Research on English Learning Strategies Between English Major and Non-English Major Students

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Modern language teaching has gradually moved from traditional approaches to various communicative methodologies. From abroad to China, from 1970s to the present, a number of researchers have made contributions to learning strategies in different aspects: strategies used by good language learners, the relationship between strategies and performance, strategy training, different factors affecting strategies. Both in China and at abroad, the research on the relationship between learning strategies and learning outcomes is being paid the increasing attention to all the time.

Keyword: learning strategy use, English majors, non-English majors

Introduction

With the continuous development of college English curriculum requirements, learning strategy use is regarded as one of the demands of current college English teaching and has attracted more and more attention of scholars in the field of education. However, until now there are few comparative studies on learning strategy use between English majors and non-English majors. In view of the above situations, the present study investigated the differences and similarities of the use of LLS (Language Learning Strategy) between English majors and non-English majors, attempting to provide some useful ideas to facilitate English majors and non-English majors to go ahead together in English teaching and learning.

Language Learning Strategies

The Definition of Language Learning Strategies

In the past decades, the studies about language learning strategies have made rapid progress. There are considerable debates to define language learning strategies in appropriate ways. However, no strong consensus is yet reached. Since a lot of definitions were given from different aspects, a number of key researchers have put forward their own definitions for the term within second language acquisition. In spite of many definitions existing, since the target of the study varies by different researchers, there are some aspects that are not comprehensive or are missing. While Bialystok (1985) mentions that the use of learning strategies is influenced by various kinds of learning tasks and individual learners' preferences, such a descriptive definition of learning strategies appears to be an integrated one. Based on the above definitions and Ellis's suggestion about the

characteristics of learning strategies, here puts forward a definition for the present study.

Language learning strategies may refer to the behaviors and thoughts that learners meta-cognitively, cognitively, affectively, and socially engage in improving their performance in the target language.

The Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Because of the varied definitions of the term learning strategy, there exist different criteria to classify language learning strategies. According to Cohen (2000), “in order to classify language learning strategies different criteria are employed, which contributes the incongruities and mismatches across the existing classifications and other categorizations” (p. 25). Bialystok (1985) claims that learning strategies vary in a number of ways, which reflects the background, the specific subjects, and the different interests of the researchers. The frameworks of classification of learning strategy made by O’Malley offer groundwork for the present study. O’Malley thinks that English learning strategies contain memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Differences of Learning Strategy Use Between Non-English Majors and English Majors

There are significant differences in the use of six categories of strategies between non-English majors and English majors. The specific differences can be summarized as the following:

Firstly, the preferences of learning strategies are different. For non-English majors, the rank order of usage among the six groups of strategy use are Memory strategies (MEM strategies), Compensation strategies (COM strategies), Metacognitive strategies (MET strategies), Cognitive strategies (COG strategies), Affective strategies (AFF strategies), and Social Strategies (SOC strategies). However, for English majors, strategies are adopted in the following rank order: COM strategies, MET strategies, COG strategies, SOC strategies, AFF strategies, and MEM strategies.

Secondly, from the remarks, we can get the same result. Non-English majors in Chinese university are not conscious enough to use learning strategies to assist their English learning. Most non-English major students focus on reading, reciting, and reviewing, which lead to mechanic memory. In fact, attaching importance to mastering the linguistic knowledge is not a mistake and the students must master a great deal of target language vocabulary in order to learn English well. However, it is noticeable that vocabulary knowledge is not equal to all. The language knowledge and the problem of vocabulary learning cannot be solved only by rote memorization. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that English teachers of non-English majors should pay attention to this problem and try to teach their students to apply learning strategies frequently and neatly to daily English learning.

Thirdly, non-English majors use memory strategies the most frequently and social strategies the least frequently, while English majors use compensation strategies the most frequently and memory strategies the least frequently. This is an obvious contrast. From the mean value, we can also infer that non-English majors use memory strategies more frequently than English majors. After comparing the typical remarks respectively from three non-English majors and three English majors, the conditions of memory strategy use are more evident.

Fourthly, English majors use social strategies the least frequently, while non-English majors use the meta-cognitive strategies the least frequently.

Fifthly, this study also shows that in the following two learning strategies English majors and non-English majors differ greatly. The two strategies are meta-cognitive strategies and social strategies. In other words,

English majors use meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than social strategies, while non-English majors use social strategies more frequently than meta-cognitive strategies.

Similarities of Learning Strategy Use Between Non-English Majors and English Majors

There are also a few common features of learning strategy use between English majors and non-English majors.

First of all, both English majors and non-English majors use all the four categories of learning strategies at a medium frequency, neither high nor low. That is to say, as Chinese learners, when learning English, they sometimes use learning strategies, not too often. On the one hand, it may be due to the questionnaires which contain four categories of learning strategies used to investigate the overall use of learning strategies; it is normal that both English majors and non-English majors use the four categories of learning strategies at a moderate frequency level. On the other hand, the subjects are lack of the knowledge of learning strategies contributing to their medium frequency level of the use of learning strategies. They could not fully understand the definition and classification of learning strategies, which leads them to employ each categories of learning strategies at a moderate frequency level.

Secondly, both English majors and non-English majors use affective strategies the most frequently. First, affective strategies are selected by learners to self-regulate attitude and emotional factors have an important influence on the language learning. The majors of all the subjects belong to tourism guide, either Chinese tour guide or English tour guide. Their majors decide that they should always communicate with others and guide for the visitors. Compared with other majors, they are more out-going and can well express and regulate their feelings. They have been conditioned to speaking in front of a great number of visitors, so they are not losing face or offending others. Besides, it may be due to their college English teaching.

Thirdly, English majors and non-English majors use cognitive strategies more frequently. Cognitive strategies are the strategies for the learners to understand and produce new language. As Chinese learners, English is the second language. The most important reason for the learners to learn is to understand the new language, and then continue to produce new language. Moreover, in China, the teaching approaches also contribute to this fact. For example, in the English class, most of the English teachers use traditional teaching approach-grammar translation teaching approach. Under the direction of such teaching approach, the teachers always adopt a single teaching style—that is first to explain the new words and the grammar points, then to translate the whole text into Chinese in order that the students can understand the text better. Thus, under Chinese situation, due to this teaching approach and teaching style, the Chinese learners both English majors and non-English majors use cognitive strategies more frequently.

Fourthly, the use of meta-cognitive strategies by English majors and non-English majors is the least frequency one. The reason of this phenomenon is worthy of studying. First of all, the definition of meta-cognitive strategies will be introduced here. According to Oxford's (1989) classification, meta-cognitive strategies belong to indirect strategies, and they are the strategies that are used to help the learners to manipulate their learning. Secondly, although, college students are all grow-ups, they are not good at organizing their own learning tasks no matter what majors they are. They are accustomed to waiting the teachers or parents to arrange their learning agenda, instead of trying to plan, monitor, summarize, and check their learning by themselves. They do not have enough

ability to access their own learning performances and learning achievements. What is more, because the learners lack the strength of autonomous learning in China, they cannot monitor their own learning process and evaluate their learning achievement by themselves. In the learning process, they are not aware of what they should do and how to do. Besides, while learning, they cannot find out their own disadvantages and change them. Therefore, as college students, once without the teachers' and parents' guiding, they can not well manipulate their own learning. Just for these reasons, both English majors and non-English majors use meta-cognitive strategies less frequently.

The last but not the least, English majors and non-English majors are not skilled in social strategies. One interpretation for this phenomenon is due to Chinese teaching and learning environment. In China, the English classroom is much like a teacher-centered class. In such a kind of classroom, teachers have been considered as the guiders, the authority, and error changers, while what the students should do is to listen to what the teachers say and do as the teachers arrange. Therefore, there is little room for the students to have independent thought and interact with other students. Another reason is that most Chinese students are quiet and shy in the English class. There are few volunteers, few questions, and rare communications among students. Even if they come across some difficult points, they do not ask the teacher for help. They want to preserve their own face and other students' faces. So they get used to being quiet in the class, especially in English class. All these reasons make English majors and non-English majors use social strategies less frequently.

Conclusion

In this study, it is obvious that there are some significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between English majors and non-English majors, but there are also some similarities. The research results have provided answers for the research questions and also give some implications for language teaching and learning. Therefore, in the process of second language teaching and learning, it is necessary to facilitate English learners use language learning strategies more frequently and more effectively, due to different majors, different personalities, different teaching objectives, and different learning environment. It is hoped that both English majors and non-English majors can improve their comprehensive abilities including listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities in English learning through using all categories of language learning strategies, and can go ahead together.

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