

Strategy Training for English Language Learners from PRC

Susan Tan

The National University of Singapore accepts a large number of postgraduate students from non-English medium universities many of whom are not sufficiently proficient in the English language. Most of these students need to learn to better manage their language learning. This paper discusses a classroom study that investigated the effects of teaching language learning strategies to foreign postgraduate students. The students kept a weekly learning journal in which they recorded their reflections about their language learning. The study showed that strategy training was effective in raising the learners' consciousness of their language learning processes. The findings have pedagogical significance for the language teacher who aims to encourage learners' independence and autonomy.

Introduction

In the last decade applied linguists, language teachers and educationists have been earnestly seeking to better understand how language learners learn and how they can be taught to learn better. This desire to nurture autonomous learners has led to numerous studies to help language learners become more self-directed, proactive, goal-oriented, creative and independent. Extensive research has gone into discovering how good language learners manage their learning and how students can be taught to better manage their learning to obtain maximum effect.

Training or teaching students about the techniques or, more precisely, the strategies of language learning are highly beneficial especially in situations where students are in a language programme for only a short time. Many students are unable to continue on their own with language learning once classes end. If these students are equipped with the means and knowledge to self-direct and manage their own learning beyond the classroom, then they can continue to learn independently of their teacher. Successful language learning may rest on this autonomy.

This paper describes a classroom study that investigated the effects of teaching language learning strategies on foreign graduate students enrolled in the Graduate English course at the Centre for English Language Communication, (CELC, NUS). The aims of strategy training in these classes were to help these foreign language students become aware of the strategies they could use to learn more effectively and to monitor and evaluate their learning process.

This research hypothesises that language learners who received strategy training would develop a greater awareness of their language learning processes. When the learners are given the opportunity to reflect meaningfully on their learning, they would begin to discover more ways to learn, understand more about the importance of employing strategies and become more self-directed and more goal-oriented in their language study.

Literature Overview

In 1975, two landmark articles concerned with the identification of the characteristics of the effective language learner were written (Stern, 1975; Rubin, 1975). These studies revealed that effective learners employed a variety of learning strategies and these were subsequently described and classified (Rubin, 1981, 1987; Rubin & Thompson, 1982; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

Various definitions of learning strategies have been offered. Wenden (1987) describes them as learning behaviours involving strategic knowledge as well as knowledge about learning. Learners use them to learn and to regulate learning. Oxford (1990) considers them as specific actions that are used for the purpose of making learning faster, easier, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. The common strand that runs through the various definitions offered is that learning strategies are specific processes that a learner consciously selects in order to help him in his learning.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) describe strategies as cognitive processes and they have classified the list of identified strategies into 3 categories. Metacognitive strategies are those that

involve planning for and monitoring or evaluating a learning activity. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, “involve manipulation of the material to be learned” (Chamot, 1987:72). These strategies are used to help understanding and memory. The last category of strategies is social and affective strategies which help the learner to learn by getting help from others and by lowering the affective filter within himself. Rubin (1987) classifies metacognitive and cognitive strategies as strategies that directly affect learning whereas social strategies do not.

The goal of strategy training is therefore to help learners become more efficient, more effective and more self-directed in their learning. Studies have found that learning strategies “develop with age, are used spontaneously with increasing sophistication by older students, result in improved task performance and can be taught” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990: 106). Most studies on strategy training have therefore involved mature students in high schools or tertiary institutions. Training with such students has yielded favourable results (Cohen & Aphek, 1980; O’Malley et. al., 1985; Chamot, 1993; Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1995; Nunan, 1996; Wenden, 1996).

Research Setup

The twenty-four learners who received strategy-training instruction were among those enrolled in the Intermediate Level Graduate English Course, which is one among the special English courses conducted by CELC. The course adopts a multi-skills approach with the aim to raise the English proficiency of students to a level that allows them to communicate fluently and accurately in formal and informal situations and in practical, social, academic and professional areas. They were placed in two classes of twelve, each based on the analysis of oral proficiency scores obtained from a diagnostic test. Group A was classified as being in the upper intermediate range, while group B was classified as being in the lower intermediate range.

All the learners were from the People’s Republic of China. Their ages generally ranged from 24 to 30 years old, the oldest being 41 years of age. All but a handful had been in Singapore for no more than three months at the commencement of the English course. Five had been in Singapore for more than one and a half

years, having worked in private companies before enrolling as graduate students in NUS.

The learners were introduced to and trained in the use of learning strategies during the course of their regular English classes which were conducted twice a week over twelve weeks, totalling forty-eight hours. As far as possible, strategy training was integrated into the course curriculum and materials. Training in strategies was explicit, that is, the strategy was named and identified to the learners. Although individual strategies were emphasised during a particular lesson, most activities required the use of more than one strategy for their completion. This ensured that learners were exposed to multiple strategies, as evidence showed that good language learners have a wide repertoire of learning strategies and use a variety of strategies in any learning task (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Learners were asked to maintain weekly entries in their learning diaries using cues as prompts to help them to examine their learning progress and to make learning plans for the coming week. The format of the learning diary is the same as that used in Nunan's (1996) study of tertiary level students learning English in Hong Kong. A sample is reproduced in Appendix 1. The data in the diary was used to see how strategy training had affected their personal learning methods, awareness of difficulties and goals for learning. These diaries were examined and recorded by the author every few weeks. Learners were told of the possible benefits that could be gained from the exercise, that no extra credits would be earned and that their participation was entirely voluntary.

Results

As training was provided in metacognitive, cognitive and social and affective strategies, diary entries were examined to see if learners had used or developed these strategies.

From the diary entries, it was evident that learners had discovered new ways to learn. They had increasingly definite ideas about the methods they could use to learn as the weeks went by. Compare Student A's entry in the first week to her entry in the later weeks:

1st week: “only way for me to improve ... is to practise more ...”

5th week: “talking with Indian or Singaporean students, reading newspapers, watching TV and movies, listening to radio ... review the book, ‘The Secrets of English Words’ ... tells us how to remember words by the roots (prefix and suffix).”

8th week: “... telling stories is also a good way to improve spoken English.”

Student A showed increasing sophistication in the ways she could learn English. Her methods and plans became more definite. She discussed new vocabulary with colleagues and started to learn the morphology of English words as a method for vocabulary learning. She found that she enjoyed story telling as a way to practise spoken English so she started to analyse how story telling could be done well:

10th week: “before you tell a story you must think over what you want to say ... and what’s the main idea ... organise the whole ... arrange the ideas ... think over how to express it in the easiest way so that everyone can understand ... lastly ... better to use some humorous method ...”

Not only did this student find new ways to learn, but she also used such opportunities to improve her learning. She made increasingly definite and sophisticated plans to improve her English from each method.

Student E recorded that in class he learned new vocabulary learning strategies, which he had not used before. In the following week he wrote that he found it easier to understand new words with the help of sample sentences. He also noticed that when he learnt new words in certain contexts he could remember them more easily. This led to a plan to learn words in groups according to the context in which they appeared. For instance, he found that he could remember the words he learned on financial news from newspapers as he prepared to do a short talk on the Asian financial crisis.

There was a change too in their attitude to learning new words. Often these students would be eager to learn difficult and sophisticated vocabulary. However, they found that they had difficulty finding occasions to use them and they also had trouble

trying to recall their meanings. This resulted in frustration for the students. So, it was pleasant to note that as the weeks went by, many of them were also beginning to learn useful vocabulary, rather than difficult but rarely used ones. For instance, one student learned the word 'paroxysm' but lamented that she had no opportunity to use it. Some weeks later she noted that the word 'envelop' could be used both as a noun and as a verb with a slight change of spelling. She noted that simple words could be more useful to her.

Student F learned to get more out of reading professional texts. In the 2nd week he recorded that he did not know how to learn language from such kinds of materials. In the 5th week, after a training task on concept mapping to get main ideas from reading passages, he wrote:

"I studied an article ... many new words ... when I read it a second time I understood more ... tried to draw a concept map ... the main idea displayed itself to me very clearly. I find it an effective way to read scientific paper."

This student had learned a strategy that he found transferable to other learning situations.

For other students, there was growing awareness that a previous learning method might not be effective. Student M planned to change his learning technique to suit his learning style, which was apparently more visual.

5th week: "I have changed my habit of learning English. When I encounter a new word, not only learn its meaning and usage, but also learn its spelling. I think only when I spell it well and use it freely do I really understand this new word."

Another significant area where learners showed increasing sensitivity was in the way they evaluated learning techniques. There was evidence that their beliefs about how to learn affected their choice of learning methods. In addition, they were beginning to see language learning more as a process and less as a product.

Student D started the first week wanting to know a quicker way to improve her English. In the 3rd week she recorded that "language learning is a period of practice". In the 6th week she

acknowledged that language learning was not “course work”. She was also able to evaluate suggested learning methods. She felt that a classmate’s idea to use Chinese subtitles to understand English movies was not a good idea because to her it was using “a language stick” and the method would encourage her to “do translation in your brain”. She also concluded that watching documentaries on Chinese culture in English was not a good idea. Although the familiar topic would make for easier understanding, she felt that language was not learnt through the language in itself but also through its culture. “Only by understanding the cultural background of western world do we learn foreign language better.” This student harboured personal beliefs about language and these beliefs affected her choice of ways to learn. She rejected the methods that were unappealing and seemingly incorrect to her. She also came to realise that fluency was not everything. Her 9th week entry reads:

“Previously I thought that speaking is a proud thing. I found I would make a lot of stupid mistakes. Therefore I changed my idea and planned to speak slowly and thoughtfully.”

After the first week of lessons, Student G recorded that he learned how to identify information words (keywords) in an English sentence. He felt that this strategy of selectively attending to important information was “very useful since my brain is slow when it process English information ... processing speed will be increased if it can concentrate on the information words.”

Learners were also more astute in evaluating their studying/learning progress. This was an important development because many students often felt discouraged and frustrated at some point in their study by their seeming lack of improvement.

Student M was conscious of the difference between the first time he had to speak at length in class and the second time he did so. He felt that he was more fluent and he wrote:

“that is the progress we have made ... by now, I am willing to speak English. And I dare to open my mouth. No matter how many mistakes ... I can say some English. I am glad I have made such progress.”

Student H too, reported progress in listening and reading skills. In the first week she found listening to BBC “not easy” while reading novels was “very difficult”. In the 6th week she had progressed sufficiently to report that she found the daily practice of listening to BBC had improved her listening skill. In the 10th week, she recorded her improved reading ability:

“... read English novel ... when I was eager to know the result of the story, my reading speed is very fast and I can guess many words. I didn't check the dictionary for one time ... popular novels are easy for me ... author only use normal words ... I can totally understand the meaning.”

In this segment Student H was beginning to show evidence that she was persevering in her learning and that though she could not comprehend fully she felt a certain sense of achievement so long as she could guess at the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary. She also realised that these unfamiliar words need not necessarily impede her understanding nor her reading pace. This helped her to finish her reading quickly and encouraged her to read more.

A significant observation was that learners were beginning to be more astute at monitoring their production. Student C began the course by making quite general statements like, “I speak too fast and cause a lot of grammar problems.” In his 5th week entry, he noted that he had started to check himself more carefully by using a tape recorder and found that he could identify many mistakes on the tape. By around the 7th week he was able to pinpoint specific errors: “I did not use the past tense ... in my speaking ... past tense is always in the wrong place ... while writing ... different kinds of word tenses are mixed ... in my speaking I always use he or him to a female and she or her to a male.” This was an important development as many students felt that the teacher was the only person who could identify their mistakes.

Student F discerned the value of being accurate in order to convey one's meaning more clearly. He reported that while travelling in a taxi to go for a meeting, he had said, “We'll be there on time” and his Indian colleague corrected him by saying, “in time”. Student F wrote, “He expressed more clearly than I, because we arrived there 15 minutes in advance.”

Student J reported that he was surprised by the negative feedback on his pronunciation from fellow students after his first short oral presentation. He thought he had pronounced well and could not understand the difference between his assessment and that of his classmates. He felt that maybe this was because “we cannot judge what we have done by ourselves” because the same brain controls both processes – acting and observing one’s actions at the same time. However, he learned later that he was able to monitor his production during his class presentation, for he wrote in the 6th week:

“... not as good as what I expected. I forgot to use ‘turmoil, drop, fluctuate’ ... it is not easy to speak in English ...”

In addition he was able to judge that his topic on currency fluctuations in Asia was very wide; so he should have narrowed it down to make it easier to handle. It was a promising development to note that he was able to evaluate his performance in order to seek better ways to improve it.

The diary entries also revealed that learners were practising and using the strategy of selective attention to regulate their learning and use of language. Student S had reported in the first week that listening was a problem for him. In the third week, he wrote that he was able to understand an Indian colleague who spoke fast by concentrating on keywords. Other learners also reported that they could understand most of what they heard on the radio or TV by grasping the general meaning though they could not understand every word.

Diary entries were also examined to see if learners were utilising the cognitive strategies they learnt in class. The analysis shows that learners were beginning to use the strategies of inferencing, prediction and attention to context to help them to understand the English language.

In the 6th week, Student G wrote that he watched the movie “A Farewell To Arms”, but found the quality of the video very poor. Yet he managed to understand the plot because he had read the blurb on the cover of the video before watching the tape. He concluded:

“... so I think that it’s important to get some useful information as hints, introduction before you watch a film, attend English lecture. It will help you on what the speaker said.”

Some students also became more systematic in learning new vocabulary. They categorised new words learnt in order to use them in their written assignments. Vocabulary learning at the sentence level appeared to help them in understanding and recall. Student G tried to learn new vocabulary by recalling all the previously learnt words associated with the new word. He found that there were two benefits to this method as it helped him to learn a new word as well as to review other words he had learned.

Lastly, the diaries were scrutinised to find out if the learners had used any social and affective strategies in their language learning. In this area the entries revealed that the learners had actively sought out people to help them in their learning. Many learners initially lamented that their language environment was poor as there were few native speakers around. Most learners also spent their after-office hours with their own countrymen. As the weeks passed, more learners started to record that they were seeking out Indian colleagues with whom they could practise spoken English. The Indian students, though not native speakers themselves, have much better oral skills.

Learners were starting to look for colleagues, spouses, even neighbours to help them practise their language. Learners were apparently making more self-directed efforts at managing their own learning by creating more opportunities to learn and by turning to their friends as language resources and language partners.

Student H reported receiving help from her fellow students when they taught her how to answer questions in detail. She sought out a learning partner who lived in the same hostel but she was not optimistic about the chances of improving her English as she felt that the girl had the same level of proficiency as hers. Fortunately, she came to realise that her friend’s listening comprehension was better, so they watched TV together and discussed the content afterwards. Additionally, learners were also engaged in more positive self-talk. Even the slightest improvements were noted and progress was celebrated.

Research and Pedagogical Implications

It seems quite evident that strategy training had positive effects in heightening the consciousness of learning processes in these learners. Learners had become more sophisticated at fine-tuning their plans for learning. There was more initiative in managing learning in general but gradually vague plans for learning initially had become more concrete and specific. Learners had learned to plan strategically in advance in order to achieve their goals.

Results also indicate that the learners were beginning to evaluate their learning methods. This process involves recognising the need to change old styles and habits as well as clarifying misconceptions about learning. Their personal choices about learning methods affected their selection of ways to learn. Some learners realised that they had to be willing to change and to attempt different methods to achieve better results. This was especially true for these students from the PRC. From personal interviews regarding their learning background and expectations, as well as class observation, I gathered that students expected the teacher to take charge in class and to answer all their questions. Pair and group work in class were not familiar to them. So these students were initially very hesitant about group and pair work and some even wrote in their learning diaries that they would like the teacher to talk to them on an individual basis. They were not comfortable with the idea of learning from their peers. Only through many sessions of co-operative work were they convinced of the importance and usefulness of social strategies and interactions in their language learning.

As a result learners also became increasingly creative in sourcing practice opportunities as well as language resources. They were better able to monitor their production and to view them not as evidence of failure but as learning opportunities. This increased ability to make plans, to seek out opportunities and ways to learn, to evaluate and monitor production had apparently helped these learners to see their language learning as being holistic. When their learning goals were fulfilled they were able to congratulate themselves.

By using cognitive strategies like attending to more important information and keywords, inferring, predicting and guessing, they learned to make language learning more manageable. This is important to students who “suffer” from information overload because they have to live in a new environment and use a foreign language.

The act of recording occasions when they spoke to others in English and the planning they made to seek out opportunities for practice in speaking skills, had the effect of spurring them on to actualise these plans. Similar results were reported in Nunan’s study in Hong Kong (Nunan, 1996).

As NUS continues to draw an increasing pool of foreign graduate students from non-English medium universities, there is a need to source for and implement the methods that will optimise student learning in our twelve-week language course. There is an acute need to prepare the learners to manage and regulate their own learning. Most of these graduate students have excelled in their field of academic study. They are individuals who have mastered the art of learning content subjects and being graduate students they are aware of how to monitor and evaluate their subject knowledge and to find solutions to problems in their own research. These students should be trained to extend and apply such skills to the task of language learning through strategy training. Their experience with learning will make strategy training very challenging and motivating because it can result in their gaining greater control over their learning and their progress.

This also means that teachers will need to be adequately trained and prepared to conduct strategy training. This is because when teachers encourage independence and autonomy in learning, they must be prepared to give up some of the control that they had previously exercised. I personally found that having this insight into the students’ learning processes, achievements, frustrations, plans and preferences made me a more sensitive teacher as I responded to their needs. For example, from one of the diaries I learned that a student fond of criticising was actually reacting to the new learning environment he was now in. He harboured some misconceptions about his own level of proficiency and held negative ideas about some classroom activities. When the objectives for learning tasks were carefully explained to him and

when he came to accept his true attainment level, he was more cooperative and more willing to participate in class.

It appears that giving learners strategy training and the opportunity and means for reflection can help some learners to understand more about their own language processes. In this study, this awareness and knowledge helped learners to better manage and direct their efforts and progress. It also appears that strategy training is suitable and essential for language learners from the PRC.

The goal of a language teacher is to see his student become an independent, self-directed, creative learner. With adequate strategy training this goal can be realised to the benefit of both teacher and student.

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Appendix 1

Date: _____

This week I studied:

This week I learned:

This week I used English in these places:

This week I spoke English with these people:

This week I made these mistakes:

My difficulties are:

I would like to know:

I would like help with:

My learning and practising goals for next week are: