

Language learning strategies of Macao nursing students: An embedded mixed methods design

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Abstract

In this study, an embedded mixed methods was used to find out the Language Learning Strategies (LLS) of 208 undergraduate nursing students for the four main English skills and cultural sensitivity issue of SILL was analyzed as these have been areas of the least focused. Significant differences were found among students' background, their LLS use and gender. With better understanding of students' LLS use, contribution to the EFL teaching and curriculum development was discussed.

Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLS) have received much attention in the past few decades. They are 'goal-oriented actions or steps (e.g. plan, evaluate, analyse) that learners take, with some degree of consciousness, to enhance their L2 learning' (Oxford, 2008, p. 41) and they can affect students' learning of a second or foreign language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 2011; Cohen, 1998, 2011). LLS can stimulate students to learn English successfully and efficiently, as well as allowing them to develop their own ways of learning English. So, students can become more confident and autonomous in learning English.

Further, LLS are important in foreign language learning and teaching because by studying students' use of strategies during their learning processes, teachers can better understand the different ways involved in their language learning. As Ely and Pease-Alvarez (1996) had indicated, the goal in looking at language learning strategies was to 'discover how to help individuals realize their full language learning potential' (p. 5).

This study was conducted in Macao, a special administrative region of China. In 1999, Macao was returned back to China. The two official languages in Macao are Cantonese and Portuguese, while English is learned as a foreign language but is also used for communication, especially for non-native Cantonese speakers. Although English is not an official language, students need to learn it from kindergarten to high school, for a total of 15 years. Even though it is one of the major subjects in schools, besides Chinese and Mathematics, students usually do not master it very well (Chan, 2007; Churchill, 2011).

With my personal experiences, even when they enter higher education, their English is still inadequate. Thus, it is necessary to understand why and how their levels of English vary in these English learners so that teachers can provide suitable help to students, for example, by understanding their LLS.

Method

In this study, an embedded mixed methods was used to find out the language learning strategies of 208 undergraduate nursing students at a small higher education institute in Macao. Qualitative data were collected with group interviews and observations, and quantitative data of using student background questionnaires and adapted SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning with three qualitative questions added for analyzing the cultural sensitivity issue of SILL) (Oxford, 1989) were embedded and collected at the same time in one semester.

SILL is an inventory using a 5-point Likert scale for understanding the frequencies of students' LLS use. Scores of 3.5 to 5 are considered as high LLS use; 2.5 to 3.4 as medium and 1.0 to 2.4 are considered as low LLS use. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the adapted SILL and the student background questionnaire with the total sample of 208 students. They were 0.938 and 0.984 respectively and both indicated 'good' reliability (Morgan, Leech, Gloechner & Barrett, 2013).

Interviews were conducted with six groups (two groups of four students each in high, medium and low English proficiency Year 2 students in terms of their scores from the first year English). LLS use in Year 2 English classes were observed using checklists from the six groups LLS classification of Oxford (1990, 2001) (including memory-related, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective and social strategies) throughout the semester. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 20) while qualitative data by content analysis. By using abductive reasoning of pragmatic approach in mixed methods research, three qualitative case studies of high, medium and low proficiency group were discussed and the cultural sensitivity issue of SILL was analyzed.

Results and discussion

What are the language learning strategies of EFL students in higher education? From student background questionnaires, it was revealed that the two cognitive strategies of using dictionaries (44.3% of students responding 'quite a lot' and 'a great deal') and surfing the Internet (42.9%) were their favorite for reading, writing and speaking. Besides, they enjoyed watching English movies (47.1%) (cognitive strategy) to improve their English, especially in speaking and listening. Singing or listening to songs/music (67.8%) (cognitive strategy) was also one of their favorites in improving English listening and reading. They also recited more vocabulary (43%) (memory-related strategy) to improve their speaking, writing and reading. Other strategies that they would use often included two memory-related strategies of remembering pronunciation (43.6%) and listening to keywords (48.4%), two compensatory strategies of getting help from others (31.6%) and guessing intelligently (36.2%), metacognitive strategy of listening to teachers carefully (48%), and cognitive strategy of remembering/using grammatical rules (36.9%).

Comparing the different years, Table 1 showed the statistically significant results from Kruskal Wallis and cross tabulations summarized into the four English skills and strategies. Year 4 used most of the strategies in all four English skills, except one cognitive strategy of *summarizing (Year 3 used the most) and one compensatory strategy of **asking for help out of class (Year 2 used the most).

English skills	Strategies used
Listening	Keywords (cognitive)
	Association (memory-related)
	Take notes (cognitive)
	Learn more vocabulary (memory-related)
	Pay attention to teachers (metacognitive)
Writing	Learn from in-class work (cognitive)

Reading	Brainstorming (cognitive)
	Remember grammatical rules (memory-related)
	Learn from others (metacognitive)
	Association (memory-related)
Speaking	Analyzing/reasoning (cognitive)
	*Summarizing (cognitive)
Others (out of class)	Ask for help (compensatory)
	Seek practice opportunities (travelling) (metacognitive)
	Use dictionary (cognitive)
	**Ask for help (compensatory)

Table 1: Statistically significant strategies used in various English skills (summarized after Kruskal Wallis test and cross tabulations)

For gender differences, Mann-Whitney U test showed that statistically significantly more females (39.9% of students answering ‘quite a lot’ and ‘a great deal’) than males (22.6%) remembered pronunciation to improve in class speaking. Similarly, more females (28.8%) than males (22.6%) improved their writing from in-class work. Further, more females (38.1%) reported using grammatical rules and took more notes (29.6%) in improving their writing in class than males (32.3% and 16.2% respectively). On the other hand, more males (32.3%) enjoyed playing games to improve their English than females (13.5%).

Students who graduated from English medium secondary schools would use statistically significantly more strategies in all English skills than those from the Chinese medium secondary schools, except compensatory strategy of ***asking for help in reading (where those from the Chinese medium secondary schools students used more) as Table 2 revealed.

English skills	Strategies used
Speaking	Practice (cognitive)
	Remember pronunciation (memory-related)
Writing	Practice (cognitive)
Listening	Practice (cognitive)
	Guess intelligently (compensatory)
Reading	Summarizing (cognitive)
	Analyzing/reasoning (cognitive)
	Association (memory-related)
	***Ask for help (compensatory)
Others (out of classes)	Find resources (from English websites) (cognitive)
	Practice (watching English films) (cognitive)
	Seek practice opportunities (join exchange programmes) (metacognitive)
	Seek practice opportunities (travelling) (metacognitive)
	Practice (singing songs) (cognitive)

Table 2: Statistically significant strategies used in various English skills by students from English medium secondary schools or ***Chinese medium secondary schools (summarized after Mann-Whitney U test and cross tabulations)

From adapted SILL, compensatory strategies of guessing and using synonyms were reported in high use (mean scores of greater than 3.5). The other two high use strategies included paying attention when others were talking in English (metacognitive strategy) and asking others to slow down if they did not understand (social strategy). On the other hand, the least four reported strategies (mean scores of below 2) were two affective strategies in which students seldom wrote down their feelings

in diary nor discussed their feelings about learning English, and two memory-related strategies of not using flashcards to remember new English words and physically acting out new English words. Also, from the adapted SILL, Year 1 used statistically significantly more cognitive and compensatory strategies than Year 3, while Years 2 and 4 did not show any significant results.

In class observations, different clusters of strategies for various tasks were observed. The least group of strategy being used was affective strategies. No other new strategies were observed.

In comparing the high, medium and low proficiency groups, the high proficiency group used all six groups of strategies the most (ranging from 2.5 to 3.4), with the medium and low proficiency groups similar in their SILL scores (2.4 to 3.1 for the medium group and 2.2 to 3.1 for the low proficiency group). More specifically, high proficiency group reported using affective strategies the least because they did not feel much pressure from learning English. Medium proficiency group students reported having fewer chances to practice English, so their cognitive strategies were relatively lower than the high proficiency group. The low proficiency group reflected the least chance of practicing together with the least goal-setting and self-evaluation related to learning English. Thus, this group had the least reported cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Finally, how well did SILL address the cultural sensitivity issue for the Chinese students here in Macao? Since SILL was constructed in 1989, it might be necessary to address some of the 'modern' ways to learn English. For instance, it may be necessary to add or modify some of the items with more technologically advanced devices. About 80% of students thought that the strategies listed in SILL were suitable to be used and that they had been using in Macao. Therefore, it was concluded that SILL was quite sensitive for these Chinese nursing students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, all nursing students use a medium level of LLS in cognitive, metacognitive, compensatory and social strategies, and a low level in affective and memory-related strategies (with mean scores ranging from 2.33-3.07). They liked to get help from others, listen to keywords, guess intelligently, use dictionaries, watch English movies, listen to songs and surf the Internet to learn English. They also liked to listen to teachers carefully, remember/use grammatical rules, recite or remember vocabulary and pronunciation which are very typical for Chinese as they start to learn grammar and recite lists of vocabulary words starting in primary schools (Ho, 2004). Respecting teachers and paying attention in classes are also the virtue of learning for the Chinese. With the advance in technology, students prefer to use gargets for learning.

Because of their low to medium use of LLS, there is a need for students to learn more strategies, to have a continuously suitable environment and motivation to stimulate their English learning. Thus, providing strategy instruction will be the next step to provide all these elements and nourishment to improve students' repertoire of LLS.

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