SURVEY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN A THREE-YEAR COLLEGE

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Abstract
This article attempts to show how language learning strategies play a role in influencing students’ English learning in a three-year college. On the basis of Oxford’s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning and Cheng Xiaotang’s research, we designed a set of questionnaires for language learning strategies for our investigation. By an analysis of the use of learning strategies by our students, we hope to find some factors connected with language learning strategies that are influencing students’ language learning. The result shows that the students’ poor performance of English in three-year colleges relates partly to their low frequent use of strategies, particularly of cognitive and social strategies. So it is necessary for us to implement strategy training in three-year colleges.

1 Introduction

In 1975, Rubin published her classic article in TESOL Quarterly “What the good language learner can teach us” which focused on the strategies of successful learners and stated that once identified, such strategies could be made available to less successful learners. She classified strategies in terms of processes contributing directly or indirectly to language learning. Following Rubin, Naiman’s 1978 and Wong Fillmore’s 1976 joined the research on language learning strategies. Particularly, developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies. Williams and Burden’s 1997 strategy concern has been on “identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language or in some cases are observed doing while learning a second or foreign language.” Wenden and Rubin 1987 1997 With the coming of the late 1980s, more and more researchers came to do the research into language learning strategies such as O’Malley and Chamot 1990, A Wenden 1987, and Oxford 1990, A Cohe 1998 While Rubin and Wenden O’Malley and Chamot’s works put more stress on the academic interest, Oxford’s work 1990 can be considered a very practical handbook of language learning strategies. What more, Oxford set up the “Strategy Inventory for Language Learning” designed to assess uses of strategies in second language acquisition which is a very valuable tool for diagnosing students’ language learning strategies.

Learner strategies are ways of learning. Good learners use these strategies to make their learning more efficient. Learner strategies have been described to include any set of operations, steps, plans or routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information that is what learners do to learn and do to regulate their learning. Rubin 1987 Learner strategies include metacognitive and cognitive activities. Metacognitive learning strategies are generally applicable to a variety of learning tasks and include the knowledge of cognitive operations of oneself or others and planning monitoring and evaluating a learning activity. Brown 1982 Cognitive strategies are often specific to distinct learning activities and include steps in learning that require direct analysis, transformation or
Since 1990s Chinese researchers have done extensive research into language learning strategies of Chinese students but most of these studies took the English major students as their subjects or based their research on the students in the key four-year universities focusing little on the non-English major students in three-year colleges. The Learning English has consistently posed problems for students in the three-year colleges. Take our college for example during the past several years the passing rate of PET Practical English Test For Colleges were usually around 30% which means the majority of the students failed to pass the test. Although many factors contribute to the poor performance of students English in the junior colleges, students’ deficiency in language learning strategies accounts in part for their hardship in English learning. This paper is to report on a survey carried out to examine the language learning strategies of three-year college students in English learning.

2 Method

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of the survey are 208 sophomores of Clinical Medicine Department in Jinggangshan Medical College of which 48 are male and 60 are female. They range in age from 17 to 22 years old. They have studied English for at least 7 years. Their present needs in English is to pass the PET and CET. All of the subjects have for the first time participated in the PET held in June 2003.

2.2 Tools

2.2.1 Questionnaires

We designed a set of Questionnaires for Language Learning Strategies based on Oxford 1990 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning and Chen Xiaotang Zheng Min 2002 questionnaire for language learning strategy. It is used to assess students existing strategies including 46 items falling into six categories. Students complete it on their own and rate the frequency with which they use each of 46 strategies on a five-point scale from “never” to “always.” It includes metacognitive, affective, social, memory, cognitive and compensation.

2.2.2 Students’ scores in PET

The other tool we adopted for this survey is students’ scores in PET which is a national English test for the students in three-year colleges or the higher schools. All the 208 students took part in the tests for the first time in June 2003 Of them 76 passed and 132 failed.

3 Data collection

The students were given a brief introduction to learning strategies and some of the first strategies in the Questionnaire Paper were discussed together as a group. We ask students to react to a series of strategy descriptions for example “I make associations between new material and what I already know” in terms of how often they use the strategies always or almost always, often, sometimes, never or almost never. Once the students had understood what they had to do they continued working through it rapidly and were encouraged to answer the questions as accurately as possible representing what they actually do rather than what they thought they should be doing. In order that the students can tell their actual learning status freely, the questionnaire papers were collected anonymously.

It is sometimes difficult for them to understand what is actually meant by some of the descriptions. If students had any problems of comprehension, they were advised to stop and to ask for help. A good understanding would increase the accuracy of their responses.

We also held an interview with students where their results acted as a basis for discussion with students giving examples to illustrate their awareness of the strategies they use. Analyzed carefully, the information gained from their discussion contributes greatly to this study. It tends to reveal more than their Questionnaires response alone. McDonough 1995 1995 considers that progress in language learning research is only possible by finding ways of allowing learners to talk about their learning experiences. By listening to the experience of the other students, they were able to compare their different approaches to learning English.

4 Results and analysis

We analyzed the data collected mainly from three aspects: overall view of students’ learning strategy use, frequency of strategy use, and contrast of strategy use between the students who passed the PET and those who failed.
Table 1: Overall view of student strategies use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean levels</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 — 5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 — 4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 — 3</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 — 2</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 2, the categories of learning strategy are arranged from 6, the most frequently used, to 1, never used or almost never used. From which we can see that social strategies are at the bottom of the “generally not used” or “almost never used” strategies. The most frequently used category of strategies are compensation strategies such as guessing and paraphrasing when encountering a knowledge barrier. The results indicate that the junior college students in this study use strategies at a comparatively low level rather than high.

Table 2: Order of strategy frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>compensation</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>affective</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>metacognitive</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>cognitive</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>memory</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>social</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Contrast between the group who passed PET and the group who failed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>the group who passed the PET</th>
<th>the group who failed to pass PET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean order</td>
<td>mean order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memory</td>
<td>2.7 5</td>
<td>2.55 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitive</td>
<td>3.0 2</td>
<td>2.40 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compensation</td>
<td>3.8 1</td>
<td>2.89 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metacognitive</td>
<td>2.9 4</td>
<td>2.65 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affective</td>
<td>3.5 2</td>
<td>2.68 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>2.7 6</td>
<td>1.97 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study of learning strategy use is moderate overall with a mean score of 2.60. No students are reported as “always” or “almost never” Table 1 and those who are reported as “almost always” account for only 7.4% of the students. The majority of the students are reported as “general” accounting for 56.4% of students. 36% of students are reported as “seldom” which is much more above those “almost always”. The above figures show that the students in junior colleges generally don’t use learning strategies often. Because of their lack of learning methods they are not very efficient learners. This affects their improvement in English learning which in turn has negative effects on their usage of language learning strategies. Some students report that they feel very frustrated when they have spent much time on English learning but with little improvement.

In Table 2, the categories of learning strategy are arranged from 6, the most frequently used, to 1, never used or almost never used. From which we can see that social strategies are at the bottom of the “generally not used” or “almost never used” strategies. The most frequently used category of strategies are compensation strategies such as guessing and paraphrasing when encountering a knowledge barrier. This is immediately followed by affective strategies, mean 2.91. Metacognitive strategies come next, mean 2.72. And then come cognitive strategies, mean 2.65. All of these strategy categories average in “sometimes used” range except the social category which is in the “generally not used” range. These strategy frequencies are moderate or low. The results indicate that the junior college students in this study use strategies at a comparatively low level rather than high.

The order of the strategy frequency is a little out of our expectation. By our observation, we find that students usually spend most of their time on remembering new words, reading texts and doing the exercises and we thought they were inactive language learners since they usually showed their lack of motivation and passiveness in learning. So we once believed that memory and cognitive strategies should have come ahead of affective and metacognitive. The disparity of this recognition between teachers and students indicates that teachers should get to learn their students more.

Students described in the interview held that they had done a large amount of tests papers in order to get high scores in the entrance examination. Their high school teachers often trained them on the compensation strategies such as guessing by context, paraphrasing when forgetting a word in writing. This illustrates why compensation strategies come on the top in this frequency order.

The final goal of English learning is that we can communicate in English. So we must do our utmost to create an English environment: listening, speaking, reading and writing as much as we can particularly practicing it with English speakers. Listing the social
strategies in the range “generally not used” illustrates that students are not good at using these strategies. During the interview when this problem was discussed many students described that they are intimidated to make mistakes in public. This is a consciousness of self-protection which will be certain to prevent students from making progress in English when it goes to extreme. In addition, the learning environment in three-year colleges is also a barrier for the implementing of social strategies for their communicating with one another usually get frustrated by their poor English. Students describe that each time they go the English corner with enthusiasm to communicate but return with frustration because few students can express themselves well and they themselves don’t know what they can say too and this makes a conversation hard to continue.

From Table 3 we can see the students who have passed the PET are reported much better in strategy use than those who have failed. The mean of three strategy categories is over 3 in the passed group while in the unpassed group none is over 3. In the passed group all the categories of strategy use are in the “generally used” range but in the unpassed group two categories of strategy use are in the “seldom used” range. Though the passed group is superior to the unpassed group in compensation, affective, metacognitive, and memory strategies, yet the differences between them are not so great all belonging to the “generally used” range. The contrast of mean is respectively 3.28 to 2.89, 3.25 to 2.69, 2.4, 98 to 2.34, 2.77 to 2.54. The obvious disparity is in cognitive and social strategies. The contrast of mean is respectively 3.32 to 2.40 and 2.71 to 1.97.

There are also differences in the order of frequency of strategy use between the two groups. The passed group lists cognitive at the third place while the unpassed group lists it at the fifth place. The unpassed group believes memory strategies more important than cognitive strategies since they put “memory” at the third place.

The above figures show us some revelations. First most students in three-year colleges have the desire to learn English well no matter whether their English is good or poor. They know the importance of English learning in modern society and make effort on it. Second the relatively successful English learners are better at using cognitive and social strategies which help them learn better than those who seldom use cognitive and social strategies. By our investigation both groups spend nearly the same time on English learning and to some extent the unpassed group spend a bit more time on it. The reason that they still failed to pass the test is that they haven’t master the appropriate learning approaches. Only having desire and motivation is not enough. Finally self-assurance plays an important role in language learning. The students in the passed group are more confident of themselves. That’s why they use social strategies much more frequently than those in the unpassed group. During the process of communications confident students tend to be active and positive and be inclined to practice the language they learned which is quite helpful to improve their English. In turn self-consciousness would affect students’ learning effect.

5 Conclusions and proposals

Many researches on language teaching indicate that when other learning conditions are the same the difference in learning strategy use would has a decisive effect on their learning grades. Wen Qifang 1996 This survey shows that the students in three-year colleges are not very good language strategy users. First they use the strategies in comparatively low frequency. Second they have the motivation to learn but do not have proper learning approaches. Third the use of memory strategies is still staying in mechanical memory. All of these restrict severely the development of their language ability and contribute in part to the unsatisfying grades of students in our college. Thus we must take some measures in our language teaching. Based on our survey we propose the following:

1 Try to find out the factors influencing students’ use of language learning strategies. A wide range of individual differences have been identified as factors that influence the development and use of language learning strategies such as age, intelligence, personality, learning style, attitude, motivation and language proficiency. Besides external factors like teaching methodology, teaching environment and other cultural and social variables also contribute to the choice of learning strategies. Thus it is our aim to find out the main factors influencing students’ choices of learning strategies and help them make intelligent judgment and informed choices of strategies and ultimately help them improve their English learning effect.

2 Implement the training of language learning strategies. Strategy training can not only improve
language learners learning effect help them realize their learning goals but also assist learners to choose proper learning approaches and become more independent and autonomous learners. The training doesn’t mean to introduce simply good learning strategies to students it is to enlarge the range of students’ choices of learning strategies and help them raise their strategy awareness select appropriate strategies to practice. Strategy training can be carried out together with teaching curriculum. That is the students learn to use strategies while completing the learning tasks assigned by teacher. English teacher must make students quite aware that it is their responsibility to choose and practice the strategies so that they would desert the idea to rely on teachers.

Create communicative environment for students. Failure to use social strategies will certainly impede the acquisition of communicative ability and the development of English learning. English teachers must create communicative environment for students as possible as they can. For example adopt the student-centered teaching model provide students as many opportunities as possible to carry out twoway communications encourage students to get over self-consciousness etc. English teachers in junior colleges are supposed to take more part in English corner activities so as to direct and encourage students to communicate more in English With the teachers’ help and direction students are certain to make progress in their English learning.

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Appendix
Questionnaires of English Learning Strategies

Sex
Scores of PET
Time usually spent on English study each day

Below are a series of statements about English learning Please read each statement and write the response 1 2 3 4 5 that tells how true the statement is

1 never or almost never true of me
2 usually not true of me
3 somewhat true of me
4 usually true of me
5 always or almost always true of me

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you Do not answer how you think you should be or what other people do There are no right or wrong answers to these statements If you have any questions let the teacher know immediately

Part A
1 I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English
2 I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them
3 I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word
4 I use rhymes to remember new English words
5 I use cards to remember new English words
6 I review English lessons often
7 I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page on the
board or on a street sign

Part B
8. I preview English lessons ahead of class
9. I concentrate on lectures in class
10. I actively answer questions in English and take part in in-class activities
11. I complete homework by myself and in time
12. I try not to translate word for word
13. I read for pleasure in English
14. I often speak English out of class
15. I write notes/messages/letters in English
16. I try to find patterns in English
17. I first skim an English passage, then read over the passage quickly and then go back and read carefully
18. I often use English dictionaries
19. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or listen to English programs like VOA and BBC

Part C
20. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses
21. When I can’t think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures
22. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English
23. If I can’t think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing
24. I read English without looking up every new word
25. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English

Part D
26. I have clear goals for improving my English skills
27. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English
28. I can usually do by my schedule
29. I think about my progress and shortcomings in learning English
30. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English
31. I often exchange learning experiences with teachers and classmates
32. I look for opportunities to participate in English activities both in and out of classroom
33. I look for help once I have difficulties in learning English
34. I often evaluate my learning effect

Part E
35. I intentionally develop my interests in English learning
36. I take a positive attitude to English and English learning
37. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English
38. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes
39. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English
40. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary

Part F
41. I communicate in English with other people in the English activities
42. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk
43. I practice English with other students
44. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again
45. I keep the conversation going by overcoming the language barrier
46. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers

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