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

Takeshi Ishikawa
Rikkyo University

Reference data:

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.

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

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.

Takeshi Ishikawa teaches English at three universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area. He is currently interested in learner autonomy. <itakeshi@pal.plala.or.jp>

References


Appendix 1

Questionnaire (translated from Japanese)

Part I: Learning strategies

Cognitive

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

   □ □ □ □ □ □
   Very often   Often    Sometimes   Rarely   Never

2. I try to focus on meaning rather than language forms.

   □ □ □ □ □ □
   Very often   Often    Sometimes   Rarely   Never

3. I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.

   □ □ □ □ □ □
   Very often   Often    Sometimes   Rarely   Never

4. I try to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context.

   □ □ □ □ □ □
   Very often   Often    Sometimes   Rarely   Never

Metacognitive

5. 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

    - 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

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

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

### Affective

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20. Practicing mock TOEIC tests is the fastest way to do well on the TOEIC test.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I feel uneasy that there is a standard TOEIC score I have to exceed to take credits in this course.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Studying English is high on my agenda.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I’m not good at the reading section (Part 7) of the TOEIC test.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I’m not good at listening sections of the TOEIC test.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I’m worried that I have a poor vocabulary.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I think reading and listening are related.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I’m worried that I don’t know how to do well on the TOEIC test.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I like reading English books.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. I start to get bored with studying English at home.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ishikawa: Helping students bring about a revolution in their out-of-class learning

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

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

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.