicated and interactive, compared with those lower level students employ. Green and Oxford [3] prove that learners' proficiency level has a significant impact on metacognitive, cognitive, compensation and social categories.

However, the result from Uhl Chamot and El-Dinary's study [4] is different in terms of strategy use. The participants are the third and fourth grade elementary students, who are in French, Spanish and Japanese immersion classrooms. Researchers adopt a method of think-aloud procedures. The result presents that high-rated students may use greater amounts of metacognitive strategies than low-rated students in reading task, and low-rated students even use more cognitive strategies than high-rated students. This result difference between Lai's study [9] and this one may derive from the factor of learners' age, which results in their different understanding of metacognition.

In addition, an interesting finding in Hong-Nam and Leavell's study [8] is that students at the intermediate level use more strategies than beginners and advanced learners. This means that the relationship between language proficiency and the number of strategies is not linear, but curve. For advanced learners, the most frequently used strategies are not metacognitive strategies, but social strategies. However, for beginning and intermediate learners, the most preferred strategies are metacognitive strategies. The other finding is that all learners as a group use metacognitive and social strategies more frequently than any other strategies.

2.5.2. Gender

Many theoretical and empirical research show an agreement on the relationship between gender and strategy use, which is that females might frequently employ more strategies than males [3,7,8,16]. Oxford and Nyikos [7] find that females more frequently use the formal rule-related

practice strategies, general study strategies and conversational input elicitation strategies than males. Hong-Nam and Leavell [8] point out that males and females are not different statistically in overall strategy use, but females are reported with higher use of affective strategies than males and employ strategy more frequently than males. Green and Oxford [3] support that females use more strategies on the memory, metacognitive, affective and social strategy. However, a contrary result from Griffiths' study [5] on patterns of strategy use is that there is no statistically significant difference of learner variables on gender.

2.5.3. Cultural backgrounds

Language learners with different cultural backgrounds may have various strategy use [5,8,16], because the development of their strategies may be affected by educators, teachers and family members in a specific culture. Griffiths [5] examines 348 international students in Auckland for one year. These students, with language levels from elementary to advanced, are from 21 different countries. The result presents that European students use the strategy significantly frequently than other students from Asian countries. Moreover, Hong-Nam & Leavell [8] adopt individual background questionnaires to examine 55 ESL university students in an intensive English learning context. The study shows that Japan and Korea students use metacognitive strategies most, but Chinese students prefer to use social strategies most.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Gao [14] makes interviews with 14 Chinese learners about their shifting strategy use from China to Britain. In the study, learners' strategy choice and use are affected due to the change of learning contexts, in which mediating elements (discourses, objects, and agents) mediate students' strategy use. Compared with strategy use in China, learners' frequency of strategy use reduces after they study in Britain because of different discourses.

2.6. Metacognitive awareness

Based on studies on language learning strategies and variables affecting strategy use, metacognitive awareness highlights its significance on learners' strategy use and learning outcomes [2,13]. Gunning and Oxford [15] mention that metacognitive awareness is involved in learners' declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge and learners could understand what the strategies are and how to employ strategy with it. The study conducted by Uhl Chamot and El-Dinary [4] even concludes that learners at an early age may have metacognitive awareness because grade one students could know how to describe the learning process in details.

Flaitz, Feyten, Fox, and Mukherjee [13] examine 130 college-level Spanish students to investigate the effect of heightening learners' Metacognitive Awareness Raising (MAR) of language learning strategies on student achievement. The empirical study reveals that students who receive MAR training perform better than the control groups, gaining higher scores in the final course.

2.7. Strategy training and instruction

A large number of studies explore that strategy training is important for learners to acquire second language [1,2,9,16,13]. Flaitz et al. [13] strongly support that strategy training could play a significant role in learners' language learning. Meanwhile, Lai [9] suggests that teachers should train students to use learning strategy and develop their own unique strategy. Furthermore, the research on language learning strategy shows that strategies should be instructed through "completely informed training" to help learners know how and why to use strategies [16]. They also point out that strategy training must consider nature and difficulty of language tasks, individual

differences and classroom activities. In addition, O'MALLEY et al. [2] conducts an empirical study on 75 high school students with intermediate language level, who take part in activities on vocabulary, listening or speaking. The study reveals that strategy training is effective for integrative language tasks, for instance, listening and speaking tasks.

Gunning and Oxford [15] conduct a study about the effect of Strategy Instruction (SI) through applying Problem-Solving Strategy Intervention (PSSI) model. It presents that the sixth grade students who are instructed how to use strategy gain success in oral interaction, through pre- and post-tests of oral English interaction. Following SI, a majority of children' awareness of strategies they use to do oral interaction tasks grows a lot. Moreover, they gain higher scores in that they could employ oral interaction strategies of speaking English only and complete the tasks.

3. Discussions and further research

Among these studies, researchers mention some cause-effect statements: 1. high motivation leads to significant use of language learning strategies, or vice versa [7]; 2. learners' high level language proficiency helps to higher level strategies, or vice versa [5]. 3.learners' beliefs lead to their use of learning strategies, or vice versa [10]. All these statements may not have definite answers for which part is a cause or an effect, but it is possibly sure that learning strategies are closely related to learners' motivation, proficiency and beliefs. Except for these variables, other variables, such as gender and cultural backgrounds, should be taken into teachers' consideration in teaching instruction. For example, teachers could not directly impart strategies of good language learners to less effective learners. On the other hand, less proficient learners could not accept all strategies good learners use due to various effects on individuals. They should try to employ them and discover whether they are suitable for them to learn second language. Thus, both teachers and students need to effectively combine learning strategies, depending on these various variables.

Moreover, the use of strategy should vary according to different learning tasks. The learning tasks, learning process and individual learner differences should be considered in that they "constitute the dynamic of learning" [11]. Uhl Chamot and El-Dinary [4] notice that appropriateness of strategy use for a task or a problem is more important than the frequency or the types of strategy use. This is proved in their study that more effective students focus more on the tasks. Furthermore, Oxford and Nyikos [7] also suggest that students should try various strategies and apply them into learning tasks which could enhance "creative, communicative learning". Therefore, students appropriately adjust their learning strategies based on the difficulty of learning tasks. Moreover, when teachers assign learning tasks and activities, they could consider all kinds of strategies involved and create more opportunities for students to practice relevant strategies. This could help students establish metacognitive awareness about strategy use and ideally employ strategies unconsciously.

There is an important point two studies mention, which is about "active use" [2-3]. Green and Oxford [3] find that more proficient students use more strategies, all of which are involved with the "active use of the target language". Furthermore, strategies students employ require "active manipulation of input" [2]. These studies emphasize on the necessity of active practice of target language. The possible reason why less proficient learners could not frequently use strategies and effectively learn language is that they are passive and not communicative. Thus, teachers should encourage them to be immersed in the target language and to actively practice strategies in the second or foreign language settings.

Based on studies in the literature review, metacognitive strategies are reported to be frequently employed by language learners. Teachers need to help students raise their metacognitive awareness about strategy use in the learning process. It means that students should not only know what

learning strategies are, but also be familiar with how, when and where to use these strategies. As for less proficient learners, they may have already known strategies good learners use, but they do not know how to employ them in an appropriate learning tasks in that they may not have sufficient awareness. Teachers, thus, need to scaffold them how to use and then develop their autonomy on learning.

However, there are also some questions that need to be further studied, for instance, how to transfer strategy from one learning task to another one and how to teach students to utilize strategies in a specific task because of individual differences and task difficulty in the natural classroom setting or outside of classrooms. Furthermore, as for strategy training, foreign language teachers may have little awareness about learning strategies and even students' learning process in the classrooms. Meanwhile, fewer studies focus on training on teachers when most studies are involved in training on students, especially on lower language proficiency learners. It is really difficult to teach students learning strategies if teachers are not familiar with strategies, or could not effectively employ strategies in their own learning process. Thus, this is a crucial issue for teachers to think about and to resolve, which may be the least discussed topic in these theoretical and empirical studies on learning strategies.

4. Conclusion

The investigation into learners' language strategies is important for learners to acquire second language. Through these theoretical and empirical studies on different variables, for instance, language proficiency, gender and cultural backgrounds, learners, especially less proficient learners would know which strategy they use ineffectively and thus learn new strategies to apply into their learning tasks. This could help learners perform well in the learning process, in which raising learners' metacognitive awareness, strategy training and instruction on strategy use become so important that teachers and students need to focus on. However, training on teachers needs to be further explored in the future research.

Acknowledgement

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