

Language Learning Strategies Used by First Year English Majored Students in Learning Speaking Skills

Tran Nhu Quynh Tram

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

E-mail: trannhuquynhtram@tdt.edu.vn

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate language learning strategies employed by first year English majors in learning speaking skills and teachers' perceptions of students' language learning strategies at Ton Duc Thang University. The subjects of this study consisted of 100 English majored freshmen and 10 teachers of English. The data collection tools were questionnaire and interviews. The findings showed that (1) the students used all six strategy categories in which the highest rank of frequency was attributed to social strategies and the lowest to memory strategies; the 20 most preferred strategies among the six categories (2) all teachers thought that learning strategies were important in the process of teaching and learning since they helped develop learners' autonomy; therefore, learning strategies should be integrated into class.

Keywords: language learning strategies, speaking skills, rank of frequency, teachers' perceptions, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the demand for learning English has been remarkably soaring since Vietnam took part in WTO. The majority of English learners are expected to be competent in English to communicate with native speakers and non-native speakers of English. However, at high school level, texts chosen are focused on reading, writing and grammar whereas listening and speaking seem to be neglected. The reason could be found in the point of view of testing system. The aim of teaching in Vietnamese high school education is oriented to meet the graduation testing requirements where what is to be tested is mainly the ability to remember grammatical rules and vocabulary use. According to Le (2000), in the two most important examinations in Vietnam, the school final examination and the university entrance examination-listening and speaking skills are not considered exam components. In addition, to become a student of English, the majority of students have passed the university entrance examination as a result of the two Subjects-Mathematics and Vietnamese literature, whereas their English scores are rather low. As Nguyen (2004) points out, since 2001 the three tests: English, Mathematics, and Vietnamese literature, have been given equal weight in scoring. This results in the fact that many first-year English students passing the exam with a very low English scores (3/10). As a result, a number of freshmen at tertiary education level may have difficulties in the process of learning, especially taking part in speaking tasks in the classroom.

In Vietnam, much attention is paid to learner-centeredness. Act Number 3 in the Educational Law of the nation says, 'Educational methods in higher education have to pay attention to fostering self-directed learning ability, creating opportunities for

learners to develop creativity, to practice practical skills and to practice in domains of research, experiment and application'. As a consequence, there exists an awareness and interest in resources for learning strategies in foreign language teaching and learning.

Language learning strategies have received much attention since the 1960s worldwide and the most general finding among the investigations of language learning strategies was that the use of appropriate language learning strategies leads to improved proficiency of achievement overall or in specific areas (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Chamot and Kupper, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). According to Oxford (1990a), effective learners use a variety of different strategies and techniques in order to solve problems that they face while acquiring or producing the language. In addition, the use of appropriate language learning strategies enables learners to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence and self direction (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989)

In spite of the increasing number of research on language learning strategies, most studies have focused on learning strategies in learning English language, not in speaking skills. As stated above, the speaking competence by the Vietnamese learners, especially first year students, is still a long way from fluency in communication. Hence, the researcher is interested in getting to know students' learning strategies and teachers' perceptions of students' learning strategies

2. Research objectives:

This research consisted of three objectives:

- 2.1. To investigate the language learning strategies used by first year English majored students in learning speaking skills
- 2.2. To investigate the students' most preferred learning strategies
- 2.3. To study teachers' perceptions of learning strategies

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of two groups. The first group included 100 students (12 males and 88 females) randomly chosen from four first year English major classes. Ten students (3 males and 7 females) out of 100 volunteered to participate in the interviews. The second group included 10 teachers who used to teach or are teaching speaking skills to first year English majors. These teachers had experience in teaching English for at least five years.

3.2. Research instruments

An appropriate approach for this study is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach in the form of descriptive questionnaire was administered to students to collect information about their use of language learning strategies, their most preferred ones. In addition to the questionnaire, another instrument, namely semi-structured interview, was used to collect useful information about why students use or do not use strategies. Also, semi-structured interview was used to discover teachers' perceptions of students' learning strategies. As Merriam (1988) claims, interviewing is a common means of collecting qualitative data. Semi-

structured interview is chosen because this interview type is guided by a list of questions which are open-ended in nature.

3.3. Data collection

The researcher carried out data collection from February, 2016 to April, 2016 at Ton Duc Thang University where the researcher works as a teacher of English. The questionnaire for students was developed into two parts. The first part consisted of 4 questions related to the student's background information. In the second part, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was adapted to measure the student's strategy use. The SILL was devised by Oxford (1990a) as an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies by students. There are two versions: one for native speakers of English (80 items), and another for learners of English as a second or foreign language (50 items). The SILL uses a five Likert-scale for which the students are asked to indicate their response (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) to a strategy description. Oxford (1990a) points out what learning strategies are useful for what language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. SILL is frequently employed to assess the frequency degree of strategy use in learning a foreign language which consists of the above skills. In order to have better understanding of what learning strategies and their frequency of use solely in speaking skills by first year English majors, in this study, the researcher did some modifications on the 50 items of the SILL based on the strategies useful for speaking suggested by Oxford (1990a, pp.324-327). The SILL used in this study is a 45-item instrument that is divided into 6 groups.

The questionnaire for teachers was developed into two parts. The first part consisted of 2 questions related to teachers' background information. In the second part, 6 questions were used to discover teachers' perceptions of students' learning strategies. Semi-structured interviews were implemented with both teachers and students.

3.4. Data analysis

The data was collected and categorized separately according to their collection, i.e. questionnaire, interviews. After each type was categorized, the categories were compared with each other from which the most common could be identified.

Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviation were calculated for the SILL results in order to understand the students' language learning strategy use. Average scores of 3.5-5.0 on the five point Likert scale were defined as high use; average scores of 2.5-3.4 were defined as medium use; and average scores defined as low use were 1.0-2.4. Besides, standard deviation was also measured.

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was also calculated. Cronbach's alpha is a type of internal consistency reliability for items with scaled responses. Cronbach's alpha reliability normally ranges between 0 and 1. The closer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0, the greater the internal consistency of the item in the scale is (George and Mallery, 2003, cited in Gliem & Gliem (2003).

The data related to teachers' perceptions about students' learning strategies were grouped and coded by the researcher. Each category of data would be compared with others to identify the distinctive characteristics.

4. Research results

4.1. Language learning strategies employed by first year English majors

Table 4.1

Mean scores and Standard Deviations of the six strategy categories

Categories	Mean	Standard deviation
Social	3.6	.95
Compensation	3.41	1.09
Metacognitive	3.39	1.03
Cognitive	3.36	1.02
Affective	3.1	1.1
Memory	2.9	1

As shown in Table 4.1, of the six categories of language learning strategies, the participants reported using the social learning strategies most frequently, with a mean score of 3.6, and memory strategies least frequently, with a mean score of 2.9. All categories of the strategy use were at medium use, except for the social category at high use.

This result was different from what found in previous research done by Politzer (1983). Politzer reported that Asian students preferred rote strategies, such as memorization, whereas Hispanic students used more social interactive strategies. However, Wharton (2000) examined the language learning strategy use of university students in Singapore and indicated a high mean and ranking of social strategy use. His result was similar to what was found in this study.

4.2. Test reliability

Cronbach's alpha is a type of internal consistency reliability for items with scaled responses. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient in this study was 0.942. This means that the internal consistency of the items in the scale was high.

4.3. Strategy preference by the mean of frequency

Table 4.2

Mean scores, standard deviation and preference ranking of the strategies

Learning strategy	Strategy category	Item number	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
Asking for clarification or verification	Social	42	4.2	.88	1
Paying attention	Metacognitive	23	4.1	1.23	2
Using a circumlocution or synonym	Compensation	18	4.0	.97	3
Repeating	Cognitive	4	3.95	.88	4
Selecting the topic	Compensation	20	3.9	1.03	5
Self-monitoring	Metacognitive	31	3.9	.88	6
Using formulas	Cognitive	7	3.85	.99	7
Cooperating with peers	Social	41	3.8	.93	8
Becoming aware of other thoughts	Social	45	3.8	.98	9
Translating	Cognitive	14	3.7	1.06	10
Getting help	Compensation	17	3.7	.91	11
Organizing	Metacognitive	25	3.71	1.17	12
Reasoning	Cognitive	13	3.65	.99	13
Identifying the purpose of a language task	Metacognitive	28	3.6	.94	14
Planning for a language task	Metacognitive	29	3.6	.93	15
Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation	Affective	33	3.6	1.09	16
Making positive statements	Affective	34	3.6	1.14	17
Listening to body	Affective	37	3.6	1.09	18
Discussing your feelings with somebody else	Affective	39	3.5	1.14	19
Cooperating with proficient users of English	Social	43	3.5	.91	20
Using patterns	Cognitive	8	3.4	.99	21

Delaying speech production to focus on listening	Metacognitive	24	3.41	1.10	22
Developing cultural understanding	Social	44	3.4	.90	23
Structured reviewing	Memory	3	3.3	.95	24
Adjusting or approximating the message	Compensation	21	3.3	1.07	25
Setting goals and objectives	Metacognitive	27	3.3	1.02	26
Using resources for receiving and sending message 2 (reading books, etc.)	Cognitive	12	3.25	.79	27
Overviewing and linking with already known material	Metacognitive	22	3.25	.89	28
Practicing with sounds 1 (imitating native speakers' accents)	Cognitive	5	3.2	1.17	29
Using resources for receiving and sending message 1 (listening to tapes, watching movies, etc.)	Cognitive	11	3.2	1.06	30
Using gestures	Compensation	15	3.2	1.17	31
Taking risks wisely	Affective	35	3.2	1.05	32
Placing new words into a context	Memory	1	3.1	.95	33
Practicing sounds 2 (pronunciation)	Cognitive	6	3.0	1.15	34
Recombining	Cognitive	9	3.0	1.08	35
Switching to mother tongue	Compensation	16	3.0	1.38	36
Seeking practice opportunities	Metacognitive	30	3.0	1.08	37
Self-evaluating	Metacognitive	32	3.0	1.02	38
Asking for correction	Social	40	2.9	1.10	39
Coining words	Compensation	19	2.8	1.15	40
Practicing naturalistically	Cognitive	10	2.76	1.08	41
Organizing	Metacognitive	26	2.4	1.10	42
Rewarding yourself	Affective	36	2.4	1.10	43

Representing sounds in memory	Memory	2	2.3	1.09	44
Writing a language diary	Affective	38	1.8	1.12	45

As seen in Table 4.2, of the 20 strategies with the high degree of frequency (mean scores varying from 3.5 to 5.0), metacognitive strategy category was dominant in the number with 5 strategies, followed by social, affective and cognitive strategy categories with 4 strategies each. There were 3 strategies belonging to compensation strategy category. Surprisingly, there were no memory strategies in the 20 most preferred strategies.

4.5. Teachers' perceptions of students' learning strategies

Table 4.3
Teachers' perceptions of students' learning strategies

	Questions	N	Percentage (%)
1	Language learning strategies are important in teaching and learning speaking skills.	10	100
2	Language learning strategies help students become active and self-directed.	10	100
3	Students' learning success is related to the number of language learning strategies.	4	40
4	Language learning strategies are not presented in textbooks.	8	80
5	Teachers should introduce language learning strategies into teaching program.	8	80
6	The least frequently used strategy type is affective.	10	100

All teachers thought that learning strategies were important in the process of teaching and learning since learning strategies helped students process a large amount of information, perform language tasks as well as overcome problems that they might face. In addition, learning strategies helped students build up learner independence and autonomy. According to Ms. Nga, due to some objective and subjective limitations, students did not have many opportunities to fully develop their speaking competence in the classroom. Additionally, with the shift in the model of teaching where learner-centeredness was emphasized, student's self-directed learning ability needed to be fostered. In such context, learning strategies were of great help. Students who were familiar with strategies were able to continue learning beyond the classroom. They knew how to make sense of input in the target language.

With regard to the relationship between learning success and the number of learning strategies that students used, 4 out of 10 teachers believed that more able students used more learning strategies than less able ones. Meanwhile, the other six teachers were doubtful about this relationship. Ms. An thought that the number of learning strategies was not the decisive element to learning success. In reality, some less able students complained that though they used the same strategies that more able ones frequently did in learning, their speaking competence did not considerably improved. Obviously, more able students tended to use strategies in an orchestrated fashion.

80% of teachers claimed that learning strategies were not officially presented in most of textbooks. As a result, not all students were fully aware of the strategies they used. In order to raise students' awareness of learning strategies, aiming at developing students' speaking proficiency, 80% of teachers thought that learning strategies should be introduced into the teaching program. According to Ms. Lan, learning strategies could be taught as part of the course or regular part of a lesson. For example, the teacher took the last 10 minutes of the class time to introduce some learning strategies that helped students master what was covered.

All teachers thought that students used all 6 types of strategies in which affective type seemed to be least frequently used. Ms. Ha claimed that some students did not know how to reduce their performance anxiety. These students became tongue-tied or lost control when being called to speak in front of the classroom. Therefore, teachers should encourage their students to use affective strategies more often by offering them knowledge to know the characteristics, effectiveness and application of these strategies.

5. Conclusion

To learn speaking skills, first year English majors used all learning strategy categories in which the order of most frequently used ones were Social, Compensation, Metacognitive, Cognitive, Affective and Memory. All categories of the strategy use were at medium use, except for the social category at high use. Of the 20 learning strategies with high degree of frequency, metacognitive category was dominant in number, followed by social, cognitive, affective, and compensation. However, no memory strategy was found among the 20 most preferred strategies. Learning strategies were thought to be important in the process of teaching and learning since they helped develop students' communicative competence and build up their self-directed learning ability. In addition, teachers believed that helping students raise their awareness of learning strategies was teachers' responsibility.

6. Suggestions for future research

The findings of this study suggest a number of directions to research

Firstly, difficulties that Vietnamese students often face in spoken English and learning strategies to overcome these difficulties need further research.

The second area concerns the factor of culture affecting students' strategy choice. A comparison between the strategy use of Vietnamese students and that of Western students' needs further studying.

The last issue the researcher wishes to propose for further research focuses on how learning strategies are related to learning outcome.

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