

Is More the Merrier: Relationship Between Taiwan University Students English Language Learning Strategies and English Proficiency Test Performance

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The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2015
Official Conference proceedings

Abstract

Second language learning has always been a complicated process involving many factors such as biological, neurological, psychological, and sociological factors. Among those factors, learning strategies, if used appropriately, have been proven to contribute to the success of second language learning when a learner is able to employ a range of them in learning a foreign or second language (Brown, 2007; Bull, 2000; Oxford, 2003; Rubin and Thompson, 1994). The focus of research on language acquisition has gradually shifted from examining mainly the teacher and teaching pedagogy towards the correspondence of language acquisition and the learners' learning strategy (Lee, 2003); prominent emphasis is on looking at the strategies and techniques the learner employs when learning a language. This study investigates the language learning strategies employed by English major and non-English major freshmen as well as its relationship with their performance on the College Student English Proficiency Test.

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Introduction

Second language learning has always been a complicated process involving many factors such as biological, neurological, psychological, and sociological factors. Second language learning behaviors and learning strategies, among different factors influencing second language learning, if used appropriately may contribute to the success of second language learning (Bull, 2000). Within the recent decade, research findings in the field of second language acquisition have pointed out the significant role that learners portray in the language learning process (Brown, 2007; Oxford, 2003). A proficient language learner, as described by Rubin and Thompson (1994) is one that is able to employ a range of learning strategies in learning a foreign or second language. Prominent emphasis is on looking at the strategies and techniques the learner employs when learning a language.

It is the intention of this study to investigate the language learning strategies employed by English major and non-English major freshmen in an university in southern Taiwan. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions are addressed.

1. What are the differences between English major and non-English major students' CSEPT performance?
2. What are the main learning strategies English language major students employ?
3. What are the main learning strategies non-English language major students employ?
4. What are the significant differences between English major and non-English major students' learning strategies?

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategy

Over the past years, many researchers (Rubin, 1975; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Kovac, 1978; Politzer, 1983; Rubin & Thompson, 1994) have tried to identify the behaviors good language learners exhibit. Rubin (1975) for one, pointed out that good language learners can be successful in various ways, and he identified the following characteristics commonly exhibited by good language learners: making reasoned guesses when not sure, making an effort to communicate and to learn through communication, finding strategies for overcoming inhibitions in target language interaction, practicing the language whenever possible, monitoring their speech and that of others, attending to form, and paying attention to meaning.

Language learning strategies can be viewed as ways that learners process information, improve the comprehension, learning, and retention of the information. While definitions are various, one of the most frequently cited and applicable definitions would be the one provided by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford, she defines language learning strategies 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, p.8). In this sense, language learning strategies is a reflection of the specific actions a learner intends to take in order to learn a

language.

Learning strategies that learners employ in the process of language learning have been classified and described by researchers such as Oxford (1990). The following lists out the taxonomies of language learning strategies identified by Oxford (1990).

Oxford's classification of language learning strategies

Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, direct and indirect, with each of them having three subdivisions. With direct strategies all require “mental processing of the language,” (1990, p. 37), the subdivisions that fall under this category are “memory strategies,” “cognitive strategies,” and “compensation strategies.” The indirect strategies are used for general management of learning and include “meta-cognitive strategies,” “affective strategies,” and “social strategies.”

Memory strategies

Memory strategies are based on simple principles such as making association and reviewing; learners create mental images, apply images and/or sounds, and review the application. Memory strategies help learners save information for future use. It has been observed that memory strategies are most frequently applied in the beginning process of language learning and as learners progress to a higher level of language proficiency, memory strategies become less employed due to the awareness of it becoming less.

Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies help learners to understand and make use of what they learn. Learners manipulate and transform the target language by repeating, analyzing and summarizing the information they receive. Four sets of information processing included in cognitive strategies are practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output.

Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies are generally employed when learners have insufficient knowledge of the target language. These strategies make up for the learner's deficiency in grammar and vocabulary. When learners face difficulties comprehending new information such as new words, they guess the meaning of the new words intelligently by using contextual clues or their background knowledge.

Meta-cognitive strategies

Meta-cognitive strategies are beyond the cognitive mechanism and are the strategies learners use to plan and coordinate their learning. Three sets of strategies are included: centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, and evaluating your learning. Centering the learning helps learners to stay focus and direct their energy towards learning certain language elements. Arranging and planning learning enable learners to receive maximum reward from their learning, and evaluating learning help learners to examine their progress.

Affective strategies

Affective strategies help learners to adjust their attitudes, emotions, motivations and values to create the most suitable emotional state for maximum benefit of language learning. Having positive feelings toward learning the target language may generate more meaningful input and practice and result in more effective learning.

Social strategies

Social strategies involve interactions among language users. Social strategies include the strategies in the following categories: asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others. Asking questions promotes conversation and helps learners to understand the meaning while cooperating with others eliminates competition thus negative emotions which might retard learning. Empathizing with others enables learners to understand other people's point of views and broaden their acceptance of cultural diversity associated with language learning.

The use of appropriate learning strategies enable learners to be responsible for their own learning while improving their independence, self-direction, and learner-autonomy; it also assists learners to continue their learning after they graduate from school (Oxford & Crookall, 1988). Osanai (2000) found that self-rating proficiency was significantly correlated with the use of language learning strategies in his study of 147 foreign students in universities in the U.S.. Wharton (2000) also reported that students who rated their proficiency as "good" and "fair" used Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) strategies significantly more often than those who rated their proficiency as "poor." Many research studies suggested a strong positive relationship between L2 proficiency and the use of language learning strategies (Bremner, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Park, 1997).

The choice of language learning strategies may also relate to a learner's academic major. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) reported that students in Humanities/Social Sciences and Education preferred functional practice strategies and resourceful/independent strategies more than students of other disciplines. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) pointed out that the students of Humanities/Social Science/Education seemed to seek out practice opportunities for their communication skills in real settings and to be in charge of their own learning by applying metacognitive strategies. Other researchers such as Chou (2002) and Peacock and Ho (2003) shared similar findings that difference exists in the choice of learning strategies among students with different academic majors.

Subsequent research further points out that among the different types of language learning strategies, compensation strategies are more favorable to Asian students at certain educational levels (Liao, 2000; Chen, 2002; Lai, 2009; Tse, 2011). For example, Tse (2011) examined the difference in the use of language learning strategies by secondary and university students in Hong Kong, the result showed that first year university students adopt compensation strategies in learning English while secondary students use memory strategies.

Tse (2011) indicated that the years of studying English has a strong influence on learner's use of language learning strategies. He later suggested that starting formal instruction earlier would aid students' use of language learning strategies.

The current study is to investigate whether differences exist in language learning behaviors and the use of language learning strategies among English major university freshmen, who generally have higher English proficiency level, and non-English major university freshmen, who generally have lower English proficiency level.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 484 university freshmen participated in this study; 131 were from the English department and 353 were from five non-English departments.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study include the College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT) and one strategy questionnaire. The CSEPT has been developed and published by the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) since 1997. The use of the CSEPT assists universities and colleges to place students in appropriate levels as well as evaluate students' English learning.

The questionnaire adapted for the study is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1986). The purpose of the SILL is to assess the frequency of use of different L2 learning strategies. On the SILL, there are a total of 50 questions covering six different areas of learning strategies—direct (primary) and indirect (support) strategies, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, syntactic and semantic strategies, formal and functional practice, social strategies, and other strategies—study, affective, and textual.

The questionnaire was translated from English to Mandarin to ensure the study participants would fully understand the questions and thus be able to provide responses that truly reflect their use of language learning strategies.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Four hundred and eighty four freshmen took the learning strategy questionnaire. The questionnaire results and these students' CSEPT results were compiled and analyzed using the statistical package SPSS (21st edition). The responses to the questionnaire items were scored. The total score for each respondent was obtained by adding the weights assigned to each of the options. For example, the positive answers to the question such as always or almost always true, usually true, somewhat true were marked with 5, 4, 3 respectively, and the negative ones including usually not true, and never or almost never true were marked with 2 and 1 respectively. The total scores were used for a t-test to examine differences in learning behaviors and learning strategies among English major and non-English major freshmen.

Results

The results of the analysis on English major and non-English major freshmen's CSEPT and language learning strategies are shown in the following tables. Table 1 below presents English major and non-English major freshmen's performance on the CSEPT. The difference in English major and non-English major freshmen's CSEPT performance is statistically significant.

Table 1: English and non-English major freshmen's CSEPT performance

English Major		Non-English Major		t	p
M	Std.D	M	Std.D		
246.64	42.79	170.07	58.26	13.334	.000*

*p<.01

No statistically significant differences were found in English major and non-English major freshmen's use of most memory strategies except for the following two strategies, "I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word." (t=-3.989, p=.000) and "I use rhymes to remember new English words." (t=-3.470, p=.001). The result shows that non-English major freshmen tend to connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help them remember the word, and they also tend to use rhymes to remember new English words more than English major freshmen. The differences between these two groups of freshmen in the use of these two language learning strategies are statistically significant.

No statistically significant differences were found in English major and non-English major freshmen's use of most cognitive strategies except for the following two strategies, "I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English." (t=4.051, p=.000) and "I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully." (t=2.724, p=.007). The result shows that English major freshmen tend to write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English, as well as skim an English passage then go back and read carefully more than non-English major freshmen. The differences between these two groups of freshmen in the use of these two language learning strategies are statistically significant.

No statistically significant differences were found in English major and non-English major freshmen's use of all compensation strategies except for the strategy "I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English." (t=-2.755, p=.006). The result shows that non-English major freshmen tend to make up new words if they do not know the right ones in English more than English major freshmen. The difference between these two groups of freshmen in the use of this language learning strategy is statistically significant. As for English major and non-English major freshmen's use of metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies, no statistically significant differences were found.

Based on the freshmen's responses to the SILL, the ten language learning strategies employed most often by the freshmen from both English major and non-English major departments are shown in Table 2 below. For the use of language learning

strategies, nine out of the ten strategies used most often by the freshmen from both English major and non-English major departments are the same. These strategies include one memory strategy: they think of relationships between what they already know and new things they learn in English, one cognitive strategy: they watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English, three compensation strategies: they make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words, they use gestures when they can't think of a word during a conversation in English, they use a word or phrase that means the same thing when they can't think of an English word, two metacognitive strategies: they pay attention when someone is speaking English, they try to find out how to be a better learner of English, and two social strategies: they ask the other person to slow down or say it again when they do not understand something, they try to learn about the culture of SL speakers.

What are also included in the top ten most frequently employed language learning strategies by English major freshmen are two cognitive strategies: they try to talk like native English speakers and they practice the sounds of English. For the non-English major freshmen, what are also included in the top ten most frequently employed language learning strategies are two memory strategies: they tend to connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help them remember the word, and they remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.

Table 2: Ten most frequently employed language learning strategies by English and non-English major freshmen

English major		Non-English major	
Strategy	Mean	Strategy	Mean
I pay attention when someone is speaking English. (Metacognitive strategy)	3.99	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses. (Compensatory strategy)	4.01
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing. (Compensatory strategy)	3.98	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures. (Compensatory strategy)	3.95
If I do not understand something in SL, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. (Social strategy)	3.91	If I do not understand something in SL, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. (Social strategy)	3.93
I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English. (Cognitive strategy)	3.86	I pay attention when someone is speaking English. (Metacognitive strategy)	3.91
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. (Metacognitive strategy)	3.83	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing. (Compensatory strategy)	3.89
I try to learn about the culture of SL speakers. (Social strategy)	3.83	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. (Metacognitive strategy)	3.88
To understand unfamiliar	3.79	I think of relationships between	3.83

English words, I make guesses. (Compensatory strategy)		what I already know and new things I learn in English. (Memory strategy)	
I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English. (Memory strategy)	3.78	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English. (Cognitive strategy)	3.70
I practice the sounds of English. (Cognitive strategy)	3.78	I try to learn about the culture of SL speakers. (Social strategy)	3.70
I try to talk like native English speakers. (Cognitive strategy)	3.75	I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word. (Memory strategy)	3.67*
B25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures. (Compensatory strategy)	3.75	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used. (Memory strategy)	3.67

*p<.01

Conclusion

This study investigated the language learning behaviors exhibited and language learning strategies employed by first year English major and non-English major students in an university in southern Taiwan.

The result of this study shows that there are only few significant differences in English major and non-English major freshmen's language learning strategies. Significant differences are found in the use of two memory strategies, two cognitive strategies and one compensation strategy. For the two memory strategies, non-English major freshmen tend to connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help them remember the word, and they also tend to use rhymes to remember new English words more often than English major freshmen. For the two cognitive strategies, English major freshmen do more than non-English major freshmen in writing notes, messages, letters, or reports in English, and skimming an English passage then go back and read carefully. Meanwhile, the compensation strategy of making up new words when not knowing the right ones in English was found to occur more frequently among the non-English major freshmen than the English major freshmen.

For the use of language learning strategies, nine out of the ten strategies used most often by the freshmen from both English major and non-English major departments are the same. Out of those ten language learning strategies, English major freshmen differ from non-English freshmen in that they try to talk like native English speakers, and they practice the English sounds. Non-English major freshmen differ from English major freshmen in that they connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of a situation in which the word might be used, and they remember a

new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.

From a closer look at the ten most frequently employed language learning strategies employed by these two groups of freshmen, it appears that non-English major freshmen tend to employ compensation and memory strategies more while English major freshmen tend to employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies more. This corresponds to the finding of non-English major freshmen showing statistical significance in their use of memory and compensation strategies compared with English major freshmen and English major freshmen showing statistical significance in their use of cognitive strategies.

This study shows similarities and differences in English major and non-English major freshmen's language learning strategies; however, since the data in this study were collected when students first entered the university, and the extent to which length of acculturation within university influences students' language learning behaviors and language learning strategies is still an empirical question at this point, thus future follow up studies could be conducted to investigate if there are changes in English major and non-English major university students' language learning behaviors and language learning strategies after they have studied in the university for two or more years. Future studies could also consider conducting interviews and classroom observation to gather more in-depth information regarding university students' language learning behaviors and their use of language learning strategies.

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