

Language Learning Strategies Use in University and Beyond

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Language learners who engage actively in their selection of language learning strategies (LLSs) better manage and evaluate their learning processes. In this paper, we report on a 14-week study investigating the influence of strategy training on 51 students in 5 settings and across 2 groups, students at 3 Japanese universities and learners at 2 private language schools. The study involved repeated exposure to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990), having learners select, practice, and evaluate strategies from the SILL and regularly record their reflections on strategies. Pre- and poststudy SILL scores, student feedback in interviews, and the students' reflections were analyzed across the various contexts. The findings suggest that explicit training on LLS was the single most important factor in improving the students' strategy use, but such training must consider factors of resistance to the concept of strategy training with diverse sets of learners in different environments.

学習方法を積極的に自分自身で選択している外国語学習者は、学習の過程を、よりよく調整し正確な評価を下している。本論は、14週間にわたる効果的な学習方法の指導について考察した報告である。指導は、二種類の五つの教育機関、日本の三大学と二個人経営による英語学校において、51人の学習者を対象に行われた。考察は、学習者がSILL (Oxford, 1990) から学習方法を選択し、実行し、その結果を評価する実践を二回行った結果に基づいている。考察は、SILLを実行する前の点数とSILLを二回行った後の点数を比較し、さらに面談で話された学習者の感想や学習方法に対する観察を検討するなど多面的に分析している。結果、学習者とその環境によっては学習方法を指導する教育に抵抗感を抱く要因があり、配慮する必要もあるが、外国語教育において、学習方法に焦点をあて、適切な学習方法を明らかにしていく教育は、学習者が学習方法を使いこなせるようになる極めて有効であると言える。



JALT2012 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

ATTEMPTS BY educators and researchers to determine the reasons why some learners learn faster than others are by no means a new development. The focus on what kind of methods successful learners employ has been ongoing since at least the 1960s, with Houle's (1961) efforts to highlight the different values and purposes learners place on their learning. Houle developed three classifications of learners including goal-oriented learners who have a specific goal for their study, activity-oriented learners who participate for social purposes, and learning-oriented learners who perceive learning to be an end in itself. Hiemstra (1994) noted that it was the last category of learners that most closely resembled the self-directed learner identified in later research. Specific to language learning, Carton (1966) noted that language students vary in their ability to make rational choices regarding their learning. Early research into "the good language learner" (Stern, 1975, p. 304) focused on the notion that the study strategies of successful language learners should be identified and used to help less effective learners to improve.

Wesche (1975) hypothesized that it was the ability to orchestrate a number of strategies, rather than individual strategy use, that best facilitated language learning, a theory later supported by Wenden (1998) who suggested that effective strategy use depended on various factors including the task purpose, task difficulty, learning style, and background knowledge.

Increased use of language learning strategies (LLSs) does not necessarily lead to more effective learning. Vann and Abraham's (1990) study of less successful learners reported that although the students were actively employing a number of strategies, they lacked the metacognitive awareness to assess which strategies were most appropriate for a given task. Further evidence highlighting the importance of appropriate strategy selection was provided by Yamamori, Isoda, Hiromori, and Oxford (2003) who argued that efforts to identify universally good strategies

were futile, as successful learners are characterized not by the repeated use of individual strategies, but by their ability to select the various strategies which will be most effective in different instances of language learning. This supports Oxford and Ehrman's (1995) assertion that "successful language learners use an array of strategies, matching those strategies to their learning style and personality and to the demands of the task" (p. 362). Indeed, Dörnyei (2005) went so far as to suggest that it is the conscious implementation of strategies, more than the strategies themselves, which facilitates learning. Given such statements regarding language strategy instruction, it was our belief that exposing our students to a variety of LLSs and encouraging them to experiment and reflect on the strategies would help them to become more informed in the selection of strategies appropriate for them in their respective learning contexts.

This paper outlines the history of LLS research and classification before describing the research methodology employed. Analysis of the findings consists of examination of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990, p. 294-296) scores recorded by the students and investigation of the students' impression of the research as described in interviews and in language learning diaries. The paper reports on both the positive and negative elements of the study and concludes with advice for other researchers considering implementing similar programs.

Strategy Definition and Classification

Various attempts have been made to identify and classify LLSs. Rubin (1975) offered an early classification of strategies, with six categories affecting language acquisition both directly and indirectly. Brown and Palinscar (1982) categorized their strategies according to their cognitive or metacognitive functions, while O'Malley and Chamot (1990) added a third category of strategies, social/affective strategies.

Oxford (1990) revised earlier taxonomies and produced a detailed list comprising six categories, namely, memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. This categorization has become perhaps the most influential and exhaustive of all taxonomies (Rivera-Mills & Plonsky, 2007) due to the SILL, which is a self-report questionnaire for determining the frequency of language learning strategy use. The inventory consists of 50 items divided into categories of remembering, cognition, compensation, metacognition, affection, and social, each soliciting a 5-point Likert-scale response from never to always true. The appropriateness of the SILL in the Japanese learning environment has been questioned by Robson and Midorikawa (2001) who argued that the official Japanese translation of the SILL (Oxford, 1990) has not been subjected to the same reliability tests as the original English version. Furthermore, Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989) acknowledged that the list of strategies is by no means exhaustive and that hundreds of other strategies may exist. Nevertheless, the SILL is commonly used in research and has been validated in a number of different studies (see e.g., Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998; Fewell, 2010; Yang, 1990).

LLSs with Asian Students

While studies concluding nationality plays a significant role in strategy use are “not easy to find” (Griffiths, 2004, p. 14), some studies have indicated that Asian learners tend to have less awareness of LLSs and consequently use them less frequently (Griffiths & Parr, 2000; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Griffiths’s (2003) report on a comprehensive study of Asian students in a language school in New Zealand revealed that despite high levels of initial enthusiasm regarding a 1-month study skills course focusing on strategy training, the interest of teachers and students alike waned to the extent that, at the end of the class, the course was not reoffered, with teachers commenting on the

difficulty of providing motivating material for students, and the students either dropping out or requesting a change of class to one with a more standard language focus. Griffiths’s data also indicated a correlation between proficiency level and strategy use, with advanced learners using LLSs significantly more frequently than elementary learners. Reluctance among Asian students to embrace the concept of LLSs may be explained by Schmitt’s (1997) analysis that in Japan at least, LLSs are given a peripheral role in formal education.

In other research from Japan, Takeuchi (1993) found Japanese students tended to pay close attention to metacognitive strategy use, and Nakatani (2005) reported that students who received explicit strategy training showed significant improvement in oral proficiency when compared with a control group. Fewell (2010) found that Japanese learners’ self-reported strategy use decreased as their proficiency improved, in contrast to Takeuchi who reported a correlation between strategy use and increased proficiency. Fewell’s findings may be explained by Cohen’s (1998) hypothesis that lower levels of reported strategy use could be the result of strategy use becoming automatic and ceasing to be conscious. The research reviewed above suggests that explicit metacognitive strategy training can lead to higher L2 proficiency, implying that sustained LLS monitoring in the language classroom had the potential to benefit the student participants in the current study.

The Study

This study was carried out for 14 weeks among five teachers implementing LLS training with two types of student groups amid a range of existing school and course-specific programs. The research was conducted with 2nd-year students at Meisei University, 2nd-year students at Komazawa Women’s University, 4th-year students at Otsuma Women’s University, and adult students at both Flying English School and at I.E.P. School.

The students ranged from pre-intermediate to early advanced English levels.

The primary aim of this study was to raise our students' awareness of LLSs and, through repeated exposure, practice, and reflection with strategies, to facilitate improvement in students' ability to independently plan and manage their own learning processes. We hoped this would help them to make more informed decisions about the appropriate strategies for different learning situations.

Oxford's (1990) inventory has been most frequently researched with university students, but relatively rarely with language school students, the most significant work of the latter being by Griffiths (2003) with Asian students in New Zealand. Thus we were also interested in investigating each group's initial familiarity with LLSs and the extent to which the SILL influenced their motivation. In particular, because the adults in private language schools were studying voluntarily, we expected them to be more motivated, resulting in greater increases in their SILL scores over the course of the study compared to the university student participants who were completing courses to fulfill graduation requirements.

The 14-week study began in April 2012, coinciding with the beginning of the Japanese academic year. The five groups of participants each completed a version of the SILL, in class or in their free time, either the original English-language version or a Japanese translation, based on their personal preference. Each student's results were compiled by the relevant researcher and returned to the student.

Students were then encouraged to revisit the complete inventory of strategies and select a number of strategies, initially limited to between three and five, to practice as regularly as possible over the following 2 weeks. A 2-week time frame was selected as it provided the students with enough time to practice their chosen strategies repeatedly, yet was short enough to allow

them to select strategies seven different times over the course of the study. Students were asked to write reflections on their experiences of strategy practice in a language learning diary. To facilitate focused reflection, the students were provided with a list of questions designed to promote meaningful reflection, such as, "How did you feel before and after the practice?" and "Would you recommend the strategy to other learners?"

Having experimented with their chosen strategies for 2 weeks, the students were asked to return to the SILL and select another set of strategies with which they would experiment and reflect upon over the following 2 weeks. This process was repeated for the duration of the 14-week study, by which time the students had been exposed to the SILL seven times, selecting a new set of strategies for practice each time.

Approximately 4 to 8 weeks into the study, the researchers conducted individual feedback sessions to determine the progress each student felt they were making in their strategy use. These sessions were also used to investigate students' diary reflections and encourage more regular strategy practice and reflection. At the end of the study, which generally coincided with the end of the university semester, the researchers conducted another feedback session and collected students' diaries. The majority of the students then completed the SILL survey a second time. Final analysis included comparing the participants' SILL scores from the beginning and end of the study, data from the feedback sessions, and the contents of their language learning diaries.

Findings

This section outlines the general findings from our investigation, starting with evaluation of the changes in SILL scores, then discussing participant feedback, and finally considering the contents of participants' diaries.

SILL Scores

Dealing first with the SILL scores for each group of students in Table 1, two of the three groups of university students showed improvements in their scores for the second administration of the SILL. However, the scores for participants at Otsuma decreased during the course of the study. Results for participants at one of the private language schools were considerably different. Students at Flying English recorded the highest average increase in SILL. However, the data for I.E.P. is incomplete, as due to a variety of administrative and student-related concerns, the second SILL survey could not be satisfactorily administered.

Table 1. Pre- and Poststudy SILL Average Scores

Institution	Prestudy	Poststudy	Difference
Meisei	3.00	3.67	+0.67
Komazawa	3.28	3.72	+0.44
Otsuma	3.08	2.66	-0.42
Flying English	3.14	3.95	+0.81
I.E.P.	3.08	N/A	N/A

Note. At I.E.P., the poststudy survey could not be completed.

At Meisei, all of the 11 participants increased their scores in the second SILL survey, with the highest individual increase being 1.33. Similarly, all 10 participants at Komazawa improved their scores, with increases ranging from 0.3 to 0.7. The scores from Otsuma were notably different however, with eight of the nine students' scores decreasing. It became evident during the compilation of data that the teachers at both Meisei and Komazawa had been able to focus on LLSs regularly and explicitly in the classroom, allowing more time for explanation and demonstration of student selected strategies. However, the teacher

at Otsuma had limited classroom time to fully implement the LLS support framework part of the study, as the course was a content-based seminar focusing on Asian-American issues and educational issues, from which students were expected to produce a graduation thesis. This meant that language learning instruction was of secondary importance in the course. Furthermore, the students were beginning their 4th year of university, and consequently were actively engaged in job hunting, which was likely given precedence over their coursework. These in- and out-of-class factors possibly contributed to their reduced participation in the investigation and consequently their declining SILL scores.

At Flying English, which recorded the highest average SILL increase of any group of participants, there was initial reluctance to participate in the study from a number of students, but the teacher eventually managed to convince all but one potential participant of the merits of the study. The class went so far as to develop a Google site on which they posted their feedback in Japanese on their strategy practice, helping other students with future strategy selection. On the other hand, the 11 participants at I.E.P. were indifferent to the study, and student complaints about time spent on strategy training meant that the teacher was unable to devote an appropriate amount of time each week for strategy selection, training, and feedback, and the school administration recommended that the second SILL be offered as optional homework. Further administrative pressure related to the English-only policy of the class meant that despite the students' relatively low English levels, the teacher was unable to offer students the Japanese translation of the SILL for the poststudy survey.

Overall, researchers at three of the five research sites were able to fully implement the SILL training, and at these three sites students showed improvement in their SILL scores at the end of the investigation. Thus when sufficient time could be

devoted to the students' strategy selection, training, and reflection, the students' SILL scores improved, suggesting that LLS training can be effective.

Participant Feedback

During the feedback sessions, the participants' comments also indicated a range of feelings about the study. At both Meisei and Komazawa, the feedback was generally positive in tone, with numerous students reporting on the usefulness of the strategies in broadening their study techniques. Comments such as, "I think it's good as I thought I could only memorize words, but now I can learn and write new words in many ways as well. So, it's a better way to study," and "My study is changing a little bit. I think about this idea (the training) sometimes," are representative of the feedback from the students at both universities. Students at Flying English generally reported that the training made them more motivated to study and to create opportunities for meaningful practice of their English. However, initial reluctance to participate was exemplified by one student leaving the school completely and emphasizes the importance of selecting an appropriate group of students for LLS training.

At Otsuma, feedback suggested that the students appreciated being introduced to the various strategies in the SILL, yet time constraints due to job hunting limited the students' abilities to implement the LLS training effectively. Feedback from participants at I.E.P. remained largely indifferent throughout and, echoing Griffiths's 2003 findings, indicated that the students were generally disinterested in the strategy training scheme, believing the teacher was not using the class time appropriately, with one student commenting, "Learning strategy: I don't understand this activities purpose" when responding to a question asking about their feelings towards various aspects of the course.

Language Learning Diaries

Participants were asked to complete regular reflections on their experiences with the LLS training, but the results were generally unimpressive. Among the university students, reluctance to write in their diaries was evident. Fewer than half the 30 students reflected regularly, and at Meisei and Komazawa, a number wrote no reflections at all, reporting that it was neither easy nor useful to reflect on their progress. At Otsuma, while many of the participants' diaries reported the negative impact of their job-hunting on their language learning, none of the 4th-year students expressed negative feelings toward the study.

The extent of the reflections from students in the private language schools differed significantly. Students at Flying English completed reflection sheets in Japanese regularly, in which they commented on their positive experiences with the strategy training. Students commented on the positive effect the study had on their ability to study English through reading, while another reflected on the extent to which the SILL had helped them discover different ways of learning. However, the reflections of students at I.E.P. were generally incomplete. One learner reflected that "Learning Words: (a) word association, (b) breaking down the word. It's hard to discuss and boring. I want to change topic more interesting."

Aside from students at Otsuma and Flying English, the completion of reflections in learning diaries was the least positive aspect of the study for students, suggesting a lack of familiarity with learning as a reflective process, a lack of understanding of the potential benefits of LLS training, and the influence of time constraints on student participation.

Implications

The radically different results for the students at the two private language schools are perhaps the most striking findings of this

research. Both groups consisted of mature and motivated adult learners, yet an element of resistance was encountered at both sites. At Flying English, which recorded the highest average SILL increase of any group of participants, there was initial reluctance to participate in the study from a number of students, and one participant dropped out of both the study and the school. In this study, the researcher was also the owner of the school and was determined to continue with the research, but the possibility of concerns over revenue must be borne in mind by any researcher considering a similar program at a private language school.

At I.E.P., despite the class teacher's attempts to integrate the strategy training into the regular class routine, the majority of students did not welcome the focus on LLS. Student feedback to the school's administration resulted in the teacher reducing the time spent on strategy training, as well as constraints regarding the completion of the second SILL survey. While the benefits of explicit LLS training have repeatedly been made clear in research, teachers must bear in mind that research situated in private language schools has been limited, and that a certain level of reluctance may be encountered. For teachers in these schools, it would be prudent to ensure that prior consent and continuing cooperation is obtained from administration and participants before embarking on such a program.

Conclusion

Reflection on the three sources of data—the SILL scores, the participant feedback, and the students' diaries—lead to a number of insights. When sufficient time to satisfactorily explain and demonstrate strategies can regularly be set aside for LLS training, the benefits are tangible and are also evident to the participants themselves. Furthermore, having students select new LLSs every 2 weeks may help to keep them engaged in trying new ways of language learning.

For all researchers, the time-consuming nature of implementing and monitoring this LLS training is a point to consider when thinking about implementing such an investigation. Another issue is whether the students are asked to complete reflections in their native or target language. Allowing reflection in students' native language could encourage deeper and more honest reflection. Furthermore, when other time pressures are present, such as job-hunting responsibilities, students simply may not have the time to devote to a program of this nature. However, we feel that in the right circumstances, any time spent exposing learners to strategies and their uses is always worthwhile.

Bio Data

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