

Application of Learning Strategies to Culture-Based Language Instruction

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Abstract

Learning strategy is one of the most important factors that determine the learning result. So, teaching learners to grasp certain kinds of strategies is a key factor which can promote the learning efficiency. This thesis discusses the learning strategies in the theoretical and pedagogical aspects, illustrates the significance of culture-based language instruction in second language teaching, and elaborates three ways to help students use appropriate strategies in their culture-based language learning.

Key words: Learning strategies; Culture-based language teaching; Instructed strategy training

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INTRODUCTION

To help students become successful language learners is every language teacher's desire and responsibility. However, just like a football coach, who can not play in the field for his players, a teacher can not recite new words, practice listening comprehension or do a cloze for his students. The only thing they can do to be to tailor their instruction to the needs of students and guarantees that the instruction can arouse and maintain the interest of all students so that they are motivated to become successful, self-directed learners. In order to achieve this

goal, language teachers must learn some basic knowledge of psycholinguistics, and they must know how learners learn, what methods learners use to complete a learning task, how many factors can affect the learners' language development, etc.. So, it has great significance to take "learning strategy" as the theme here. Learning strategy is not only the main content of psycholinguistics, but also an important factor that determines the learning efficiency. By mastering some theoretical knowledge of learning strategies, teachers can collect information about learners' strategies to analyze learners' learning behaviors. After having a comprehensive understanding of learner's situation, teachers can tailor their instruction accordingly, they can provide more effective strategies to learners and encourage them to select, practice and evaluate those strategies. Through this process, teachers can help students to be real controllers of their own learning and then become more autonomous strategies users gradually.

1. LEARNING STRATEGIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learning strategies have learned facilitation as a goal and are intentional on the part of the learner. This broad description of learning strategies may include any of the following: focusing on selected aspects of new information, analyzing and monitoring information during acquisition, organizing or elaborating on new information during the encoding process, evaluating the learning when it is completed, or assuring oneself that the learning will be successful as a way to allay anxiety. And according to Oxford (1990) and Pressley (2002), learning strategies are steps or actions taken by language learners to enhance any aspect of their learning: access, storage, retrieval, and use of information. There are dozens or even hundreds of learning strategies, depending on how narrowly these strategies are operationally defined or

measured. No matter how many definitions are made by different researchers, they express the same meaning, that is, learning strategies are mental steps or operations, and by using them, learners can learn a new language and regulate their efforts to do so (Wenden, 1998, p.18).

Learning strategies research in the field of language learning seeks to answer the following questions: What do learners do to help themselves learn? How do they regulate these efforts? What beliefs or knowledge do they bring to their language learning process? How can learners be helped to refine and develop the skills of learning referred to in the first three questions? Based on those questions, Wenden and Rubin (1987) put forward the following characteristics of learning strategies. (a) Some strategies can be observed and some can not. There is an observable behavior that accompanies the mental act, for example, when learners ask a question to clarify something they do not understand, this kind of strategies can be observed. When learners infer or compare, the strategies they use can not be observed. (b) Learning strategies may be deployed consciously in response to a problem a learner has clearly perceived and analyzed. They can also be automatized, that is, learner's decision to use them remains below consciousness when they meet the learning situation or problems with which they are quite familiar. (c) Strategies, unlike more enduring personality characteristics of a learner, or learning style, are amenable to change. They are a part of our cognitive software, acquired in the same way as we acquire language. Ineffective ones can be changed or rejected, new strategies can be learned and well-functioning strategies can be adapted to new situations. (d) Strategies are problem oriented. Learners use them in response to different kinds of learning problems or needs (Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

Language learning strategies can be classified, explained and exemplified in six groups. The six strategy groups are labeled memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social. The first three groups are known as "direct" strategies, because they are directly involved in the subject matter; the last three groups are called "indirect" strategies, because they are not directly involved in the subject matter itself, but are essential to language learning nonetheless (Oxford, 1990). Memory strategies aid in entering information into long-term memory and retrieving information when needed for communication. Cognitive strategies are used for forming and revising internal mental models and receiving and producing messages in the target language. Compensation strategies, such as guessing unknown meanings while listening or reading, or using circumlocution in speaking and writing, are needed to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language. Metacognitive strategies help learners exercise "executive control" through planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning process. Affective strategies enable learners to control feeling, motivations, and attitudes related to language learning. Social strategies facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation (Oxford, 1990,

p.71). Yet, there is no consensus among researchers about categories of strategies, nor about how to measure them. However, the three main strategies are accepted by all researchers, that is, cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies and affective/social strategies.

2. LEARNING STRATEGIES TRAINING IN INSTRUCTED SITUATION

When strategies used by good language learners are identified and the strategy use of effective and less effective learners are compared, we can't help asking ourselves, whether can less effective learners learn to use strategies to assist their learning, and, if so, what strategies can and should be taught, and what instructional approach can be used to teach the strategies selected. In this part of the thesis, those questions are going to be discussed and some suggestions are going to be given for promoting learning strategies instruction.

2.1 Theoretical Basis for Instructed Strategy Training

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), instructed learning strategies training takes the following four important propositions as its theoretical basis. (a) Mentally active learners are better learners, students who organize new information and consciously relate it to existing knowledge have more cognitive linkages to assist comprehension and recall than do students who approach each new task as something to be memorized by rote learning. (b) Learning is strategic. Good learners are aware of the learning process and of themselves as learners, and seek to control their own learning through the use of appropriate learning strategies. Although each contact area may require a particular set of strategies and skills, a number of core skills underlie all subject areas. Examples of these core skills are using prior knowledge, making a representation of the information, self-monitoring, and summarizing. (c) Strategies can be taught. Students who are taught to use strategies and are provided with sufficient practice in using them will learn more effectively than students who have had no experience with learning strategies. (d) Learning strategies can be transferred to new tasks. Once students have become accustomed to using learning strategies, they will use them on new tasks that are similar to the learning activities in which they were initially trained (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, pp.188-240).

2.2 Separate and Integrated Instruction

Whether instruction should focus only on learning strategy instruction or should be integrated with classroom instruction in the language or content subject elicits heated discussion in research field of learning strategies.

Arguments in favor of separate training programs indicate that strategies are generally used to many contexts

and that students will learn strategies better if they can focus all their attention on developing strategic processing skills rather than try to learn content at the same time (Derry & Murphy, 1986). Examples of separate strategy training are Dansereau's (1985) Computer Assisted Cooperative Learning Program, designed to train pairs of students to use a sequence of reading comprehension strategies, which are presented and practiced by computer, and his learning strategy system trains primary strategies for comprehension/retention and for retrieval/utilization, and support strategies for planning, monitoring, and concentration management (Dansereau, 1985). Those who hold an opposite opinion insist that learning in context is more effective than learning for separate skills, because the immediate applicability of those skills may not be evident to the learner. And Dansereau found that his students encountered difficulty in adapting his learning strategy system, to particular kinds of text materials, so later, he developed a strategy training program in which the strategies were designed for specific types of texts. Similar analysis was also conducted by Hattie et al. (1996), who reported the highest effects for the direct teaching of cognitive skills. These effects were mostly produced by interventions aimed at the near transfer of a specific task-related skill.

Dansereau suggests that the direction of the future study of learning strategy system should be the integration of both content-independent strategies and content-dependent ones (Dansereau, 1983). This type of integration is also suggested by Ellis (2002), who said that "many of the most successful studies have employed multiple data collection procedures" (p.535). He also added, that 'a method that has been found to be more successful involves the use of structured interviews and questionnaire (Ellis, 2002, p.534). In the study, students receive short periods of separate strategy training, then they are asked to use the strategies in the content classroom. Ellis and his coworkers have developed and implemented both separate and integrated instruction in learning strategies. The separate training is designed to teach students how to use learning strategies effectively. Then, practice is provided by applying these strategies to students' regular courses.

2.3 Direct and Embedded Instruction

The argument of whether the actual training should be direct or embedded is quite similar to the question for separate and integrated strategy training. In direct instruction, students are informed of the value and purpose of strategy training, whereas in embedded instruction, students are presented with activities, materials and examples to elicit the use of strategies, but are not informed of the reasons why this approach to learning is being practiced (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.153). Most of the researchers are in favor of direct instruction, for some recent studies inform students about the purpose and importance of strategies and provide instruction on regulating and monitoring strategies, the result is quite

satisfactory. Students said that the instruction helped them maintain strategies and transfer strategies to new tasks.

An advantage of embedded instruction is that little teacher training is required. As students work on exercises and activities, they learn to use the strategies that are cued by the textbook. An example of embedded strategy training is Barnett's (1988) study of college students on reading comprehension. Students were provided with special reading comprehension exercises designed to teach students to recognize cognate, make inferences to guess meanings, use titles and illustration, and make predictions about the text. However, students were not told the rationale or intent of this strategy instruction. Students in the experiment showed some improvement but not significant. An explanation is that students who are not aware of the strategies they are using do not develop independent learning strategies and have little opportunity of becoming autonomous learners (Barnett, 1988).

Therefore, many researchers suggest that instruction in learning strategies be direct rather than embedded, or add directly instructive to materials designed with embedded strategies.

3. APPLY LEARNING STRATEGIES TO CULTURAL-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

As language is a representation and carrying form of a national culture, it is impossible to really learn the language of a nation well without knowing the culture thereof. In a language, there are "cultural" symbols almost everywhere. Due to difference in culture, one often finds in making a speech abroad that the audiences have no reaction at all to his joke by being expressionless and keeping quiet; however, the same joke can make the domestic audiences laugh themselves into convulsions; similarly, due to difference in culture, when talking about a serious issue, one remark that is off-key may cause the listener to laugh or even be thrown into convulsions; one remark that is perfectly innocuous can make the opposite side unhappy or angry. It is thus clear that language and culture are inseparable. Language is the carrier and expression of culture, to learn a language well must have to know the culture reflected and expressed by it. For Chinese English learners, they must accept the concept that language is closely connected with culture, know that culture is various and language is diverse. Due to difference in culture and language, it is not an easy thing to know each other well, communication between different cultures often comes across difficulties. Learning a kind of foreign language not only has to grasp pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and idioms, but also has to know how the person selecting this kind of language looks at things, how to observe the world; it is imperative to know how they use their language to reflect

the thoughts, habits, behaviors of their society, that is, know the culture of their society. However, in English teaching for a long time, teachers often emphasize imparting of language knowledge and exercising of language skills, but ignore comparison of the differences between Chinese and English cultures. As a result, students are hard to get rid of the influence of the native language and are unable to have a proper communication in English. However, with today's constant improvement in English level in middle school, the English foundation of university freshmen in enrollment is no longer what it was before. They absolutely have the ability to accept the knowledge of the differences between English and Chinese cultures and language habits. Therefore, it has become one of the teaching objectives of English teachers to incorporate the study of the cultural knowledge of English language in English study by guiding and training students to adopt rational and effective study strategies purposefully and consciously. It is hoped that this will make students learn a real, practical, native English that can be used to have a proper communication.

There are many ways to teach students to use learning strategies in their English studying and help them apply learning strategies to cultural-based language learning.

3.1 Develop Study Contents and Plan by Applying the Cognitive and Meta-Cognitive Strategies

The cognitive strategies that can be used are: repetition, translation, note-taking, grouping, deduction, recombination, key word, contextualization, transfer, inference and elaboration (Chamot, 1987). In practicing listening, use the grouping strategy to have to listening materials classified to know the characteristics of different types of listening materials and do well-targeted exercises. For example, English and Chinese news reporting is highly different. English news reporting tells who, what has happened, and next when, where it happened, and then tells the news source to show the credibility of news. Finally it introduces the reason (why) and the background (how), while Chinese news reporting often adopts a technique to tell the reason first as foreshadowing and then tell what has happened. Therefore, in news listening exercise, a learner should place the main attention on the beginning of news, i.e. introduction, to look for useful information according to the five elements of news (who, what, when, where and why). In practicing oral language, it is advisable to consciously pay attention to the differences between Chinese and western cultures in calling, greeting, showing gratitude, showing modesty, praising, showing concern and topics of conversation, etc., recite wonderful article passages regularly, use such forms as dictation, repeating, translation, etc. to check and record with a view to conveying ideas or feelings in native English and then cultivate the ability of a learner to think and express in English. In studying vocabularies, it is advisable to pay attention to some vocabularies with cultural connotations and the vocabulary

vacancies resulting from the differences between Chinese and English cultures. The cultural connotation of a vocabulary means the national cultural meaning contained therein, which is the implication outside the conceptual meaning of a word or phrase. Due to differences of different nations in thinking mode, psychological condition, social specification, ethnics, custom and habit, communication manner, customary taboo, etc., it is inevitable for vocabulary semantics to have a national cultural brand and imply the connotation of national culture. Paying attention only to the denotative meaning of a vocabulary but ignoring its possible changes in vocabulary semantics under different cultural backgrounds will be bound for a learner to lead to being lack of practical application ability and failure in communication. In reading training, what is concerned about is the difference in the textual structure and textual content linkage between English and Chinese languages. For example, there are more personal references, demonstrative references in English than in Chinese. In Chinese, personal pronouns is seldom used, this is because that after the agentive subject is introduced, it will be omitted in sentences in the future. In comparison with English, Chinese sentences pay more attention to expression completeness and omissions in China are obviously more than in English. It is advisable to read original English books and various English newspapers and magazines at regular time and in a certain quantity and write reading notes, comprehend more accurately the contents of articles and obtain new information through your own practice, perception and experience accumulation instead of staying in language knowledge understanding. In writing training, due to difference in thinking mode, a learner often ignores the differences between English and Chinese languages and writes articles with marked Chinese impress. Therefore, in respect of article structure, it is imperative to get rid of the error to go around theme, learn how to use English textual mode to arrange your own article structure and make what you write meet the way in which native English speakers write. In sentence pattern application, it is imperative to get rid of the traditional thinking mode and avoid using too many simple sentences or single sentence patterns in English writing.

3.2 Apply Social Strategies and Emotional Strategies to Help Implement Study Contents and Plan

One of the most common strategies is cooperation: discuss together with classmates issues regarding differences between English and Chinese language cultures and exchange information. Study group members recite vocabularies jointly through such methods as dictation, playing vocabulary games, etc. Find a morning reading partner to do morning reading together and practice oral language by repeating with each other after reading. Correct each other's compositions with classmates and exchange what you have learned from writing. Frequently

attend such after-class English activities as English corner, speech contest, debate contest, etc.. Another commonly used strategy is inquiry. Inquire teachers and classmates for further explanations, interpretations or examples. When communicating with English and American people, inquire about local customs and practices, communicative manners and customary taboos. When students examine their efforts and attempts made, they may be aware the various difficulties and frustrations that they are facing, in this circumstances, still another useful strategy can be used: self-talking. Students can encourage themselves constantly that they can succeed or comfort themselves to reduce anxious mood.

3.3 Apply the Meta-Cognitive Strategy to Manage and Assess the Study Result

For example, through writing weekly notes, regularly rethink your study strategy and effect profoundly, try to avoid and improve in the next week study and attempt to use a new strategy, adjust the original strategy. Assessment has two types: one is that a learner checks the study result by him/herself, for example, if he/she can understand correctly any vocabularies with cultural connotations in an article. The other is to search for assessment criteria and apply what one has learned, for example, communicate with native English speakers to see if you can overcome the differences between Chinese and English cultures in daily communication and make a proper communication.

CONCLUSION

Some researches show us the reason why some language learners are more successful than others. In effect, "successful" or "expert" or "intelligent" learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use the skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently. These researches also conclude that it's possible and efficacious to provide strategies training, especially for those learners who may not be as varied and flexible in their use of learning strategies as their successful classmates.

To combine study strategies with language culture study is still a new subject which is pending for more in-depth exploration and research. We hope that through this article, more foreign language teachers and researchers may pay attention to the role of study strategies in language culture study, incorporate study strategy cultivation and cultural introduction in class teaching to promote the improvement in the foreign language teaching quality in China.

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