# Investigating Language Learning Strategies --- Implications from Previous Research

語言學習策略研究: 文獻探討結果之啟示

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#### Abstract

The development of learning strategy studies originated from the trend of educational psychology, which shifted from behaviorist influences to cognition emphasized in the 1950s-1960. In second language learning field, language learning has been seen as a kind of problem-solving process. Strategies used by learners play a significant role in affecting students' learning process and learning effects. This study reviewed and summarized previous research done in language learning strategy field, aiming to provide a holistic view of language learning strategy study development and results. The author categorized related studies in terms of studies in language learning strategies, and studies in language learning strategy training. At the end of this research, six implications from the review results were concluded.

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#### 摘要

學習策略研究發展的興起可追源自教育心理學於60年代的轉變,此時認知學派漸取代1950-1960年間盛行的行為主義成為主流學派。在第二語言學習領域中,語言學習一直被視為一種問題解決的過程。學習策略的使用在語言習得過程中扮演著舉足輕重的角色,影響學習者的學習過程及學習結果。本研究即針對先前語言學習領域中的策略研究進行文獻探討,目的在於對語言學習策略研究之發展及研究結果進行全面的了解。本文作者將先前的學習策略研究分成以下兩大類來探討:(一)語言學習策略研究,以及(二)語言學習策略訓練研究。文末作者並依文獻探討之結果,歸論出六項結論。

# Investigating Language Learning Strategies --- Implications from Previous Research

The development of learning strategy studies originated from the trend of educational psychology, which shifted from behaviorist influences to cognition emphasized in the 1950s-1960s. Learning became knowledge acquisition instead of a mechanistic process of response dominated educational practice. And learners became active processors of information instead of passive recipients of knowledge (see Huang, 1997; Mayer, 1992). According to Dansereau (1978), before the mid-1950s, behaviorism pervaded educational psychology. Starting from the 1950s, there was an increasing emphasis on more complex behaviors, such as problem-solving and language processing. The failure of behaviorism led the success of cognitive psychology. The cognitive psychologists emphasized learners' role in organisms' manipulations of incoming stimuli in predicting responses and developed procedures to identify strategies. Not until the early 1970s had cognitive findings a substantial impact on education. Much of the impact lied in the area of learning strategy improvement (p. 3).

In language learning field, researchers (e.g., Wenden, 1987) claimed that, "research on learner strategies in the domain of second language learning may be viewed as a part of the general area of research on mental processes and structures that constitute the field of cognitive science" (p. 6). Carton (1966) first made the assumption that learners differed in the ability to make valid and reasonable inferences. Starting from Carton, language learning has been seen as a kind of problem-solving process for many language educators (see Rubin, 1987). Moreover, Kaplan (1998) reviewed the literature on general learning strategies and discussed the literature on learning strategies from psychological research. He found that general learning strategies do not play a significant role in distinguishing L2 from L1 acquisition, and recommended that L2 researchers turn their attention to the development of specific language strategies.

Research focusing on language learning strategies came from the concern for successful learners' learning strategies under the assumption that some learners are more successful because they approach learning in a more successful way (e.g., Vann & Abraham, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). For example, Rubin (1975) initiated successful learners' language learning strategy use investigation with the assumption that if the strategies could be identified, they might be taught to less-successful learners. Furthermore, Griffiths and Parr (2001) looked at how the theory of language learning strategies have developed and concluded two points for the theoretical assumptions behind learning strategies: 1) learning is a cognitive process, and 2) learning strategies can be learned.

According to Huang (1997), the early studies of language learning strategies were focused on the identifications of the strategies contributed directly or indirectly to language learning, for which, studies on successful and less-successful learners' strategy use were conducted. In the eighties, researchers (e.g., Politzer & McGroarty, 1985) started to question the universal validity of good strategies and brought about studies of the factors influencing strategy choice. Almost at the same time, to bring language learning strategies into practice to help students' learning, the training of language learning strategies started to develop. In the following text, literature will be reviewed based on the three stages of language learning strategy investigation.

### Successful and Less-successful Learners' Strategy Use

Initiated by Rubin's research (1975) in identifying successful language learners' strategy use, many studies have contributed greatly to this issue. According to Huang (2000), researchers (e.g., Bialystok, 1979; Chamot, 1987; Chamot et al., 1988; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1993; Tarone, 1981) have identified categories of strategies used by successful language learners. In Chamot and Kupper's study (1989), they concluded that more effective learners used a variety of appropriate metacognitive, cognitive and productive tasks.

Recent studies further investigate learning strategies successful learners in different countries used and obtained more results. For example, Bremner (2000), investigating English learning of Chinese students in Hong Kong, found that high English proficiency learners used cognitive and compensation strategies statistically significantly more often than other kinds of strategies. Bruen (2001), studying effective Irish learners of German, found that more proficient learners used more cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Also, they used language learning strategies in a more structured and purposeful manner and applied the strategies to a wider range of situations and tasks than less proficient learners. Also, Vadergrift (2003) investigating skilled Canadian learners learning French found that more skilled students used mostly cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. It seems that among these studies, cognitive, metacognitive, and compensation strategies are the three top learning strategies used by the successful foreign language learners.

A paucity of research was conducted with less successful foreign language learners' strategy use. Even fewer studies were focused on the comparison between the strategies used by successful learners and less successful learners. There showed no conclusive results among these studies, either. For example, Nyikos (1987) found that the characteristics of less successful learners included using fewer types of strategies, using non-communicative strategies, being not aware of the strategies they used, and being not able to describe the strategies they used. However, in their study (1990), Vann and Abraham found that although less successful learners did not show careful orchestration and creativity in language learning, they were aware of the

learning strategies they used. Nevertheless, Bremner (2000) found that learners with lower levels of target language proficiency showed higher frequency of affective strategy use than learners with higher levels of language proficiency. On the other hand, Abraham and Vann (1987) pointed out two differences between successful and less successful language learners' strategy use: the learners' efforts in achieving language accuracy, and their flexibility in using learning strategies.

#### Factors Influencing Strategy Choice

In the eighties, researchers proposed that learning behaviors were culturally specific, and claimed that it took caution to define a strategy as absolutely helpful (e.g., Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). The studies on factors affecting learners' choice of language learning strategies became popular (see Huang, 2000). As researchers found, "learning strategy uses vary from person to person" (Huang, 1997, p. 24), and many factors were found in affecting learners' strategy use in language learning. For example, since late eightieth, researchers (e.g., Bedell, 1993; Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford, 1993; Parry & Stansfield, 1990; Rossi-Le, 1989; Wildner-Bassett, 1992; Yutaka, 1997) have identified several factors in influencing learning strategy choice: the language being learned, duration of learning, degree of awareness, age, sex, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking learning style, aptitude, career, orientation, national origin, learning styles, personality type, sensory preferences, language teaching methods, culture background and task requirements.

Later, researchers investigated the issue of factors in strategy choice of different learners' background. For example, Oxford and Ehrman (1995) investigating adults' language learning strategies in an intensive foreign language program in the United States found that the use of learning strategies were related with the students' persistence, motivation, planning, gender, teacher perceptions, and facilitative anxiety. Chung (2002) conducted a study to locate the predictors of language learning strategy choices, and to examine the difficulties encountered by Taiwanese senior high school students in learning English. She found that four social-psychological variables were related with the students' strategy use: knowledge, effectiveness, difficulty, and anxiety. The difficulties the students reported had in using learning strategies included the unfamiliarity of the strategies, the requirement of English ability, the learning environment, the feeling of being embarrassed, passive learning attitude, and heavy academic load. It seems that in investigating factors influencing learners' strategy use, the focus has been expanded to include study of the difficulties hindering strategy use process.

#### **Strategy Training**

In this section, studies in language learning strategy training will be reviewed in two parts. In the first part, the background and rationale of language learning strategy training will be provided. And, in the second part, language learning strategy training studies and their results will be presented.

### Background and rationale of language learning strategy training

In the field of language education, discussions on language learning strategy training started around the eighties. Researchers (e.g., Norman, 1980; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986) claimed that good teaching should include the ways to learn, to remember, and to process information. The reasons came from the assumptions that one of the main factors in deciding language learning effects was the appropriate use of learning strategies in completing language tasks (see Chamot, 1998; Huang, 2000). If teachers teach less successful learners the learning strategies successful language learners used, the learners might make progress in language learning. Also, some educators perceived strategy training as not only to transform less successful learners into more proficient ones but also to enhance the already steady progress of good strategy users (see Feyten et al., 1999).

Under the assumptions mentioned above, several researchers further proposed rationales for language learning strategy instruction. For example, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) mentioned the assumptions for learning strategy instruction in language education field included: 1) mentally active learners being better learners, 2) strategies being teachable, 3) learning strategies being transferable to new tasks, and 4) academic language learning being more effective when accompanied by learning strategies. Moreover, Chamot (1998) proposed five rationales for teaching learning strategies in second language classrooms. First, successful learners used more metacognitive strategies, which helped them choose appropriate strategies to help their learning in target language. Second, most students had the abilities to learn to use appropriate learning strategies in an effective way. Third, learners needed to use learning strategies to solve problems in learning process. Fourth, learning strategy instruction could motivate learners by offering learners the techniques for more effective learning, and by increasing learners' confidence on their learning abilities Fifth, learners would become more independent in learning after they became skillful in using language learning strategies (p. 5). Furthermore, recently Lovelock (2002) proposed four points for the teaching of learning strategies. First, learner strategies facilitate obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using language. Second, being actively involved in the learning process is necessary. Third, consciousness raising is essential for effective learning. And fourth, social strategies and communication strategies are indirect aids to learning (p. 27). From the rationales and assumptions mentioned above, learning strategy training appeared to be essential for successful language

programs.

#### Language learning strategy training studies

Although language educators claimed the importance of applying learning strategy instruction to language teaching, studies related with language learning strategy instruction were relatively fewer than studies in other areas of language education. According to researchers (e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, Huang, 2000), in the eighties, strategy training studies were focused on vocabulary learning tasks. From the nineties, language learning strategy training studies started to include other language aspects. In the following text, language learning strategy training studies will be presented in two parts: general language learning strategy training studies, and strategy training studies in four language skills.

#### 1. General language learning strategy training studies

Before mid eighties, not all studies in language learning strategy training obtain positive results (see Oxford, 1993). For example, Cohen and Aphek (1980) found that association strategies helped advanced learners in vocabulary learning. However, Bialystok (1983) found no significant relationship between strategy training and vocabulary acquisition. O'Malley et al. (1985) found that although strategy training helped improve spakeing ability, it did not improve listening comprehension. Researchers (e.g., Oxford, 1993) suggested that the inconsistency of the study results lied on some methodological problems, which might obstacle the revelation of important findings.

After mid eighties, the findings of strategy instructions tended to show more consistent results. Researchers (e.g., Chamot, 1998) recommended that strategy instruction studies could help students increase their language abilities and confidence as long as the instructions were "properly conducted" (p. 4).

For example, Brown and Perry (1991) conducted a study with Arabic-speaking students at an intensive English program, where students learned were instructed various strategies for vocabulary learning. The results showed that students had a significantly higher rate of recall on vocabulary after strategy instruction. Nunan (1997) investigated the effects of strategy training on four aspects of learning process: students' motivation, students' knowledge of strategies, perceived utility of strategies, and actual use of strategies. The results showed that strategy training had positive effects on students' motivation, knowledge of strategies, and perceived utility of strategies. Feyten et al. (1999) examined the effect of learners' general awareness of language learning strategies on student achievement. They found that consciousness raising with respect to language learning strategies produced better language learners for middle school level students, who learned a foreign language for the first time.

Fowle (2002) tried to develop learners' metacognitive knowledge through experimenting different strategies of working on vocabulary notebooks. She found that students became more active in learning vocabulary as well as their employment of different learning strategies.

#### 2. Strategy training studies in four language skills

Strategy training studies tended to be more focused on strategy training in receptive language skills, which are listening and reading, than productive skills, which include speaking and writing.

In the studies related with reading skills, almost all the results showed positive. For example, Katims and Harris (1997) investigated the effectiveness of a comprehension enhancement strategy training in multilevel reading classes for middle school students. The results showed a significant effect for treatment conditions. Salataci and Akyel (2002) reviewing studies related with improving learners' reading skills, tried to investigate possible effects of strategy instruction on first and second language reading. They found that strategy instruction helped improve students' use of reading strategies and reading performances. Pappa et al. (2003) examined the effectiveness of strategy training and motivation boosting in English reading. The results showed that only the students who received strategy training or motivation boosting improved their performance in English reading comprehension. Also, the combined type of training had larger effect than either motivational boosting or strategy training only. Further, Dhieb-Henia (2003) tried to find out if and to what extent a metacognitive strategy training course helped English as specific purpose (ESP) students read scientific research articles more efficiently. The results showed that the experimental group students' declarative knowledge of the metatextual features of research articles was enhanced. Also, the experimental group performed significantly better on reading test after receiving strategy training.

Compared to strategy instruction studies done related to reading ability improvement, the strategy instruction studies focusing on listening ability improvement appear to be fewer. Results of these studies did not show consistent. For example, O'Malley (1987) studied the influence of language learning strategy training on high school students and found that students who received strategy training made progress in listening abilities. However, the researcher suggested that if the students had been given more time and some choices in strategy selection, the students performance would have been better than it was. Schwartz (1992) conducted trainings of cognitive and metacognitive strategies with university Spanish students, however did not obtain positive results. Tompson and Rubin (1996) gave third-year university students of Russian listening strategy trainings with video. The results showed that the experimental group made statistically significant bigger progress in listening tests than the control group. Tutunis (2001) investigated whether strategy training helped

English learning students in their achievements in listening. The results indicated that the experimental group, who received the training, made improvement in listening performance, which was observed from strategy training. Graham (2003) reviewed studies of strategy training in improving students' listening ability and found that strategy training yielded both negative and positive results.

In productive language skills, only a paucity of strategy training studies were conducted. Among them, studies done in improving speaking ability tended to be more than the ones for improving writing ability. Lam and Wong (2000) provided the training of the use of learning strategies to 58 17-year-old students to develop their discussion skills. The results supported the value of strategy training in that learners made more attempts to seek clarification opportunities after training. Also, Lovelock (2002) designed individual assessment cards as a way to assist language learning strategy training to a group of Japanese high school graduates in developing English communication skills. The results showed that after the students learned the strategies, learning English as a practical communicative skill became an achievable goal for them.

#### Conclusion

After the literature review shown above, the researcher concluded the implications as follows. First, the origin of language learning strategy studies was related with the trend of educational emphasis on cognition. In the development of language learning strategy research, at the early stage, studies were focused on improving the learning of memory tasks.

Second, one of the rationales for investigating language learning strategies lay on the assumption that language learning being taken as a kind of problem-solving process. The strategies used in learning process differed person to person. Successful learners used different strategies from less-successful learners. Another rationale existed on the assumption that learning strategies are learnable.

Third, in general, successful language learners used more cognitive and metacognitive strategies than other kinds of strategies. Also, they used a higher variety of strategies than less-successful language learners. Studies on less-successful language learners did not show conclusive results though.

Fourth, numerous factors have been identified in influencing language learners' strategy use and choice. Lately, research in investigating difficulties learners face in using learning strategies have been included, which have expanded the discussions on reasons affecting learners' strategy use.

Fifth, after mid eighties, methods for applying strategy training became more thorough and organized. Results of strategy training studies became consistently positive. Studies showed that under proper use of training methods, strategy trainings helped improve learners' language ability and their learning confidence.

Sixth, so far, strategy training studies focused more on receptive language skills, such as reading and listening, than productive skills, such as speaking and writing. In strategy training for improving reading ability, results have shown consistently positive. However, the strategy training studies for improving listening strategies have not reached consistent results yet. Some studies obtained positive results, while some, negative. On the other hand, only very few strategy training studies were related with speaking or communication ability improvement, although these studies showed positive results.

This study has reviewed research related to the development of learning strategy investigation. Further studies are suggested to discover the ways to improve the effects of learning strategy training, which might provide significant contributions to language learning to a great extent.

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