On the Relationship Between Learners’ Needs and Their Use of Language Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between learners’ two major needs (preferred language skill and preferred language learning material) and their patterns of strategy use. The data for the study were collected in two phases with two self-reported questionnaires. First, a needs analysis survey form designed by Nunan and Burton (1985) was administered to 150 students. Based on the results of this questionnaire 120 students were selected and divided into four groups. Then Oxford’s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners, 50 items) was administered. The results of study showed students preferring different language skills used language-learning strategies in different ways. Results also indicated students learning language through different materials, employed different types of learning strategies.

Keywords: Learners’ need, Learning strategies, Language skills, Language learning;

1. Introduction

Language learning approaches have their roots in related disciplines of psychology, linguistics and sociology. In approaches which have their roots in behavioural paradigm, language learners take passive and reproductive roles. They become active by responding to certain stimuli in language learning environments. Therefore, the teacher’s role is to create an environment, which stimulates the desired responses and reinforces or discourages those that are supposed to be incorrect or undesirable [1]. The instruction processes are controlled and managed by language

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teachers and they based on their own priorities take the primary decisions. This active role places the teacher in the centre of instruction.

Because of the emergence of new theories such as Chomsky’s Universal-Grammar theory along with dissatisfaction with results gained by traditional methods in 1960s, new approaches to language teaching were introduced. In these alternative approaches, the learners rather than teachers were in the centre of foreign language instruction. Learners are assumed to have active and creative roles in language instruction. Key decisions concerning all aspects of language teaching are made with reference to the learners’ different variables [2]. Teachers are no longer “the director of a stage play”, but they are facilitators, counsellors and needs analysts [3]. They must analyse learners’ changing needs and organize language courses in such a way that meets the language learners’ needs.

Autonomous language learning is another characteristic of learner-centered programs. In this perspective, learners are viewed to be responsible for their own learning and must develop independence, autonomy, and responsibility. So, they must be trained to identify their own learning strategies and try new strategies to improve their own learning without depending on their own teachers.

1.1. Learners’ needs

Learners’ needs are an umbrella term, which refers to a wide variety of information about the learner, the teacher, the language being learned, or the context of language learning. Brown [3] pointed to four types of needs identified by Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff and Nelson [4]. He also supplies language-related definitions for these needs:
1. Needs are any differences between future desired students’ language performances and what they can currently do.
2. Needs are any learning goals that are preferred by a majority of the stakeholders involved?
3. Needs are whatever the students would naturally learn next based on what is known about them and the learning processes involved.
4. Needs are any language elements or skills that would be harmful if missing. [5]

According to Brindley [6], there are even more types of needs including demands, wants, desires, expectations motivations, constraints, lacks, and requirements. Richards [7] argues learner needs are frequently described in terms of linguistic deficiency; in other words, the difference between a student’s present ability in using target language and what she or he should be able to do.

1.2. Language learning strategies

From the birth of language learning strategy research in 1975, definition and terminology has been major issues in language learning strategy field [8]. Although there are many different definitions and terminologies for language learning strategy in the second language education literature, there is no agreed-upon definition for them. Among different definitions, Oxford [9] has developed the most comprehensive definition for language learning strategies to date. According to Oxford, learning strategies are “specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing skills of the new language. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or the use of new language”. In this definition, Oxford broadened her definition to include all four skills of language within the domain of language learning strategies.

1.3. Language learning strategy classification

Many prominent figures in the field of language learning strategies have developed classifications for Language Learning Strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1996; Rubin, 1997; Oxford, 1990 to cite a few). What differentiate their classifications are the criteria they have applied or the number of strategies they have recognized. As noted by Cohen [9], strategies can be categorized based on their goals, functions or language skills they contribute. The most comprehensive classification has been proposed by Oxford [10].

1.4. Oxford’s (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies

Oxford divided language-learning strategies into two broad classes, direct strategies that directly involve the target language and indirect strategies that do not directly involve learning subject matter but support and manage second language learning. In Oxford’s (1990) framework of strategies these two classes are also subdivided into six groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. These six strategy groups are further divided into 19 sub-groups and 62 subsets.
1.5. Factors influencing language learning strategy use


Teachers might use the results of these studies in their strategy training courses. Teachers can take advantage of variables that they can control (e.g., language task at hand), and be aware of facilitative or debilitative nature of other factors that they have no control (e.g., sex, age, nationality).

1.6. Research questions

1.6.1. Does students’ personal preference for particular language skills influence their strategy use?

1.6.2. Do learners learning English through different materials use different language learning strategies?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total number of 150 language learners at intermediate and upper intermediate level of language proficiency in Pardis and Sadr Language Institutes in Zanjan Province, Iran, were selected to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from 17 to 35 with the mean age of 25. Out of these participants, 57 were female (38%) and 93 were male (62%). They had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least seven years in their formal education. The participants had received no instruction in the use of language learning strategies.

2.2. Instrumentation

Two research instruments were employed for data collection in current study. The first one, used for identifying the needs of participants, was a needs analysis survey form designed by Nunan and Burton (1985, cited in Nunan, 1998, pp. 14-6) and the second one was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners, 50 items), taken from Oxford (1990, pp. 293-300). The version 0.7 of SILL consists of fifty short statements, each representing the use of one strategy.

The SILL internal consistency reliability using Cronbach’s Alpha is .96 and its content validity is .95 according to Oxford and Nyikos’s 1200 university sample. In another study, Cronbach Alpha has been .96 using a 483-person Defence Language Institute field sample list [12].

In order to identify the students’ needs, the researcher administered the needs analysis questionnaire to 200 students. Afterwards, based on the results of needs analysis questionnaire, 120 students with different needs were assigned in the following four groups to participate in the rest of the study.

Group A: Members of this group preferred to learn speaking skill of language.

Group B: Members of this group preferred to learn reading skill of language.

Group C: Members of this group wished to learn English through studying grammar and vocabulary books.

Group D: Members of this group wished to learn English through watching films and listening to audio files.

Although the needs questionnaire identified a couple of subjective and objective needs, this study confined itself to two above-mentioned learners’ needs: language skills preferred by the students and materials of learning language. For administering the SILL, the participants were asked to fill in the SILL in about 10 to 15 minutes, as advised by Oxford. The researchers provided any clarification the students needed as they answered the SILL. Having administered the needs questionnaire and SILL, the researcher compared the strategy use between first and second and also third and forth groups.

3. Results

Having gathered necessary data, the researcher used the SPSS version 19 to analyze the gathered data.

Research hypothesis 1: The students’ personal preference of particular language skills does not influence their strategy use.

An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the students who prefer to learn English for speaking skill of language with those who preferred to study reading skill. As displayed in Table 1, the students who preferred to learn English for speaking (M = 169.43) outperformed the students who prefer to learn English for reading (m = 158.43).

Table 1: Summary of descriptive statistics for skills preference
Fig. 1: The mean scores of strategy use for two groups preferring different language skills

Table 2: Summary of the independent t-test skills preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
<td>Std. Error Difference</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.190</td>
<td>6.999</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>11.00000</td>
<td>1.57156</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
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<td>.000</td>
<td>56.726</td>
<td>000</td>
<td>11.00000</td>
<td>1.57156</td>
<td>7.85267</td>
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</table>

The results of the independent t-test indicate significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups (t (58) = 6.99, P = .000 < .05). Based on these results it can be concluded that the null-hypothesis, that the students’ personal preference of particular language skills does not influence their strategy use, is rejected.

Research hypothesis 2: The learners learning English through different materials do not choose different language learning strategies.

An independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the students who preferred to learn English through studying grammar and vocabulary books with those who preferred to learn English through watching films and listening to tapes and CDs. As displayed in Table 3, the students who preferred to learn English through watching films and listening to tapes and CDs (M = 162.66) outperformed the students who preferred to learn English through studying grammar and vocabulary (M = 159.46).

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics for materials preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn through listening to tapes and Watching films</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>162.6667</td>
<td>6.96461</td>
<td>1.27156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn through reading Grammar &amp; Vocabulary books</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>159.4667</td>
<td>5.05646</td>
<td>0.92318</td>
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</table>
Table 4: Summary of independent t-test for materials preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>5.429</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>2.036</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The results of the independent t-test indicate significant differences between the mean scores of the two groups (t(52) = 2.03, P = .047< .05, it represents a weak to moderate effect size). Based on these results it can be concluded that the null-hypothesis, as the students’ personal preference of materials does not influence their strategy use, is rejected. However, the results should be interpreted with caution due to the weak to moderate effect size index.

4. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to examine the influence of learners’ two main needs (skills most needed to students and materials through which students prefer to learn language) on learning strategy use. Analysis of data showed students with different needs used different learning strategies. So based on the findings, it can be concluded that learners’ needs are among factors which influence strategy.

Based on the findings of this study, language teachers are advised to be flexible in strategy instruction. They should not follow the same lesson plan across different classes or different schools for strategy instruction. So they should adapt their lesson plans based on learners’ needs. Language teachers should also know learners’ preferences for particular strategies can be a sign for learners’ specific needs.

References


