

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY RESEARCH IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: One of the major approaches in the pedagogy of English language teaching (ELT) and learning that has gained prominence in recent years is the use of language learning strategies (LLS). Several researches on the same have provided evidence on its positive influence on learners' academic outcomes. This paper attempts to give a critical overview of language learning strategy research in the Indian context and those involving Indian students elsewhere. Beginning with definitions and classifications of language learning strategies, research conducted in both ESL and EFL contexts are briefly looked into with major focus on the Indian context. Having noted a scant of research among the Indian students, the paper concludes with implications for further research.

Keywords: ELT, language learning strategies, India, Indian students.

INTRODUCTION

It always makes us wonder why or how a good language learner differs from a poor language learner while/in learning a second language. The reasons are rather psychological or to be more specific, related to one's cognitive ability i.e. the ability to understand and produce a new language. People are not born with the ability to comprehend everything. They need to learn in order to understand something. If you take learning English for instance; not everyone can understand it, yet there are many non-native speakers who have mastered the language with almost native like competence. This is the case which is not only similar to English but to other subjects also.

Learning a second language is in a way similar to that of the first where the only difference is that the latter is acquired unconsciously while the former needs conscious efforts by the learner (Oxford, 1990). While doing a particular task each one does it in a different manner following a technique of one's own. This technique used by a learner to accomplish a task at hand is what subsequently came to be known as a strategy. Strategies that were used to learn a second language i.e. language learning strategies (LLS), came into being as early as 1970s. Though initial studies focussed on identifying those strategies used by good language learners, it later progressed towards more intense research on various other aspects of LLS.

A whole lot of researches have been carried out on the use and impact of LLS among different kinds of students across various countries (Ghavamnia, Kassaian & Dabaghi, 2011; Rahimi, Riazi & Saif, 2008; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Ok,

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2003; Watanabe, 1990; Park, 1997; Goh & Foong, 1997). Yet, most of the research has been done in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context with little focus to English as a Second Language (ESL). In particular, LLS research in India is still at its infancy stage when the language skills are considered. Therefore, this study points out the scarcity of research in the Indian context and urges researchers to focus more on the under researched areas in LLS among the Indian students to better comprehend the learning patterns among these students.

BACKGROUND OF LLS RESEARCH

LLS research has progressed from simply identifying and listing out the strategies used by the students to more advanced levels like strategy instruction, styles and strategies based instruction, Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), Self-regulated strategy Development models and the like. This strategy concept has been of great aid to the learners learning a second language. A brief summary on its evolution, definitions, classifications, previous research have been given below.

Definitions

Language learning strategies is a term that is used to refer to the processes that involve conscious use of a language. There are several definitions laid out by researchers, starting right from Rubin (1975) who pioneered the research to Oxford (1990) whose definition and classification has been widely accepted and used. According to Rubin (1975) LLS are “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge (p. 43).” Oxford in 1990, after a series of studies, put forward her definition stating LLS to be “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations (p. 8).” O’Malley et al.’s (1985) research was based on Rigney’s (1978) definition which stated LLS as “procedures that facilitate acquisition, retention, retrieval and performance.” In 1987 Wenden came out with his definition of learning strategies as “the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning.” Eventually, it was Oxford who, in 1990 based on a series of earlier research came up with the most popular and widely accepted definition of LLS as the “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations (p. 8).”

Classifications

Similar to the several definitions for LLS, quite a number of classifications also exist. Researchers who researched on LLS came up with different ways to categorize the strategies based on different aspects and this resulted in more than one classification.

While Rubin (1975) classified LLS into two categories namely direct and indirect strategies, O'Malley et al. (1985) opted for a three-way categorization namely, cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies. Based on Rubin's dichotomy, Oxford in 1990, further subdivided the direct and indirect strategies into memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective and social. Pintrich and Gracia (1991) formed a tripartite model consisting of comprehension, storage and using strategies. While a six factor model was proposed by Yang (1999) that included, functional practice, cognitive-memory, meta-cognitive, formal-oral, social and compensation; Schmidt and Watanabe (2001) reduced it to four factors namely, cognitive, social, study and copying. On the other hand, Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2003) categorized the strategies according to the skills i.e. listening, vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

Despite the several categorizations put forward by the researchers, there has been no consensus drawn toward a particular model/classification, rather it has only given rise to controversies (Woodrow, 2005; Rivera-Mills and Plonsky, 2007). Thus, it has been recommended that the researchers discuss together to develop one consistent classification of strategy categories that could be widely accepted and applied (Griffiths, 2008, 2013).

LLS RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

As mentioned earlier, most of the studies in LLS have focussed on EFL contexts, involving learners from Iran, Taiwan, China, Japan, Palestine, Saudi, Korea, Indonesia, etc. For all of these learners English is a foreign language that is not commonly spoken in their country.

Right from the early research on identifying the strategies used by successful and unsuccessful students to instruction of strategies, students from the western countries have been involved (Rubin, 1975; Abraham & Vann, 1987). Several studies conducted to find the relationship between language proficiency and LLS have shown a positive correlation between the two i.e. use of LLS improves language proficiency of the students (Erhman, 2003; Oxford & Erhman, 1995; Bailystok, 1979). Recent studies by Liu (2015) and Tam (2013) on Chinese and Hong Kong students have revealed the same where more proficient students used strategies more frequently.

Gender difference, a factor that seems to affect the choice of LLS, has also been researched to a great extent. In most of the studies female learners were reported to use more strategies than their male counterparts (Zeynali, 2012; Bozinovic and Sindik, 2011; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Kato, 2005; Green & Oxford, 1995). Recent studies by Nahavandi (2014) and Tam (2013), on Iranian and Hong Kong students respectively, have reported similar findings on the relationship between LLS and gender, with females using strategies more frequently than the males.

The effects of other variables like age, aptitude, personality and learning styles (Feleciya et al., 2015; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012, 2011; Chamot & Kupper, 1989) have also been researched. All of the above variables were found to considerably influence students' choice of LLS. Nunan (1997) and Oxford (2003) discovered that motivation plays a key role in strategy use. Use of learning strategies has resulted in higher motivational levels among learners. LLS have further been found to promote learner autonomy as well as motivation (Feleciya & Zafar, 2016; Kormos & Csizér, 2014; Lee, 2013; Benson, 2013; Moskovsky et al., 2013; Winke, 2007). Socio-economic status and cultural differences are also major variables that have been found to play a significant role, but remains seldom researched (Tam, 2013; Lee, 2010; Flowerdew & Miller, 2008; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985).

Strategy instruction has now emerged as an effective way to enhance the learners' second language learning. As LLS are found to be teachable, studies related to instruction of strategies to develop the language skills and specific language areas such as grammar and vocabulary have also been conducted. These studies prove that effective training of students in the use of strategies can lead to greater academic outcomes (Guan, 2014; Baghbadorania & Roohani, 2014; Moradi, 2013; Oyetunji, 2013; Cohen 2002). Apart from these approaches, different models like CALLA, strategies-based instruction (SBI), styles and strategies based Instruction (SSBI) and self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) have come into being. More researches are being conducted to find out other compatible models to cater to the needs of different kinds of students belonging to different parts of the world.

LLS research in India

This section focuses solely on the research conducted in the Indian context.

Prasad (1997), in his PhD dissertation on learner strategies in large ESL classes at tertiary level, highlighted the variables that affect the use of strategies. The differences in socio-cultural and educational contexts were also observed. Learner profiles were developed during the 14 hours of English classes and through questionnaires, interviews, diaries and uptake charts. These profiles exhibited a range of learner strategies used by the students including certain situation specific strategies. The study thus laid emphasis on the conduciveness of this method in a large ESL classroom. The relationship between learner styles and learning strategies was researched by Manikonda (1998) who, in addition, attempted to find out ways to effectively train the learners. He identified three types of styles namely, visual, auditory and tactile. Through the study he found that the learners used strategies that did not reflect their style. Though some of them did this in order to reach his/her goals by moving out of their preferred styles, others were totally unaware of the right strategies to be employed according to their learning style.

Subsequently, Sheorey in 1999 examined the use of LLS among Indian college students and found that these students, who studied English in an environment of an indigenized variety of English (at Hyderabad), ranged from moderate to high frequency users of strategies. He reported that the cultural and educational background of the students influenced some of the strategies they used. Additionally, he also found that female candidates used strategies more frequently than the male candidates; as did the students whose proficiency in English was high.

Mandal (2009) reported that cooperative strategies improved the higher level thinking skills of engineering students in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. He also added that the performance of weaker students significantly improved when they were grouped with higher achieving students. Jig-saw puzzle, think-share-pair, 3 minute interview and critical debate were some of the activities used by researcher. Madumathi et al. (2014), in a study among the Indian ESL students (below average), noted a significant difference in strategy use across gender and board of studies. With the help of TOEFL scores they found these low achieving students had low proficiency levels in English. Among them, those who frequently used LLS seemed to score comparatively better marks in TOEFL.

Second year engineering students (both rural and urban) of Ratnagiri district, when examined on their use of LLS, showed a high preference for cognitive, meta-cognitive, compensation strategies and social strategies, while they hardly made use of memory and affective strategies. It was observed that these students exhibited anxiety and shyness in learning English in addition to lack of confidence and lack of awareness of the benefits and application of strategies (Patil & Karekatti, 2012). On the contrary, Malayalee undergraduates, when examined under three contexts namely, in class, on campus, outside the classroom and off campus, showed least use of social strategies. Even the highly motivated and fairly co-operative learners had opted for a less than optimal use of interactive social strategies (Harish, 2014). This lack of use in social strategies affected the students' interactive skills.

Based on a taxonomy by Tarone (1977); Faerch and Kasper (1983); Ellis (1984) and Dornyei (1995), Patil & Karekatti (2015) also explored the use of communication strategies in oral communicative situations by engineering students, based on a taxonomy by. They reported that the students employed strategies to a great extent for interviewing task when compared to public speech and presentation. In all the tasks given strategies like fillers, restructuring and repetition were mostly used by them.

All of the above studies consequently show how little a research has been done in the Indian context. Thus, there is a need for LLS researchers to focus more on the Indian context in order to know more about the benefits and ways to improve language learning experience among ESL learners.

INDIAN CONTEXT AND LEARNING STRATEGY RESEARCH

A variety of studies on LLS have taken place in other contexts (ESL/EFL) with a variety of students. But, comparatively, there is a lack in variety and the number of studies that have been conducted in India. From the studies conducted so far with the Indian students, it can be observed that most of researchers have involved tertiary level learners and engineering students (Patil & Karekatti, 2012; Feleciya et al., 2015). Aspects like variables affecting the choice of language learning strategies, use of LLS of a particular group of students, relationship between learning styles and learning strategies, impact of cultural, educational and socio-economic contexts in learning English, role of gender and board of studies, and the effects of using cooperative strategies have been touched upon (Sheorey, 1999; Mandal, 2009; Madhumathi et al.; 2011, 2014). The review of the studies report that LLS seems to work in all of the above contexts and with majority of the students engaged in the study, thus providing evidence of benefits of LLS.

Nyikos and Oxford (1993) emphasize the importance of formal instruction of strategies as students are unaware of the use and its application. This is very true in the case of Indian students especially with those hailing from rural areas. Students from rural areas face more difficulty in learning English when compared to those from urban areas. This is due to the teaching methods and use of vernacular medium while in school. Because of this, these students find it difficult to communicate in English. Thus, Importance to effective communication in both oral and written should be given as they form one of the basic criteria by recruiting companies (Sageev and Romanowski, 2001). Also, Cohen and Griffith's (2015), on revisiting LLS research, have laid out the general areas in the field of LLS that's needs more focus which includes research on areas and contexts that has received less attention so far.

With LLS spanning over four decades and having been subjected to various contextual explorations, a lot is yet to be discovered as far as Indian students are concerned. Apart from those aspects examined already in the previous studies, a lot is yet to be figured out. As most of the studies have only concentrated on obtaining the surface level information, more focus is needed on the four language skills as well as other language areas such as grammar and vocabulary. Since strategy training has evolved to be an effective way to improve learners' performance overseas, the same can be inculcated in schools and colleges in India too. As evidence from earlier studies proves the effectiveness of LLS with specific group of students and in specific contexts, the same can be extended to other under-researched contexts too. In order to get a comprehensive idea of how strategies work in diverse contexts, research should be conducted across the different states of the country, involving every possible group of students, be it among those from rural or urban areas as everything from socio-economic to cultural contexts differs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

India is a big country that comprises billions of people from diverse cultures. English, having obtained an international status, has become the second language of the country. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on all the possible areas to fully comprehend the learning needs of the students. Certain aspects applicable for learners in other countries may not be applicable for a learner in India. The countries' culture differ, the learners' environment and educational background differ. As a result, their choice of strategies in completing a task at hand may completely vary. All these should be considered when researchers select students for their study. This will enable us to comprehend the nuances of employing learning strategies in a better way.

1. Learners from all disciplines should be involved in the study. Right from school students to post graduates should be examined of their language strategies and other training to see the differences/impact as course and age progresses.
2. Separate studies should be made involving students at co-educational as well as single sex colleges. This will enable the teachers to understand the differences in students choices based on the environment. The same can be done with school students also.
3. Students belonging to rural areas can be enrolled for research on the use of LLS. They are the ones who need great support to overcome language barriers while opting for higher studies and job opportunities. A comparative study can also be done using rural and urban students to better understand the problems faced on both sides.
4. The available instruments used to measure the strategies must be adapted according to context, the needs and situation of the learner as well as the research purpose.
5. If the available material is not found to cater to the needs of our students, new materials should be designed that would accommodate the relevant details of the target population.
6. Strategy training has been reported to dramatically increase the performance of students. Therefore, efforts to integrate implicit and explicit strategy instruction in regular classes can be undertaken by the teachers. (Cohen et al., 1996)
7. More research on factors affecting language learning choice of the Indian students can be helpful. Based on the findings relevant actions can be undertaken to improve the quality of learning of those students (Al-Buainian, 2010).
8. The syllabi can be modified by providing ways to inculcate new LLS or strategy training as a part of their regular class instead of a separate session.

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