



On Factors Influencing EFL Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Language learning strategies refer to techniques used by language learners for the purpose of regulating their own learning. Research on learning strategies has always been a complex issue, because many factors come to play a role when learners are developing and using their learning strategies. To investigate the variations in the use of strategies among EFL students, this paper attempts to analyze internal factors (including learners' age, intelligence, personality and cognitive style) and external factors (such as teachers' teaching approaches and materials) that may influence the use of language learning strategies for EFL learners.

Key words: EFL learning strategies; Internal Factors; EXTernal factors; EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

For EFL learners, significant differences exist in both use frequency and type of learning strategies, and these differences are related to language learners' achievements (Ellis, 1994). Why learners display so many differences when developing and using learning strategies has been a major concern of learning strategy research. Studies show that learners' individual difference in age, intelligence, language aptitude, learning style, learning strategy,

attitude, motivation and personality is the main cause of the differences in learning achievement and also the root of the differences in learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). In addition, external factors such as teaching approach and environment also affect the development and use of learning strategies of learners from different aspects.

1. AGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Ellis (1994) holds that age has a very significant impact on the development and use of language learning strategies. The cognitive ability of learners increases with age, and their cognitive style also changes along with age. It is cognitive ability and cognitive style that have a direct impact on the development and use of learning strategies. For middle school students in China, the development and use of learning strategies can be divided into three different periods, namely pre-school period, primary school period, and middle school period. During the pre-school period, children have not yet developed their learning strategies, so they lack the ability to consciously use learning strategies. When they are in primary school, especially in senior grades, learning strategies have been developed and mastered by learners, even though strategies in this period are usually simple and children are still not proficient in using strategies to improve learning outcomes. If teachers can offer some proper guidance and training during this period, pupils in primary school can also develop and use effective learning strategies.

In middle and high schools, the cognitive ability of learners develops swiftly, along with enriching and expanding cognitive styles. In familiar knowledge areas, not only can learners develop their own strategies unconsciously, they also cultivate their strategies consciously, capable of adjusting their learning strategies in accordance with requirements and objectives of learning tasks. However, without the guidance and

assistance of teachers, learners in middle and high schools still find themselves inadequate to develop and use language learning strategies in an independent and systematic manner (Zhu, 1994).

English language teaching in China's middle and high schools tends to stress the teaching and training of basic language knowledge and basic skills (known as "double basics") but ignore the training of "how to learn". Therefore, after entering the university, many students have no clue about how to learn. Study in university places higher demand on learners in terms of autonomous learning. However, without previous training in this regard, many freshmen often feel clueless about how to learn; some students even complain that teachers in university have too little management or control over them.

In addition, uninstructed, self-developed strategies will not necessarily lead to effective results, such as rote learning, repeated transcription etc. Self-developed strategies may also be converted to habits or spontaneous behaviors. Once ineffective learning strategies turn into habits or spontaneous behaviors, learners may find it rather difficult to change them. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to arrange appropriate training on learning strategies for students in middle and high schools

2. INTELLIGENCE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Some scholars (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) believe that intelligence is an innate trait and thus has little influence on the development and use of learning strategies. However, that is not the case. Whether intelligence is innate or not is not a concern of this paper, for we shall focus on discussing whether intelligence has an impact on the development and use of learning strategies. Subjectively speaking, learners will not choose and use learning strategies consciously according to their intelligence levels, because not all of them have gained a good understanding of their intelligence levels and there is no obvious correlation between intelligence and learning strategies. However, from an objective perspective, intelligence still has an influence on the development and use of learning strategies, because some learning strategies, such as observing and deducing English grammar through language analysis, are relatively demanding on intelligence. Learners with lower intelligence may also attempt to cultivate and use such learning strategies, but when they use these demanding strategies, they are not likely to achieve the same results as those with higher intelligence. Over time, they will be consciously or unconsciously stop using these learning strategies and resort to other ones.

Research on learning strategy training indicates that learners with higher intelligence tend to develop a complete set of effective learning strategies by

understanding the daily teaching content of teachers and summarizing their own learning experience.(Oxford, 1990). Ordinary students with general intelligence usually develop learning strategies under the specific guidance of teachers or through specific learning strategy training. However, students with much lower intelligence not only need the specific assistance and explanation of teachers but also require repeated practice to mechanically deploy the taught learning strategies. However, once the learning content, tasks and environment have changed, they would immediately find it difficult in choosing appropriate learning strategies or may use strategies that cannot effectively solve their problems.

Surely, intelligence is only one of the factors affecting the development and use of learning strategies, rather than sole prerequisite. Learners with higher intelligence are not necessarily able to master effective learning strategies, and learners who have not mastered effective learning strategies are also not necessarily those with lower intelligence.

3. PERSONALITY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

In terms of the influence of personality on language acquisition, most studies focus on the influence of extrovert and introvert personalities.

Wen (1996) believes that character traits of extroverts are more suitable for language learning, because language as a communication tool plays its role most significantly when interpersonal communication takes place. Studies afterwards found this viewpoint not entirely correct. Modern people tend to accept the two viewpoints. Firstly, extrovert learners have some advantages in mastering basic interpersonal communication skills. This is mainly because extrovert personality can expose learners to more practice opportunities and more language input, increasing the chance of successful language acquisition. Secondly, introvert learners display more advantages in cognitive academic language ability, because they spend more time in reading and writing (Griffiths, 1991).

The two viewpoints above can be more appropriately described as two phenomena, which have been confirmed by many studies. However, scholars have hugely different interpretations of these two phenomena, but there are few disputes over the first phenomenon mainly characterized by language practice opportunities. However, when it comes to the second phenomenon, some believe that introverted learners spend more time in reading and writing while some hold that introverted learners are more adept at taking advantage of the introverted character to make in-depth and minute analysis of limited input (Shu & Zhuang, 1996, p.49). A similar explanation is that introverted learners may delve deeper into grammar, translation, reading comprehension etc.. (Zhu, 1994)

In any case, personality has a direct impact on the development and use of learning strategies. Extroverted learners dare to speak and build good relations with others, so they are better at creating and taking opportunities for language practice and learning. Introverted learners do not perform that well in this regard, but they are good at observation and thinking.

4. COGNITIVE STYLES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Brown (1994) holds that cognitive style, also known as learning style, refers to the way of cognitive process in which learners identify, handle, store and extract information and the orientation toward which learners seek to solve problems. It is generally believed that cognitive style is innate, enduring and difficult to change. Research on cognitive style is the most common area of psychology whose research results have been widely applied to the study of related disciplines. Foreign language learning researchers hold that difference in cognitive style is also one of the major factors causing the difference in learning strategies among foreign language learners. Even though it is commonly believed that cognitive style is not easy to take shape, some scholars hold that teachers can help learners cultivate their own preferred cognitive style in foreign language teaching, so that learners can explore the potential of unused cognitive styles and develop effective language learning strategies.

Most cognitive style studies focus on the different functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Studies (Brown, 1994) have shown that the right and left hemispheres of the brain have different functions. The left hemisphere excels in logic, language and analytical thinking, and perceives and processes information in a part-to-whole approach. The right hemisphere is adept at language and spatial thinking, more sensitive to visual, tactile and auditory information, and more effective in processing global and emotional information.

In real life, not everybody develops his or her right and left brain in a balanced manner. Some people have a better-developed left brain, some a better-developed right brain. The so-called developed right or left brain is indeed distinguished by judging which brain has functioned more. Anderson (1999) has found that learners knowing how to make the best use of both left and right brains are the most successful learners. Therefore, learners with a developed left brain should on the one hand give full play to their advantages in logic thinking and language ability and on the other hand make active efforts in developing other functions of the right brain, such as non-linguistic and spatial thinking ability. On the contrary, learners with a developed right brain should strive actively to develop the logical thinking and language ability of the left brain.

In regard to language learning, learners with a dominating left brain like to analyze language phenomena, pay close attention to grammar structure and discourse details, dislike using instinct and comprehensive ability, and are not good at grasping the gist of an article. Learners with a dominating right brain prefer learning strategies using imagine thinking and perception. For instance, when they try to remember a new word, their brain may present an image related to the word; and they prefer to look for the general idea of an article when reading. If a language learner has a clear idea of his own cognitive style, and select and use language learning strategies in line with their own cognitive styles, so as to give full play to their potentials. Surely, learners should also first know clearly what types of learners they are.

In addition to the distinction of cognitive style based on the use frequency of the left and right brains, researches (Shu & Zhuang, 1996) have also made other comparative studies, such as field independence and field dependence, reflective type and impulsive type etc. These classifications divide learners into two different groups. The limitation of these classifications is conspicuous, because classification standards are too categorical and not suitable for all learners. To overcome this drawback, researchers have begun to study cognitive style from other perspectives, among which a more mature classification method is to divide learners into auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile types (Reid, 1987).

a) Auditory learners prefer listening to reading, keep a better memory of listened contents, and focus their attention on teachers' oral explanation. However, they find it difficult to focus on reading.

b) Visual learners can learn only when they see texts or pictures, and prefer reading silently. Their attention is given to the content on the blackboard rather than teachers' oral explanation.

c) Kinesthetic learners love to read and write and sometimes perform the action. They are more interested in hands-on activities.

d) Tactile learners prefer to learn via hands-on work, such as building a model etc.

We believe that Reid's four learning styles are indeed a manifestation of different learning strategies, that is, different learners tend to use different sensory organs to perceive the outside world. Language is the outside world when it comes to language learning. In addition, language learners usually do not belong to one learning type, but use two or more learning styles altogether, such as auditory-kinesthetic type, visual-kinesthetic type or comprehensive type. We suggest that language learners should understand their learning styles as much as possible and continue to give full play to their advantages. Meanwhile, they should also try other cognitive styles and use eyes, ears, mouth, hands and brain to explore more learning approaches and increase language input.

5. TEACHERS' INFLUENCES ON LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Teachers may have a direct, or indirect, influence on the development and use of learners' learning strategies. Direct influence refers to the impact caused by teachers who carry out or infiltrate learning strategy training into teaching activities. Indirect influence on learning strategies refers to the subtle influence of teachers' teaching experience, teaching methods and teaching approaches on learners' use and development of learning strategies. For example, some teachers always explain new words before text reading. The specific steps are to lead students to read the list of words in the textbook one by one (if no word list is provided in the textbook, they may list a new word list themselves), write the words on the blackboard, explain these words, and illustrate examples or compare them with synonyms and antonyms. Over time, learners will consider it as an effective word learning method. Later in the self-study process, especially when reading English articles, learners will prepare the new words to a notebook and look them up in the dictionary. Dictionary lookup and new word note-taking themselves are not bad practice, but it would not be an effective learning approach to look up a large number of new words and take their meanings down on notebook before or while reading.

After teaching English for years in a university, the author finds that students attach great importance to English and spend a lot of time in previewing the lessons. However, the author often finds such a phenomenon where many students, heedless of the general idea of the text, only look for unknown words when previewing a text and take these words down in a notebook. Afterwards they would look them up in the dictionary and note down all word meanings without caring which meaning is being used in the text. When the teacher asks about the meaning of a new word in class, students often scramble for a hint in their notebook and offer a list of meanings of the word. This indicates that students fail to grasp the exact meaning of the word in the text. Then, what is point of dictionary lookup and word note taking?

We only discuss a lexical teaching approach of teachers above to illustrate how teachers may have an influence on learners' development and use of learning strategies. Indeed, every aspect of teaching activities, is it educational teaching or skill training, plays an active or negative role in promoting the development and use of learners' learning strategies.

6. OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Attitude and motivation also affect the development and use of learning strategies. Research has shown that highly

motivated learners with a positive attitude adopt a wider range of learning strategies and use them more frequently. In addition, type of motivation also influences the choice of learning strategies. For example, learners with instrumental motivation tend to use more communication strategies, because they mainly aim to improve their language ability for a particular purpose (Shu & Zhuang, 1996).

In addition, differences in learners' language level can also affect the choice and use of learning strategies. Studies have shown that advanced learners use more strategies than beginners do, and use them more frequently. On the same level, learners with better academic record use more strategies than those with poor performance. In addition, poorly performed learners also use some strategies that are not very effective.

Finally, the learning environment of learners also influences the use of learning strategies (Rubin, 1987). Here, the learning environment includes teaching method, materials, evaluation standards, assessment method, students' learning autonomy, cultural background and other related aspects.

CONCLUSION

A wide range of individual differences have been identified as factors that influence the development and use of language learning strategies. To probe into the nature of strategy use and development, both researchers and teachers should take into account the internal factors such as age, intelligence, personality, learning style, attitude, motivation, and even language proficiency. Besides, external factors like teaching methodology and materials, means of assessment, degree of learner autonomy, and other cultural and social variables also contribute to the diverse choice of learning strategies. Thus, it is not our aim just too simply group learners into "successful" and "unsuccessful" types and describe them in a dichotomous manner. Rather, we need to, and help the learners to as well, recognize and understand that there is a wide range of variables and choices in the language learning process, and that to make intelligent judgment and informed choices are essential in both language teaching and language learning.

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