



Identifying Learning Strategies and Needs of the Students in their L2 Acquisition at the University of West Bohemia: A Case Study

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Abstract

The use of different learning strategies by language learners is indisputably one of the many crucial factors that can greatly influence the second language (L2) acquisition process. By exploring these strategies and their practical application to language learning, students and teachers can be provided with a tool that is both reciprocal and collaborative. As the language level of university students increases, it is crucial to provide them with new and adequate approaches to further enhance their language level and ensure that they know how to improve their L2 skills before entering the job market. This paper aims to critically examine the different learning strategies and acquire a better understanding of the needs, expectations, and challenges of the students at the University of West Bohemia in order to adjust the courses and fulfill the needs and expectations of these students. The first part of the article delves on the theoretical background of the different kinds of learning strategies and summarizes the outcomes of recent studies in this area. This part also introduces the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that was chosen by the researchers as the framework for measuring the students' learning strategies. The second part of the article presents the research design and hypotheses of the research, which will be conducted at the University of West Bohemia for the period covering the academic year of 2020/2021.

Keywords: learning strategies, language acquisition, strategy for language learning

1. Introduction

It is evident that learning strategies of students have been changing over the past years. When it comes to English language learning, students approach their learning in a completely different manner than they did ten years ago. This may be due to the continuous enhancement of technology and the presence of the English language everywhere. In order to adjust the way the English language is taught in schools, it is vital to understand what the students' preferences and choices are in terms of English learning. When we know the preferences and needs of our students, we can adjust the courses so students can advance and improve their language skills in both educational and professional contexts.

The paper reports the theoretical background of learning strategies and a learning strategies measurement tool SILL. Also, it presents a mixed research study design and preliminary results of the research conducted at the University of West Bohemia.

2. Learning strategies

Over the years, the definition of learning strategies have been modified, and there is not a unified definition. According to Cohen (2011, p.7), learning strategies are "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance." Another definition of learning strategies is: "Learning strategies are the specific actions one takes and/or techniques one uses in order to learn" (Oxford, 1990, p.9). Cohen (2011) distinguishes four different learning strategies: strategies for language learning, strategies for language learning vs language use, strategies by language skill area and strategies according to the function. The same author highlights the difference between language learning and language learning strategies. He points out that learning strategies are a conscious choice of language learning approach, whereas language learning can be unintentional.

3. Learning strategies in L2

When it comes to language learning or learning a target language, learning strategies enhance language learning and cause language learning to be easier, faster and fun (Cohen, 2011). Learning strategies also help students advance in language learning and improve their proficiency and self-confidence (Oxford, 1990). In addition, learning strategies help students become independent learners



who take responsibility for their learning (Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 1990). Researchers classify learning strategies into different groups: strategies by working with materials, by skill area or by function. There are various language learning strategies people use when working with the material. We can distinguish the following: identifying the learning material, grouping vocabulary, revising learning material and memory techniques (Cohen, 2011). Working with materials includes subsequent strategies such as rehearsal strategies, coping strategies and communicative strategies. Learning strategies by skills are often called operational skills, and they include: listening, reading, speaking, writing, learning new vocabulary and grammar and translation. The skills that belong to this group are also skills such as summarizing a text and working with vocabulary. The last language strategies are strategies by function. These strategies are metacognitive, cognitive and social (Cohen, Learning styles and strategies, Oxford). Some researchers consider metacognitive strategies essential for autonomous learning and successful learning outside the classroom (Learning styles and strategies). Another classification of strategies is comprehension/receptive strategies and production strategies. There are other ways we can classify strategies, for example, by age, proficiency, gender, specific culture or language.

Oxford (1990, p.16) presents two categories of learning strategies: direct and indirect. These two groups depend on and support each other. Each category contains subcategories that are linked to language skills: speaking, reading, writing and reading.

Figure 1 – Direct and Indirect learning strategies (Oxford 1990)

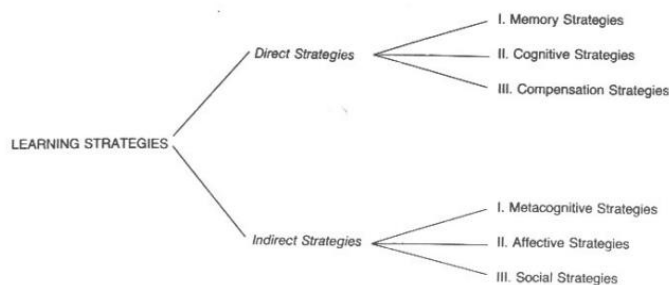


Figure 1.2 Diagram of the Strategy System: Overview. (Source: Original.)

4. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

Since its conception and development, the use of strategy inventory for language learning, otherwise known as SILL by Oxford (1990) has become a standard and confirmatory measurement tool for assessing L2 learners 'use of language learning strategies in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) situations (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; LoCastro, 1994; Mullins, 1992; Nakatani, 2006; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Phillips, 1991; Yang, 1992). This assessment tool has been extensively checked and widely used in the domain of L2 acquisition and teaching due to its reliability and validity in understanding and evaluating these learning strategies, such as in the areas investigating L2 learner's overall learning strategy use, strategy preferences and their underlying factors, relationship between L2 performance and strategy use, and practical strategy training (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; McMullen, 2009; Nisbet et al., 2005; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford and Burry, 1993; Park, 1997, 2011; Riazi & Rahimi, 2005; Russell, 2010; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 1999).

While various researchers have used a diverse array of data collection such as self-observation, self-report, and self-revelation in an attempt to determine and evaluate students 'use of language learning strategies such as in a study conducted by Cohen in 1987, the SILL has maintained its tenability in data collection which can then help explore specific cognitive processes and techniques utilized by language learners.

The SILL was developed primarily to provide a comprehensive classification system in strategy inventory in L2 acquisition. It is comprised of questions delving on direct and indirect learning strategies ranging from memory strategies for memorizing and recalling vocabulary words, cognitive strategies for understanding and constructing text, compensatory mechanism for offsetting a lack of skill or knowledge to metacognitive strategies for identifying an individual's learning style, affective strategies for managing and controlling one's emotional state and social strategies for working and learning with other people (Oxford, 2003; Park, 2011).



The set of questions presented in the SILL comes in two distinct versions. Version 5.1 was designed for native English speakers learning a new language. It uses a five-point Likert scale where students are asked to respond and specify their level of agreement to a statement using a similar nomenclature: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. In contrast, whilst it still uses the same Likert scaling method of categorisation where students are asked to evaluate how frequently they employ a certain language learning style, version 7.0 was designed specifically for ESL /EFL students learning English (Oxford, 1990). Both versions use students' self-evaluations of their self-reported strategy use. The resulting numbers correspond to the use of each particular strategy described in the questionnaire.

Weighing on the reliability and validity factors of SILL as a measurement tool to assess the learner's preferential learning strategy together with the needs analysis component as determined in the qualitative and quantitative survey utilized in this study, the SILL was adopted primarily for this purpose.

5. Theoretical Background of current research in needs analysis

There have been multiple approaches to assess the scope of needs analysis (Schutz and Derwing, 1981; Allwright, 1982; Richterich, Jones, Nelson and many others). According to West (2008, p.1) this evolution could be divided into four main stages. It was illustrated that ESP (English for Specific Purposes) developed in the beginning with the focus on EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) and later on EAP (English for Academic Purposes). Since the 1980s general English skills have gained popularity. As the access to technology was growing, it has become vital to teach students to work with internet resources, apply computer-based learning skills, which then led to the emergence of integrated analyses that started in the mid-1990s. The author created a table with the stages of needs analysis scope and the authors who worked on each branch, please see it for further reference.

A needs analysis is aimed at considering the goals, values and priorities of the stakeholders that take part in the learning process. In his work on holistic foreign education in 2001 Jaatinen points out that it is crucial to look at the particular learner as a representative of his/her social group. In that case the issues connected to differentiating between objective and subjective needs may cease to exist as the ESP course design has to include several learning dimensions at once, such as emotional, volitional, cognitive and social ones (Kohonen, 2005)

6. Research design and methodology

Exploring the needs of the students may be a quick process due to the development of modern technology. Teachers can survey their students on their needs and wants and receive feedback almost instantly. However, that frequently means that qualitative analysis methods are being implemented which can limit the research context. On the contrary, using language tests to determine knowledge gaps can also result in the loss of key sources of information. It is assumed that both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods taken separately do not demonstrate more complex students' needs (Huhta, 2013).

Therefore, in order to create a fuller picture of the needs of the students at the University of West Bohemia, it was decided to use the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, mixed methods (Cresswell, 2014). This method is often referred to as triangulation of data. Five hypotheses were checked for statistical significance as it might be risky to draw conclusions from imprecise (i.e., statistically insignificant) results. The first factor that should be considered in any assessment of statistical significance is how well the group of people who took part in the survey is represented. For this particular article the result of 68 questionnaires were analysed.

As the first step of the process in this study, the set of questionnaires for Business and Academic English students was prepared, validated and piloted. In the second step, the results were collected and examined. It was possible to analyse the results of the questionnaires using reliability analyses and factor analyses. During the third step of the research, it is planned to ask a few selected students to do the language strategies survey or an interview. In this case it will be possible to perform the regression analysis to compare the results with the student's Final Test Scores. The analysis may clarify how exactly the learning strategies the students use help them to get good grades in language courses. Variance analysis could be included in order to divide the students into groups – e.g. successful, average, below-average students. The fourth step includes interviewing teachers and prospective employees to understand the needs of the market better. Last but not least, the results of the four steps will be analysed and the old courses will be updated with relevant materials. We assume that it is important to underpin the needs analysis for ESP by an evidence-based thick



description which will arguably attempt to showcase various factors that influence the context of the educational and professional discourse.

7. Results

We developed an online survey to measure students' language experience and needs analysis. Our survey contained questions related to language skills, language difficulties, future plans and overall importance of mastering English language skills. While performing the analysis we tested the relationships between the factors. The results of the questionnaires filled in by 68 students from the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Applied Sciences in the University of West Bohemia in April, 2021 were analysed.

Thus, our survey addressed four questions that were later used to form three null hypotheses: (1) H₀: There is no significant relationship between the importance of mastering English language skills and language skills of a student.

(2) H₀: There is no significant relationship between the importance of mastering English language skills and language difficulties experienced by the student.

(3) H₀: There is no significant relationship between the importance of mastering English language skills and future plans of this student to use the language in academic/professional career.

Step 1: As the data is a set of scales from 1 to 5, we decided to execute factor analysis. Once the factor table was set up, it was considered important to determine the reliability, or internal consistency of our questionnaire items, that is how reliable the information we have measured is. In order to do that we calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient which was equal to 0.918. If the coefficient is over 0.7 (Robinson et al., 1991), the dataset is considered to be consistent. In our case, the coefficient we received is approaching 1, which means our dataset is highly internally consistent. It also may imply that some of the questions might be omitted in the future provided they are not contributing any unique information to the dataset.

Step 2: To ensure the term "language importance" is easy to operate, we used the following questions: (4) How good are you at (specific language skills); (5) Rate the level of difficulty of the following skills; and (6) which skills you might need to apply in your academic/professional career, all measured on a 1 to 5 scale (1 is for the most positive reaction). Due to the word limit we will not present a table with questions, variables and factors here. Four main factors were labeled as follows: "importance", "language skills proficiency", "language difficulties" and "future plans". It was later proven by Eigenvalues that exceeded the threshold of 1.5. These are the values we have received for these 4 factors:

Eigenvalue 1: 9.15

Eigenvalue 2: 3.32

Eigenvalue 3: 2.03

Eigenvalue 4: 1.59

Step 3: Using a statistical package known as "Gretl" we executed the factor analysis in order to receive factor loadings (principal factors on correlation matrix with the component rotation matrix). It is important to stress that the variables with loadings greater than 0.5 are loaded on the same factor, which means these are meaningful factors different from each other.

Step 4: Hypotheses testing

We ran a correlation analysis to determine the relationship between English skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) mastered by the university students and the other two factors: students' language difficulties and their future expectations. We have received negative correlation coefficients ranging from -0.4 to -0.65 for listening skills and the level of difficulties students have with listening. The fewer difficulties they faced, the more students felt confident about using their listening skills as frequently as possible. There was also a clear connection between mastering speaking skills and students' desire to speak English in their future work environment. We received positive coefficients ranging from 0.3 to 0.6 for giving presentations in English, making business phone calls on a regular basis, etc.

Low correlation coefficients ranging from 0.0 to 0.25 between writing skills and difficulties students have with writing gave us a notion that the majority of the students felt reluctant to use their writing skills in their future job. Even the students who marked having no difficulty to write official/unofficial pieces did not wish to write in English in the future. The results of the correlation and factor analyses need to be verified during the round of personal interviews with selected students during the following phase of the project.



8. Conclusion

By and large, the preliminary findings of this study in identifying the students' needs in their L2 acquisition provided a working proposition in support of the hypotheses presented in this paper on how students' learning experience affects their choices and desired outcome in language learning. With the use of self-assessment tool (i.e. the SILL), the study provided valuable insights on the many variables in influencing the choices that students make in language learning such as personal motivation, gender, years of study, learning experience and future career plans.

In the first phase of this research, the relationships between the mindset of the students in relation to the importance of mastering English language skills, learning experience and level of task difficulty were compared and analysed. These conditions determine the level of engagement that students apply in facilitating their language learning across different settings. The initial empirical findings of this study showed a significant correlation between the students' individual level of confidence, motivation and perception on how they perform in language tasks specifically in writing and speaking exercises.

Like most studies conducted in similar areas (Nisbet et al., 2005; Oxford, 1989; Park, 1997; Phillips, 1991), several important pedagogical implications may be drawn from this research. While there is a set of expectations imposed by the standard academic classroom setting, students should be encouraged to try and experiment with different learning devices and strategies, giving them an active role in their own learning. Teachers can provide a strong support system such as giving immediate feedback and designing additional exercises to help them gain confidence in performing better in tasks which then promote an innovative and a stimulating learning environment. A successful language program geared towards giving the students more control and autonomy in their language learning must take into account the students' needs and expectations to help them realistically prepare to use English as their target language in their future career prospects. Subsequently, teachers should continuously develop a flexible teaching style incorporating various learning techniques and preferences that are compatible with the needs, expectations and challenges of the students.

As this is in an ongoing study, the next part of this research will verify the results obtained during the first phase and determine which learning strategies the students utilize not only to successfully pass the subject but more importantly, gain their L2 proficiency. A closer examination regarding the interplay of these learning strategies and the actual attainment of proficiency level will be explored and analysed through qualitative and quantitative methods. This will be done using a variety of measures in the form of structured interviews and in-depth surveys that would draw upon the experiences and actual perceptions of both students and teachers concerning the effectiveness of these learning strategies. This is followed by a formal discussion with prospective employers to determine the current and future job market demands. Finally, after a thorough investigation and analysis, it is the hope of the researchers that results will contribute to an equally important and necessary change in the continuous development and delivery of the curricula for both Business and Academic English courses at the University of West Bohemia in promoting a conscious understanding and application of workable learning strategies within the confines of effective and practical learning milieu.

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