AN APPLICATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MONGOLIA

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Abstract

The study observes the current language learning strategies employed by Mongolian high school students. It aims at surveying the relationship between favored language strategies, gender, and grades. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to 896 participants of public schools urban and rural areas of Mongolia. Although, the results of the study indicated that the participants were medium users of language learning strategies, metacognitive strategies (the mean ranked 3.42) were the most frequently used and memory strategies (the mean ranked 2.96) were the least used. The results also showed that the significant differences exist between male and female students.

Keywords: language learning, strategy category, high school students, correlation

INTRODUCTION

With the development of the research on second language acquisition, more and more attention has been paid to the research on individual learner differences. Among those, language learning strategies have been increasingly attracting the interest of contemporary educators as they have potential to enhance learning. Learning strategies are required to have the principal influence on the rate and level of second language acquisition (Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 1990). Over the years, many researchers have studied and examined the language learning strategies. However, the results of the studies are different and controversial. Most of the research subjects in these studies are students in different colleges and universities. There is little in the literature that focuses on the language learning strategies of students learning English in secondary and high schools.

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1.   What is the general pattern of language learning strategies by secondary and high school students in Mongolia?

2.   Are there any differences between male and female students in using language learning strategies?

3.   Are there any differences in strategy using language learning strategies in terms of students' grades?

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Definition and classification of language learning strategies

Since the mid-seventies, more and more researchers and teachers in ESL field have realized the importance of the strategies used by learners in the language learning process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Zhou, 2010). But as for the definition and classification of the language learning strategies, researchers have different opinions. Robin (1975:43) defined the learning strategies as 'the techniques or devices that a learner may use to acquire knowledge'. In her later research, she identified two kinds of learning strategies: those that contribute directly to learning, and those that contribute indirectly to learning. The direct learning strategies include clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practice. The indirect learning strategies are creating opportunities for practice and production tricks. Stern, in 1975, also produced a list of ten language learning strategies which he believed to be characteristic of good language learners.

Later, Stern (1992:261) defined 'strategies' as 'broadly conceived intentional directions'. O'Malley et al (1985:23) identified learning strategies as being 'operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information', which was originally used by Rigney (1978). They identified 26 strategies, which can be divided into three categories: metacognitive (knowing about learning), cognitive (specific to distinct learning activities) and social. Oxford (1990:8) also used Rigney's definition, described language learning strategies as 'operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information'. However, she classified learning strategies into six groups: memory strategies (e.g., grouping, representing sounds in memory), cognitive strategies (e.g., repeating, analyzing, getting the idea quickly and taking notes), compensation strategies (e.g., switching to the mother tongue, using other clues), metacognitive strategies (e.g., linking new information with already known one, self-monitoring), affective strategies (lowering anxiety by use of music, encouraging oneself and discussing feelings with others), and social strategies (asking for clarification, cooperating with others and developing cultural understanding). These six groups in the later studies were further divided into direct strategies and indirect strategies. From the above, we can see that there is no consensus on the definition and classification of language learning strategies in the field of language learning strategy research.

Apart from language proficiency, as research has shown, there are other factors that exert influence on the strategies that the language learners select and use. For instance, gender was one factor that has been explored by a number of researchers. In language learning strategy studies involving gender, efforts have been made to investigate the strategies used by males and females and 'the sex difference findings to date show that in typical language learning situations females use significantly more learning strategies than males and use them more often' (Oxford 1989, p.239).

1.2 Research into language learning strategies

Early learning strategy research was mostly about listing and classifying language learners' strategy use, especially strategies used by good language learners (Robin, 1975; Stern, 1975). Later on, researchers attempted to investigate the relationship between language learning strategies and success in language development, strategy use and language proficiency. Green and Oxford (1995) found that language learning strategies of all kinds were used more frequently by higher level students. Griffiths (2003) also discovered a positive correlation between course level and reports frequency of language learning strategy use. Park (1997) revealed a positive linear relationship between strategy use and language proficiency.

Many studies have also done to investigate the factors affecting strategy choice or strategy use. A great deal of evidence has been found on the gender differences in the use of language learning strategies. Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Oxford and Nyikos (1989) and Green and Oxford (1995) discovered distinct gender differences in strategy use. The results showed that females were more frequent users of strategies. But in Ehrman and Oxford's another study done in 1990, they failed to discover any evidence of differing language learning strategy use between the sexes. The result of the study done by Li (2002) also showed that there was no significant difference between the employment of learning strategies and the students' gender in foreign language learning.

Another branch of studies done in the language learning strategy field is about the effects if strategy training. Many researchers have worked to apply the findings from previous studies into the pedagogical practice and come to the conclusions that language learning strategies are teachable and that learners can benefit from training in learning strategies (Cook, 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Oxford, 1990).

From the above literature review, we can see researchers differ in defining and classifying language learning strategies and that many studies have been done on language learning strategies. Although the results are different and controversial, the hypothesis that good language learners' success may be due to the use of more effective language learning strategies and the assumption that language learning strategies may be taught and trained to improve the learners' learning are appealing and worth being studied further.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

A sample of 896 respondents participated in this study but one student did not complete the questionnaire, comprised of 482 females (53.8%) and 414 males (46.2%) between the grades of 6 to 12 and randomly selected from five public high school in urban and rural of Mongolia. Permission to participating in the study was obtained from their teachers and participants were told to do the questionnaire carefully and objectively.

2.2 Instruments

In order to collect information on strategy use, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language (SILL, version 7.0) was adapted for the study. The SILL was developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990) as an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language strategies by

students. It appears that SILL is the 'most often used strategy scale around the world', and the only language learning strategy instrument that has been checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). SILL is 'perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies' (Ellis, 1994) and 'has been widely employed by researchers all over the world' (Lim 2002). SILL 'has been employed as a key instrument in numerous studies' (Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006).

The SILL used in the current study consists of 50 items and has been classified into 6 categories: (a) memory strategy items (items 1 to 9), (b) cognitive strategy items (items 10 to 23), (c) compensation strategy items (items 24 to 29), (d) metacognitive strategy items (items 30 to 38), (e) affective strategy items (items 39 to 44), and (f) social strategy items (items 45 to 50). They are assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The number indicates the frequency of strategy use, ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always).

2.3. Procedures and Data Analysis

The questionnaires were given to the participants by their teachers in English classes. The participants were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire and of the fact that there was no right or wrong answer. They were also asked to express their honest options according to their own specific conditions by making the appropriate choice on the right side of each statement. The participants were able to complete the survey in about 20 minutes. Each completed questionnaire was manually examined, and 896 questionnaires were usable and used for statistical analysis but 1 questionnaire was not usable.

The data from the SILL questionnaire sheets were analyzed with SPSS 18.0 to measure the learning strategy use. Descriptive statistics provided the means and standard deviations (SD) to analyze the participants' general pattern of language learning strategy use and the strategies frequently used and less frequently used. Independent sample tests were used to analyze the differences between male and female participants and among the seven grades. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between learning strategy use and gender.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The general pattern of language learning strategy use

In order to assess the general pattern of language learning strategy use, the study calculated the mean and standard deviation of the six SILL categories respectively. As Oxford also divided learning strategies into two main groups: direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective and social strategies), we also calculated the descriptive statistics of the direct and indirect strategy groups. The details of the statistics were presented in Table 1.

Table1. Descriptive Statistics for all learning categories

Categories	Mean	Std. Deviation
Memory	2.96	0.74
Cognitive	3.11	0.76
Compensation	3.06	0.84
Metacognitive	3.42	0.83
Affective	3.12	0.85
Social	3.17	0.89
Direct	3.05	0.69
Indirect	3.26	0.75

In the study, generally speaking, students in secondary and high schools used indirect strategies more than direct strategies. According to Oxford's (1990) division of language learning strategy use (High usage is from 3.5 to 5.0; Medium usage is from 2.5 to 3.4; and Low usage is from 1.0 to 2.4), these participants used learning strategies at a medium level because the mean of the total was medium. The means of each category, which ranged from 2.96 to 3.42, also indicated that these students were medium users of language learning strategies. From Table 1, it could also be seen that, among six categories, secondary and high school students used metacognitive strategies most frequently and memory strategies least frequently. From this study, we can get the general pattern of language learning strategy use by these secondary and high school students in Mongolia, which is metacognitive, social, affective, cognitive, compensation and memory.

3.2 The gender differences in language learning strategy use

As shown in Table 2, the means of six categories ranged from a high one of 3.59 to a low one of 3.06 for females and from a high one of 3.22 to a low one of 2.85 for *males*. For male students, none of the 6 categories was in the high usage group, while for females there was 1 category which belonged to the high usage group. This table also indicated that both males and females used metacognitive strategies most frequently and memory strategies least frequently. According to means of the total, it could be concluded that females used strategies more than males. This result was consistent with the findings of Green & Oxford (1995), in which females used significantly more learning strategies than males.

Table 2. Differences in learning strategy use between males and females

Categories	Male (N=414)		Female (N=482)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Memory	2.85	.79	3.06	.67
Cognitive	2.99	.76	3.22	.74
Compensation	2.91	.82	3.18	.83
Metacognitive	3.22	.83	3.59	.79
Affective	2.96	.89	3.25	.79
Social	3.01	.88	3.30	.88
Total	2.99	.83	3.27	.78

Table 3 below showed the correlation between gender and learning strategy use. Gender was highly correlated with metacognitive, affective, social, compensation, cognitive and memory strategies [Sig. (2-tailed) <0.01].

Table 3. Correlation between gender and language learning strategy use

	Gender
Memory	.143**
Cognitive	.152**
Compensation	.157**
Metacognitive	.224**
Affective	.169**
Social	.162**

**. Correlation is highly significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

3.3 The differences among the students in seven grades

The study revealed that students in all seven grades were medium users of learning strategies, with 6th grade using strategies more (Total M=3.41) and 12th grade students using strategies least (Total N=2.90). Table 4 in this study indicated that generally the means of each category descended as grade went up with exception of metacognitive, cognitive, memory and

compensation strategies that rose slightly among the students in 8th grade. Moreover, in metacognitive strategy use, students in 6th grade had the highest mean while students in 12th grade had the lowest mean.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of learning strategies by 7 grades

	6th grade (N=118)		7th grade (N=77)		8th grade (N=112)		9th grade (N=78)		10th grade (N=179)		11th grade (N=260)		12th grade (N=72)	
Memory	3.25	0.75	2.99	0.84	3.17	0.77	2.86	0.71	2.90	0.71	2.87	0.66	2.76	0.74
Cognitive	3.40	0.80	3.17	0.76	3.30	0.71	3.04	0.80	3.05	0.75	3.03	0.70	2.82	0.77
Compensation	3.20	0.90	3.08	0.90	3.14	0.85	2.98	0.91	3.06	0.84	3.04	0.76	2.79	0.80
Metacognitive	3.75	0.83	3.45	0.85	3.53	0.84	3.37	0.93	3.33	0.77	3.34	0.76	3.24	0.89
Affective	3.39	0.88	3.38	1.02	3.16	0.84	3.07	0.84	3.05	0.79	3.01	0.79	2.91	0.80
Social	3.41	0.92	3.32	0.85	3.27	0.87	3.07	0.89	3.18	0.89	3.07	0.87	2.86	0.90
Total	3.41	0.85	3.23	0.87	3.26	0.81	3.07	0.85	3.09	0.79	3.06	0.76	2.90	0.82

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The overall learning strategy use

The means of six categories are all below 3.5, which indicate that students in secondary and high schools in Mongolia are medium users of language learning strategies. Students prefer using indirect strategies to direct strategies. According to Oxford (1990), good language learners manage their own learning process through metacognitive strategies, control their emotions through affective strategies and collaborate effectively with their peers or teachers by using social strategies. The most frequently used learning strategies are metacognitive strategies (M=3.42), with the particular item "I have clear goals for improving my English skills"," I try to find out how to be a better learner of English" (M=3.60>3.5) at the highest. The result is similar to that of Li (2002). However, one surprising finding of the study was that memory strategies were the least frequently used strategies. The results contradict with that of Li (2002), Oxford (1990) and many other studies conducted in Asia.

4.2 The differences between learning strategy use and gender

This study shows that there is a significant correlation between learning strategy use and gender in secondary and high schools. The significant correlations are found in all six categories [Sig. (2-tailed), 0.05]. We can come to conclusion from this study that females in secondary and high schools use metacognitive strategies more frequently than males, such as managing the learning process and deal with the task, e.g. planning, identifying and selecting resources.

In secondary and high schools in Mongolia, we can find females generally do better in English than males. This phenomenon may be related to the use of English learning strategies because females use more learning strategies related to English learning than males and females are more active in using learning strategies to get effective learning. Another reason may be that females are more stable than males in attitude and learning motivation, because they are more nature in physical and psychological development. Females are willing to work hard and use learning strategies to improve their learning while males are indulgent in playing.

4.3 The relationship between learning strategies use and grades

As for the differences among seven grades, students use learning strategies less frequently as they go into higher grades. This result is somewhat surprising and confusing. In our opinion, as students become more physically and psychologically mature, they should use learning strategies more often. However, it is not the case in this study. The reason for this may be due to the great pressure of university entrance examination that high school students face.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find out the general pattern of language learning strategy use by secondary and high school students and the differences in gender and grades in Mongolian context. It revealed Mongolian secondary and high school students use metacognitive strategies most and memory strategies least. Female students use strategies more than male students. As for the differences in grades, the higher grade the students are in, the less frequently they use learning strategies. As researches and studies in the field of language learning strategies show us, learning strategy use is closely related to the students' academic performance and teachers can assist the language learning process by promoting language learning strategy awareness and use. Therefore, teachers in secondary and high schools should pay special attention to the use of language learning strategies among students and train them to use strategies that are beneficial for them on the basis of the differences in their characters. Only by combining strategy instruction with the teaching content appropriately can teachers achieve satisfactory teaching results.

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