

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Helping students bring about a revolution in their out-of-class learning

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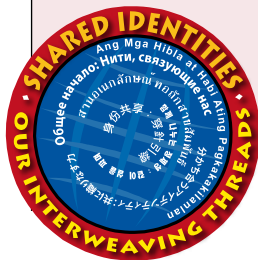
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I believe it is every teacher's dream to have a positive impact on students and help their learning change for the better. This paper examines how teacher's explicit teaching of learning strategies changes students' out-of-class learning. The study took place in a university in Japan. A questionnaire was administered to the whole class at the beginning of the course. Among the students, three kept a weekly journal and answered the same questionnaire at the end of the course. The results suggested that the out-of-class learning style of the students showed remarkable improvement, and what promoted the changes were simple, basic strategies that advanced learners might take for granted. Teachers do influence students, and just one piece of basic advice can revolutionize our students' learning. Because of the limitation of time students are in the classroom, it is important for teachers to seek a better way to help students become more autonomous learners.

学生に良い影響を与え、彼らの学習がプラスの変化を遂げる助けになることはすべての教師にとっての望みであると思う。この論文は教師による学習方略についての明確な提示が学生の家庭学習をどのように変化させるかについて探るものである。これは日本の大学で行われた研究である。コースの最初にクラス全体にアンケートが実施された。その中の3人の学生が週1回日記を付け、コースの最後に同じアンケートに答えた。結果によるとそれぞれの学生の家庭学習が顕著な変化を示した。変化を促進したものは、上級学習者であれば当然と見なすような簡素で基本的な方略であった。教師は確かに学生に影響を与え、たった一つの基本的なアドバイスが学生に革命的な変化を起こし得る。学生達と教室内で過ごす時間は限られている。学生を自主的な学習者にする手助けをするためのより良い方法を探ることは教師にとって大切であると考えられる。

In this study, I investigated how learner training, or teacher instruction in learning strategies, influenced student learning motivation and attitudes toward out-of-class learning. Learning strategy refers to “a range of specific learning techniques that make learning more effective” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 95), and learner training “aims to make everyone more capable of independent learning” (Dickinson, 1992, p. 13). The basic belief about learner training is that teachers can stipulate the learning strategies that successful learners employ and teach them to poor learners, which will lead to more efficient learning. (Rubin, 1987;



Wenden, 1987) However, there is some disagreement among researchers about the effectiveness of learner training. One reason is that there is no verifiable evidence that awareness of strategies causes L2 learning success (Miller, 1993). There was even a case where the performance of the experimental group who received training performed worse than the control group, which seemingly resulted from the fact that the former group's members could not help sticking to their well-established strategies for the task (O'Malley, 1987). In light of criticism of learner training, Miller (1993) argues that until its benefit has been proven, teachers should be careful about devoting precious classroom time to the training. Although "success" in Miller's context would take prolonged longitudinal research to investigate, it is possible to investigate whether the training itself has been successful in the short run if we can "observe students performing the technique and know that the behavior observed indicates that students ... are practicing the target strategy" (Miller, 1993, p. 681). Miller (1993) claims that in the case of a highly motivated group with the same goals, learner training would seem to have a higher possibility of success. If this holds true, students in a class like the one considered in the paper here, who have the single goal of achieving target TOEIC scores, seem to have a chance of improving their learning. What teachers need to consider is how to keep students motivated. The issue that teachers at my university discuss every year is that some students' motivation deteriorates as time passes. Dörnyei (2001) claims that after the first motivation arises that leads a learner to choose a goal, it has to be maintained. The challenge for the students with a specific goal of attaining required TOEIC scores, then, is how to keep what Dörnyei calls "executive motivation," the

motivation to maintain the initial motivation, throughout the semester. Dörnyei (2001) maintains that teacher influence and knowledge and use of self-regulatory strategies (e.g. learning strategies) are two of the motivational influences that affect student executive motivation, and this is exactly why I tried to incorporate learner training into my class. Considering the fact that not many studies have been carried out about student learning strategies at home, and many of these were in ESL settings (Hyland, 2004) and not in EFL settings, it seems worth studying student out-of-class learning in Japan, where students learn English as a foreign language. As Oxford (2002) suggests that teachers should incorporate all types of strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social) into their teaching, I kept in mind to balance these four strategies in the training.

Study

Method

This study was conducted in an English department of a Japanese university in Chiba. In this university, the students in the TOEIC course are required to achieve the target TOEIC scores which vary according to the level of the class they belong to. Their average score as of April 1st was 396.6 and the target score was 525. A questionnaire with 29 items to be evaluated on a Likert scale (in Japanese, see Appendix 1) was administered to 60 sophomores (25 males and 35 females) at the first class meeting. The aim was to understand the overall situation of the class in the use of strategies, and to know what advice to give. Then three students (2 males and 1 female) were selected for a qualitative study whose responses met the three criteria: 1.

The response to Questionnaire item 18 (“I ask someone for advice on how to study”) was either “rarely” or “never,” 2. The response to item 27 (“I’m worried that I don’t know how to do well on the TOEIC test”) was either “strongly agree” or “agree,” and 3. The “okay” sign at the end of the questionnaire was circled indicating he/she can participate in this study. I promised a reward as a token of gratitude but made it clear that it was not a grade as passing a grade in this course had to totally depend on the TOEIC score. At the end of the semester, I gave each participant a book gift card. Because not many students wanted to participate in the first place, the number of students for the qualitative study was smaller than expected. They wrote a weekly learning strategies journal (LSJ) and sent each entry to me via email when it was completed (at weekly intervals), for approximately three months. At the end of the course, the same questionnaire was administered to the three students. At every weekly class meeting, the class had learning strategies training. The strategies varied from a cognitive strategy of reading properly, a metacognitive strategy of making a schedule, an affective strategy of changing places to study for a change, to a social strategy of communicating with non-Japanese. As strategy training is best done when taught explicitly (Oxford, 2002), I also used a lot of visual aids.

Overall situation in the class

One situation is lack of attention of students to learning strategies. Approximately 50% of the students had not stopped to review or seek new strategies (see Appendix 2, 1.) Other results showed that (1) about half of the students

did not read English sentences properly; (2) many students were in need of affective support; (3) their approach to vocabulary building had room for improvement; and (4) half the students never or rarely read English for pleasure, and about the same number of them thought solving mock questions was the most important. Based on these findings, I decided what strategies to introduce. One of the strategies, for example, is what I call the “Paint the wall layer after layer” method (see Appendix 3) with which students skim through one whole chapter of a vocabulary book and repeat the activity over and over.

Case studies

The three students (Ryu, Jiro, and Sakura, all pseudonyms) increased their awareness of the importance of strategies and became more motivated to study for the TOEIC after getting strategy training in class. The journals they kept revealed how they changed.

Ryu’s change

Ryu had a problem in reading. In response to Questionnaire Item 1 (“I read English from left to right without my eyes moving back for translation”), for Questionnaire 1 the response was “sometimes”, but “often” for Questionnaire 2. The journal entries showed how Ryu’s reading habits changed. Ryu’s journal entry for May 18, “My biggest problem is that I cannot translate even easy English sentences into Japanese.” In class, I instructed the following: “Attempting to translate not only prevents you from reading properly, but also from comprehending English language

in the proper order because you are not accustomed to comprehending what you hear in the proper order. One way to kick the habit is to read English passages aloud. When doing it, you have no choice but to read in the proper order and cannot translate into Japanese.” Soon after I told this in class, Ryu wrote, “I came to understand that it is important to think in English. Now I am trying hard to kick my habit” (May 25). After a while, Ryu stopped writing about translation, now on the right track, but one day motivation suddenly deteriorated. June 15: “I feel scared to think that I might not be able to solve actual TOEIC problems” (June 15). The TOEIC test began to overwhelm Ryu. However, after I told the class that about 90 percent of the grammar used in the TOEIC test consists of basic junior high school grammar, the fog cleared away. After my talk (June 23): “I realized the importance of fundamentals and felt confident. With the confidence, I took the TOEIC test today, and could solve the grammar section with ease” (June 29). After seeking some strategies that were best suited, Ryu gradually became more confident. On July 6: “My problems are gradually on the decrease as I find out how to learn English.” The final journal entry included the following: “The advice from my teacher was really informative. Now that I know the importance of using English, brushing up my English skills itself is a pure joy to me now” (July 29). As is clear, Ryu was beginning to have strong intrinsic motivation.

Jiro's change

Until this course started, English had been pure boredom to Jiro. However, during this course, Jiro's attitude changed. To Questionnaire Item 29 (“I get bored with studying

English at home”), the response was “strongly agree” for Questionnaire 1, but “disagree” for Questionnaire 2. Jiro's journal entry for May 18 showed a wish to break with the status quo: “I wonder if my way of learning at home is efficient.” Jiro began with making touching efforts to increase vocabulary. At the beginning, the response to Questionnaire Item 25 (“I'm worried that I have a poor vocabulary”) was “strongly agree,” but “slightly agree” for Questionnaire 2. July 8: “Vocabulary cards are useful. You can shuffle them to make it more challenging. Also, I found it effective to skim through the whole chapter of my vocabulary book, and repeat the activity frequently. Recently I sometimes read a vocabulary book on my bed for a change, which is effective.” This remark shows that Jiro tactfully created an original combination of cognitive (vocabulary cards), metacognitive (skimming through first), and affective (changing places) learning strategies. Jiro's attitude toward English changed, too. The response to Questionnaire Item 22 (“Studying English is high on my agenda”) was “disagree” for Questionnaire 1, but “agree” for Questionnaire 2. The final journal entry (July 29) included the following: “After taking this course I got into the habit of studying English daily. Now I can study English with a lighter heart.”

Sakura's change

Like Jiro, Sakura had never tried to improve her learning strategies. In response to questionnaire item 6 (“There are times when I review my current learning strategies and seek new ones”), for Questionnaire 1 the response was “never,” but “often” for Questionnaire 2. The journal entries showed how Sakura felt about studying English at home: “I do not

feel like studying in my room that has neither air conditioner nor CD player” (May 21). After the instruction of creating a better place to study, Sakura made an action. May 28: “Now that I started changing the place to study, I can concentrate better. And guess what! I bought a CD player!” I think this change alone made a great contribution to the improvement of Sakura’s learning environment, which led to the creation of virtuous circle. June 16: “Thanks to the CD player, I gradually got used to the speed of English... I did great on today’s vocabulary quiz, which motivated me more.” The final journal entry shows Sakura’s growth as a learner: “The teacher’s talk about the importance of basics prompted me to start reviewing the basic grammar. Surprisingly, it is fun. I will spend more time on it this summer” (July 30).

Discussion and conclusion

The three students investigated here found different strategies essential to their learning and incorporated them into their out-of-class study. If I had not implemented learner training, Ryu would still be reading English in an improper order. Jiro might have given up memorizing words halfway as usual, and Sakura would not know the pleasure of learning with a CD player. As mentioned earlier, there is little evidence that connects strategy training with student’s L2 success. Therefore, it is uncertain that Ryu, for example, will continue reading in proper order, which would increase his English proficiency. In the new framework of learner strategies, Macaro (2006) proposed that “repeated activation of language processes in working memory results in structural changes taking place in long term memory both in vocabulary and morphosyntax. These changes ...

lead to skill development” (p. 330). I hope that the new habits learned in the training can eventually result in new processing pathways in the brain and increase their English proficiency of the students. The changes occurring in the study habits of the students may be small, but it is quite possible that they will be the fundamentals to build on for better learning. I found that creating rapport with students was essential for successful strategy training. I tried to introduce each strategy in words they could understand and in a humorous way. In fact, students laughed a great deal every time I introduced new ideas. Had I not paid attention to creating a comfortable classroom environment, their motivation to try out and execute the suggestions might have been lower.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire (translated from Japanese)

Part I: Learning strategies

Cognitive

- I read English from left to right without my eyes moving back for translation.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
- I try to focus on meaning rather than language forms.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
- I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
- I try to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Metacognitive

- I make a schedule poster on which my goals and/or procedure of study is written.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

6. I review my current learning strategies and seek new ones
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
7. I use a count-down timer or an alarm clock to divide up the time and concentrate.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
8. I record what I studied in my schedule book or diary.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
9. I utilize an effective way of memorizing new words.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
10. I incorporate reading-out-loud activity into my learning.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
11. I use an audio book that I can listen to repeatedly.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
12. I skim through the targeted chapter of a vocabulary book once and go back to the start without being a perfectionist who do not proceed to the next word until he memorizes one word perfectly.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Affective

13. I read books and/or newspapers to gain information.(for pleasure)
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
14. I move to places to study other than my room for a change of pace.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
15. I visit a reliable web site to gain information on how to study.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
16. I have my way of cheering myself on and actually do it.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never
17. I have my way of mental diversion and actually do it.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Social

18. I ask someone for advice on how to study.
 Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

19. I try to take every opportunity to talk with people from foreign countries.
-
- Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Part II: How I feel about studying English and the TOEIC test

20. Practicing mock TOEIC tests is the fastest way to do well on the TOEIC test.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

21. I feel uneasy that there is a standard TOEIC score I have to exceed to take credits in this course.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

22. Studying English is high on my agenda.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

23. I'm not good at the reading section (Part7) of the TOEIC test.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

24. I'm not good at listening sections of the TOEIC test.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

25. I'm worried that I have a poor vocabulary.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

26. I think reading and listening are related.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

27. I'm worried that I don't know how to do well on the TOEIC test.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

28. I like reading English books.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

29. I start to get bored with studying English at home.

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

30. I'm looking for students who will kindly participate in the research project. If you can do that, please circle "okay!" below. Your cooperation does not guarantee that I will give you the credits, but the participants will be given a small honorarium. <Okay!>

Appendix 2

Overall trend of the class

1. I review my current learning strategies and seek new ones.

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	3	8	20	15	14
%	5	13.3	33.3	25	23.3

2. I read English from left to right without my eyes moving back for translation.

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	5	21	19	10	5
%	8.3	35	31.7	16.7	8.3

3. I have my way of cheering myself on and actually do it.

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	5	5	11	19	20
%	8.3	8.3	18.3	31.7	33.3

4. I skim through the targeted chapter of a vocabulary book once and go back to the start without being a perfectionist who does not proceed to the next word until he memorizes one word perfectly.

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	9	19	20	9	3
%	15	31.7	33.3	15	5

5. I read books and/or newspapers to gain information and/or for pleasure)

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	9	6	22	12	11
%	15	10	36.7	20	18.3

6. I try to take every opportunity to talk with people from foreign countries.

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Number	5	10	11	20	14
%	8.3	16.7	18.3	33.3	23.3

7. Practicing mock TOEIC tests is the fastest way to do well on the TOEIC test.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number	4	17	29	7	3
%	6.7	28.3	48.3	11.7	5

Appendix 3

Some strategy training activities introduced in the classroom

Cognitive

1. Reading aloud training with a training kit (a script with slashes and a CD with narration with pauses) to help students correct their improper way of reading
2. Pronunciation training paying attention to the difference between the rhythm of a syllable-timed language and that of a stress-timed language

Metacognitive

1. Paint the wall layer after layer approach

“There are 75 words to memorize every week. When memorizing them, some of you take one-step-at-a-time approach; that is, trying to read each example sentence with maximum concentration and only after mastering the word move on to the next one. The disadvantage of this is that there is a high possibility of getting discouraged and giving it all up because reaching the final words seems to take too much time. I suggest that you take advantage of the magic power of frequency. First, skim through the whole chapter swiftly. Next, return to the first page. And then, repeat the activity many times. To avoid getting bored, changing what you focus on every time is a good idea. For example, you just read the sentences for the first time around, listen to the CD for the second time, and read the sentences out loud for the third time.

2. Using useful items. (1) Marbles and a dish to make it easier and more fun to count how many times they read a script out loud. (2) A countdown kitchen timer for time management.

Affective

1. Creating or moving to a new place to study
2. Reading English newspaper articles that deal with tips on how to study

Social

1. Asking the teacher via email Hot Line I set up
2. Having students share their ideas on how to study efficiently