LEARNER STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATIVE ACQUISITION: LEARNER'S AUTONOMY FROM THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the conscious strategies learners use in acquiring language skills, though the main focus of the investigation has been on communicative strategies used in the SLA environment coping with communication difficulties in the target language situation.

Methodology: A survey has been conducted of 100 BBA students (to understand the strategies adopted by them) with the help of questionnaires and follow up interviews which are used for observations in this study.

Main findings: Learners do indulge different kinds of learning strategies and the choice of these strategies depends on the aim, objective and situation. Also, this selection/choice vary from learner to learner.

Applications: This study will be useful for the teachers and students of ELT, EFL, and SLA to understand how learning strategies affect learning.

Novelty: The goal of this study is to monitor learner strategies and to develop the learners' motivational or affective level, or methods of selecting, organizing, acquiring and integrating new knowledge of the students. (Chamot and O'Malley, 1990), then by providing them with the tools to self-regulate their learning autonomy will be functional.

Keywords: SLA, Communicative Acquisition, Learning Strategies, Learners' Autonomy, Cognitive and Meta Cognitive, Communicative Competence.

INTRODUCTION

Learner strategy researches have a belief system that explicit and implicit knowledge is necessary for the learning process and both the knowledge play a significant role in making a learner successful. A significant amount of these researches emphasize the model of learning which involves more on unconsciously collected information (Bialystok, 1978; Smith, 1981; Cohen, 1981 and McLaughlin, 1978).

It is assumed that taking learning decisions consciously can enhance the learning process of both poor and good learners, that is, it can lead them to learn better. Smith (1981) affirms that 'consciousness rising is not a time-wasting procedure.' Further, students of learner strategies conscious may enable learners to use their strategies more effectively and efficiently. It has been reported in the Rubin-Henze (1981) study by Henze that if a learner is conscious enough about learning strategies it consequently results in focused learning and how she evaluated her own strategies and modified it as per her own requirements. She chose to write a diary for this controlled experiment.

Only a few learners willingly participate in the learning tasks through an inherent, subliminal natural approach. However, cognates are purposefully used in language books, but quite often these cognates are not described to students in the SLA environment, hence they fail to comprehend the relationship of these cognates in their L1. If a student's interest is directed to realize the relationship, he may acquire a good quantity of words in a quick time. It is conceived that once the range of possible learner strategies is identified, one important role of the teacher would be to provide to students a setting that helps in the detection of strategies that substantiates their learning abilities. The additional role of the teacher would be to suggest alternative strategies for organizing and storing information. This task should be an important part of the teacher's role.

Once students develop an ability to evaluate their own learning process, there are greater chances that they will be able to best judge for deciding the various learning tasks and activities. The fact is that teachers cannot monitor individual learning strategies in large classrooms. Therefore, students should be trained to help and identify techniques of engagement for them. Researchers of learner strategies feel it is essential for language students to begin to take control of their learning. Learners with effective strategies are independent to work outside the classroom and capable of working without teachers' input and direction.

Learning theories suggest that it is best to build on what the student knows or better still, to help students build on what they know. Knowledge varies from learner to learner; this makes it necessary for them to determine their personal knowledge. This knowledge comprises awareness of learners about the process of their own learning knowledge of the language (their

own and any second or foreign language), understanding of the communication process. Second or foreign language learners do not come to the learning process as tabula rasa rather they come to the situation, as speaking human beings who know a great deal about language and communication. It is essential to start by making this knowledge explicit and building on it.

Understanding the set of tasks, measures, programs, the procedure by the learner to ease of storing; recovery and use of knowledge acquired are included in learner strategies. (Brown et al., 1982, O'Malley et al., 1990).

This paper investigates the learners' strategies and how these strategies can be used for better learning and recommends the incorporation of learner strategy training in students' curriculum to help them in language learning/ acquiring especially in Indian rural background learners context who do not get a wide exposure to the second language and feel inhibited due to this lack of good communication skills in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner strategies can be both natural and adopted. These strategies vary from learner to learner from a social and economic point of view. Apart from the background of a learner the propensity to draw inferences may also vary (Carton,1966). For a learner of second language learning, it is suggested to use inference as a learning strategy (Carton, 1966). Second language learning could be a time taking process. Learners having difficulties in language learning can find it uninteresting finding themselves failing in accomplishing their aim; To solve problems of such learners the successful learners can be asked for their learning strategies, which can be provided to the former (unsuccessful learners) to excel in their target language (Rubin, 1975).

For learning and acquiring a language, a learner needs to understand the basic units of a language such as words and phrases. This involves a better vocabulary. For improving vocabulary the learners (usually) opt for memorizing the words (Cohen, 1981). But the application of this vocabulary can be a tough task. For which the learners must know how to use the other important learning strategies – social (communicative) strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies; as these classify him/her under the good category of learners (Rubin, 1975; Agrawal, 2012). Cognition is known as the knowledge that one perceives and metacognition as knowledge about cognition. Therefore metacognitive learner strategies are necessary as they are used by learners to track & understand their own learning and the strategies that they use(Chamot and O'Molly, 1987). Observing various learners it is found that the social and cultural aspects do affect the learning process and selection of learning strategies (Hadzibeganovic and Cannas, 2009).

There are three basic principles of pedagogy which can govern development of autonomy in language learning: learner involvement (arousing responsibility in learners), learner reflection (critical thinking and evaluation of learning), and appropriate target language use (target language should be the main way of language learning, that means it should be the principal medium of learning); working according to these principles (can be specifically addressed as focused on cognition and metacognition) can help the teachers to overcome the challenges in autonomous language learning classroom (Little, 2007). Teachers should be prepared for such classrooms in advance. The latest teaching techniques and better approach combined in the form of lesson plans help learners to be autonomous (Yagcioglu, 2015). Learner autonomy has been a major focus in ELT or SLA classrooms. It is necessary for teachers' success to understand and pay attention to learner's autonomy (Yang, 1998). Collaborative learner autonomy is another aspect that helps learners to develop autonomy that makes their learning socio-culturally strong (Blidi, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach with the survey as its major technique – questionnaires and interviews are used as instruments to evaluate the abilities of students, understand their choice of learning strategies for proper reasons. A survey of 100 students of BBA students who had Communication Skills as the compulsory paper was done. In this project, a questionnaire related to all the language skills, i.e., listening, reading, speaking and writing were prepared and distributed. In this study quantitative methodology was used.

Although many variables can contribute to the success of learners, our focus here is on the behavior and thought process that learners use in the process of learning, not those variables which may provide a background to learning success, usually called filter by some researchers. It is a proven fact that adult learners focused on their task and address language learning with certain presumptions and opinions which affect how they handle a new language. Information about them also has been collected by observing language learners or by asking them to describe what they do while performing learning or communication task e.g. while reading, writing, speaking and listening. There are several classification strategies, but in the survey, no specific adherence to such classification was done strictly but has adopted an integrated approach to providing wider options to the learners. Rubin's (1987) classification, Tarone (1977) and Oxford's (1990) classification of SILL have proved helpful in compilation of this inventory of language learning strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected through the questionnaire, interviews, and observation demonstrates. The observations from questionnaires & intervenes provide data which explains that learner use learning strategies in acquisition/ learning a second language, and these learning strategies in different categories. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. In part, I general questions about their language learning skills i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking was asked. The investigation shows that 87 percent of learners read newspapers for their second language acquisition, while 7 percent can't read various magazines and 6 percent read fiction and 4 percent of learners read anything, they can get for their reading skills.

For, reading comprehension 30 percent learners used inferencing as their strategy to understand the text, while 40 percent learners preferred to look up the word in a dictionary and 20 percent tried to form a general meaning from the text and 3 percent learners did not make any effort to comprehend the full meaning but left it for a later time.

For, vocabulary enhancing, 32 percent learners tried to remember new words by using them often and 20 percent learners learned them by heart while 20 percent used cognate, a linguistic strategy to remember the new word and 3 percent learners were not sure about the strategy they used to improve their vocabulary.

In response to the question about their listening comprehension, 70 percent of students listened to the radio, T.V., records, movies, and tapes to train themselves in listening.

To acquire good writing skills 51percent of learners used practice strategy by writing a paragraph daily on some topic, 18 percent of learners had pen pals or used emails and blog writing to enhance the skill while 29 percent read the related material about the topic on which he was supposed to write.

In response to the question regarding the difficulties in communication and strategy to overcome them, 23 percent learners had difficulty with the pronunciation, 20 percent learners' lack of knowledge of vocabulary created hindrance in their communication while 19 percent learners have structural problems and 18 percent learners had other difficulties in communicating the second language. To overcome these difficulties almost 5o percent of learners asked the speaker for the repetition of the explanation of the message while 5 percent tried to conjecture about the message and 20 percent tried to check their understanding in one way or another.

In the second part of the questionnaire, a list of communication strategies was provided to the learners to find about the frequently used strategies as well as the ones which were not often used by them. The result of this investigation showed that 70 percent learners use repetition as a strategy in their communication skills, while 15 percent learners used alternative words when they faced a problem in communicating their message, 7 percent learners took help of examples to put their point of view and 7 percent students were not aware of any such strategy so they decided according to the situation.

In the second question again a list of conversational strategies was provided to find out which among them were used frequently by learners to remain in the conversation with someone taking in English or a native speaker of English. 70 percent of learners used cognitive strategies to remain in the conversation. They asked for repetition or clarification to comprehend the message. Sometimes they took the help of compensation strategy by using fillers and hesitation devices. In addition to this 25 percent, learners used paraphrasing and approximation to stay in the conversation and thus increased chance for practice. The respondents acknowledged issues distinct areas of speaking like; formation of communicative sentences, pronunciation, expressing creatively through idioms and phrases. Further, they expressed their limited competence in expressing through colloquial and slang expressions for oral communication.

Thus, the result of this survey shows that learners select and decide different types of strategies according to their needs, aim, and objective of learning a second/foreign language as well as according to the requirement of the task and linguistic activity. For example, in a language classroom if the objective of the student is to develop interactive communication skills to interact with speakers of L1, then communication, social and compensatory strategies would be helpful.

For vocabulary enhancement, they use memory strategies and if they want to improve their writing skills, they use cognitive as well as metacognitive strategies such as planning, practicing and so on.

From the data collected through the survey and personal interviews, newly identified attributes as challenges were respondents agreed that it is better to write down the important points during a conversation. Communicating with young children is a creative activity as it gives young learners less anxiety. Books that are designed for young learners are a direct source of acquiring the target language vocabulary. Anxiety, hesitation, and inhibition are obstacles in attaining fluency. Respondents found that for effective utterances of sentences one needs to be careful in 'selection' and 'production' of sentences.

CONCLUSION

Some clear implications for teaching can be drawn from this study. Self-motivated students of EFL with conscious learning efforts focus not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom. It reveals that a second language acquisition environment can be created outside the classrooms and activity can also be planned accordingly. Teacher's involvement could help both weak and strong learners; the latter can refine their concepts and learning strategies while the former can be supported in difficulties. Once the teacher is aware of the orientation of methods used by students for autonomous learning, they can frame a supportive framework for L1 strategies. The study reveals that instructions can be framed in; visually, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile types of instructions. The study supports that instruction for target language must be multi-dimensional and this can be achieved only once a learner is aware of its autonomous universe.

As a first step, teachers could attempt to discover these strategies their students are already using by asking them to keep a record of LLS in their diaries, by conducting interviews, by making them think aloud while performing particular task or activity or by sharing their planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies in his classroom teaching and thus providing guidance to the poor learners. A framework enriched with instructional methodologies is controlled by a learner's style and strategies which is shaped by a learner's personal ability and willingness to acquire. Learners have their specific choices of strategic and stylistic preferences therefore it will be an instructional failure if an instructor believes that a single method for L2 acquisition is enough. The study has found that the communicative approach should incorporate a specific instructional design that has a focus on fluency and form both. Such frameworks will enhance student enhancement for L2 acquisition.

Two major benefits could be expected from such a teacher-generated activity: students are likely to become more meta-linguistically sophisticated as they practice retrospective analysis of themselves as language learners, and the teacher would become sensitized to the learner's perspective and to the various factors, both in and outside the classroom which affect the learning process. The goal of learner strategies is to develop the learners' motivational or affective level, or methods of selecting, organizing, acquiring and integrating new knowledge of the students. (Chamot and O'Malley, 1990), then by providing them with the tools to self-regulate their learning autonomy will be functional. Once students have control over their learning methods, they shall be able to control their production which will develop their learning capacities.

Development or training for the strategy is understood as teaching, especially focusing on why, when, and how to indulge language use and learning strategies which consequently will enhance the quality of students. (Cohen,1981; Ellis & Sinclair,1989). Research in learner training has demonstrated some effective models of learner training (Palinscar and Brown, 1984). There is ample evidence in brown and palinscar's work which suggests a good quality of training structure can be identified by both exercise to use a correct strategy for task instructions which signify the importance of activities, instruction which are supervisory and controlling. The focus of such research, whether on cognitive or metacognitive or any other type of strategy, should be decided based on the learning preferences and objectives of a student.

LLS training will equip the learners with tools that they can make use of at the time of difficulty with their choice. Because of the limited scope and the small number of subjects of the project the results might have certain discrepancies, but this will initiate further research in this area on larger subjects to draw significant results and recommendations.

This study is limited to the geographical area of Jaipur. Also, the results are confined to BBA students. But it can be used by both learners and teachers of ESL, EFL and it can benefit SLA classrooms.

In conclusion, what this study has perhaps shown most clearly, is that the learners of the second language are not just learners absorbing the information that the teachers provide. They understand and perceive things and then apply strategies to all circumstantial learning situations whether it is in or outside of the classroom.

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