



The Impact of Strategies-based Instruction on Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper aims at providing some information concerning the impact of strategies-based instruction on listening comprehension. First the author briefly reviews some literature relating to this issue, and then focuses on a study conducted in English major at Jiangsu University of Science & Technology. This study is set out to examine the contribution that formal strategies-based instruction might offer learners to their improving listening proficiency. 44 senior students in English major, varying in performance in English learning (with the consideration of students' scores in TEM-4), are sampled. The Microsoft Excel is undertaken to analyze sample materials and data. Despite the limitation of the study, the final results indicate that strategies-based instruction plays a positive role in determining students' improvement in listening comprehension. The pedagogical implication of the study is that: if the instructors systematically introduce and reinforce strategies that can help students to improve listening competence and that are specially designed for any given test, their students may well improve the performance on language tasks. The study also seems to endorse the notion of integrating strategy training into the classroom instructional plan and embedding strategies into daily language tasks.

Keywords: Strategies-based instruction (SBI), Language learning strategies (LLS), Strategy inventory for language learning (SILL)

1. Introduction

1.1 History of Language Learning Strategies Research

Language learning strategies (LLS) is a key issue in second and foreign language (L2 / FL) learning and teaching. The learner's expectancy on success and his or her positive values on learning tasks influence, but not guarantee intrinsically motivated deep learning. If the learner values the learning tasks but lacks skills / strategies to complete it, his or her high self-efficacy belief would not lead to competent performance.

Since the early 1970s research in the field of L2 learning and teaching has shifted from the method of teaching to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a L2. Much research (Rubin: 1975, Naiman et al.: 1978, Huang: 1985) has been focused on ascertaining the characteristics of good learners and identifying their learning strategies to benefit underachievers. For the purpose of defining and categorizing LLS, considerable progress has been made in developing definition and taxonomies (Rubin: 1981, O'Malley et al.: 1985a, Oxford: 1990, Cohen: 1998). Many strategies training studies have been conducted, most of which have been proven successful (O'Malley et al.: 1985b, Oxford et al.: 1990, Cohen: 2000). Among various divisions of learning strategies, those by Chamot (1986) and Oxford (1990) are widely accepted, for example, cognitive strategies (strategies involved in analysing, synthesis, and internalising what has been learned, such as note taking, resourcing and elaboration), metacognitive strategies (the techniques in planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning) and affect / social strategies (dealing with the ways learners interact or communicate with other speakers, native or non-native).

With the development of strategy study, Cohen (1998) further distinguishes language learning strategies and language use strategies. While language learning strategies include strategies for identifying the material to be learned, distinguishing it from others, grouping it for easier learning, committing the material to memory etc., the language use strategies include four subsets: retrieval, rehearsal, cover and communication strategies.

Cohen defines learning strategies as "learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner. The element of choice is important here because this is what gives a strategy its special character. These are also moves which the learner is at least partially aware of, even if full attention is not being given to them" (Cohen: 1990, qtd. in Cohen: 2000). Thus, language learning and language use strategies can be defined as those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a L2 / FL, through the

storage, retention, recall, and application of information about the language.

In China, studies on English learning from learners' perspective have been increasing in the recent decade. Focusing on listening comprehension, what comes into our sight included Jiang Zukang (1994)'s "Learning strategies and their relationship to learning achievement in listening comprehension" and Wu Weiyang (2000)'s "Using learning strategies to develop listening comprehension - A case study", etc.

1.2 More Recent Strategies Research --- The Focus of Minnesota's SBI (strategies-based instruction) Experiment

"The field of strategies training has received mixed reactions from professionals in the field, primarily because until recently there were few empirical studies that could be drawn on to demonstrate that, under certain conditions, such training had irrefutable benefits" (Cohen et al.: 1995, qtd. in Cohen: 2000). In response to these criticism, Cohen started an experiment consisting of 55 students enrolled in intermediate - level foreign language classes (of their own choosing - not randomly assigned) at the University of Minnesota, and then a research report came out entitled "The impact of a strategies-based instruction on speaking a foreign language". He defined SBI as "a learner-centred approach to teaching that extends classroom strategy training to indicate both explicit and implicit integration of strategies into the course content" (Weaver & Cohen: 1994, qtd. in Cohen: 2000). SBI has two major components: (1) students are explicitly taught how, when, and why strategies can be used to facilitate language learning and language use tasks, and (2) strategies are integrated into everyday class materials, and may be explicitly or implicitly embedded into the language tasks. "The component that makes it SBI is the added element of explicit (as well as implicit) integration of the training into the very fabric of the instructional program" (Weaver & Cohen: 1994, qtd. in Cohen: 2000). Much similarly to Cohen's SBI experiment but focusing on listening comprehension, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What LLS are used by English major undergraduates (senior students) in Jiangsu University of Science & Technology?

(2) Whether there are gains in listening proficiency over 20 days SBI, and whether the SBI affects students' listening comprehension?

2. Research Design

2.1 Sample

The sample under study consisted of 44 senior students majored in English as subjects at Jiangsu University of Science & Technology. 7 subjects in the sample were self-chosen to participate in a case study as the experimental and comparison group.

2.2 Instrumentation

The study instruments include a pre-test questionnaire, SBI, and a post-test examination consisting of two listening comprehensions abstracted from TOEFL Practice Test A & B.

The pre-test questionnaire contains 2 sections. Section 1 is on background information, which is intended to help researchers better understand the results of the survey in context, including name, class, sex, TEM-4 score, estimate time spent in studying English, self-evaluation in studying English, reasons for studying English, etc. Section 2 is the 50-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Version 7.0 (SILL) (Oxford: 1990), which was translated into Chinese to facilitate students' understanding. The 50-item, each having 5 choices, ranges from "the statement is never or almost never true of me" to "the statement is always or almost always true of me". Based on the SILL put forward by Oxford (1990), these 50 items belong to the following 6 categories: Memory strategies (9 items in Part A), Cognitive strategies (14 items in Part B), Compensation strategies in (6 items in Part C), Metacognitive strategies (9 items in Part D), affective strategies (6 items in Part E), and social strategies (6 items in Part F).

The post-test examination consisted of two listening comprehensions abstracted from TOEFL Practice Test A & B, each containing 50 multiple-choice questions. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is used to evaluate the English proficiency of individuals whose native language is not English. It is composed entirely of multiple-choice questions with four possible answers per question. There are three sections in the test, each measuring a critical skill in the use of English. Listening Comprehension (Section One) contains recorded material that is similar to what you might hear if you were a group of North American students at a college or university. The language includes the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions common to spoken English, as well as the special grammatical construction used in speech. This section tests comprehension of both short and long conversations and talks.

2.3 Data Collection & Analysis Procedure

First, 44 senior students in English major, varying in performance in English learning (with the consideration of students' scores in TEM-4), were sampled by filling out the SILL to identify their learning strategies.

Then, 7 of the sampled students were chosen to participate in a case study, all of which showed great interest. After taking TOEFL Practice Test A in the first week, students received the special-designed 20 days strategies-based

instructional treatment, and in the fifth week using TOEFL Practice Test B tested them as comparison. Both TOEFL Test A and B are taken in Section One only and are considered highly reliable.

Furthermore, students were interviewed by the author of this paper to examine the reactions to the previous strategies-based instruction and the specific strategies employed on the given TOEFL tasks. All the valid sample materials and data were collected and analysed by using Microsoft Excel.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Research Question 1: Frequencies for Strategy Use

The frequencies analysis provided us with the strategies frequently used and less frequently used by all the subjects. Table 1 presents the response frequency for each item in SILL. The average of individual strategy items ranged from a high of 4.02 (item30) to a low of 1.32 (item 6), while the overall mean of this sample was 2.819, indicating that they were medium strategy users in EFL (English as a foreign language) learning. [In examining strategy use on the five-point scale, three types of usage were identified as suggested by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995): high ($\text{mean} \geq 3.5$), medium ($2.5 < \text{mean} < 3.5$), and low ($\text{mean} \leq 2.5$)].

(Insert Table 1 here)

A close examination of the individual strategies (see Table 1) suggests that the most frequently used strategy is Compensation strategy [$M=3.339$] (see Table 2), including: If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing (Item30: $M=4.02$); I read English without looking up every new word in the dictionary (Item28: $M=3.98$); To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses (Item25: $M=3.50$); When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use body movement, or draw pictures (Item26: $M=3.50$), etc. Some researchers also found that learners from Asian backgrounds prefer compensation strategies. Perhaps this is a characteristic of Asian students, trying to make up for their lack of knowledge by other means such as paraphrasing or guessing when learning a foreign language.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Although Memory strategies can be powerful contributors to language learning, in this study they were the least reported. For instance: I use flashcards to remember new English words (Item6: $M=1.32$); I physically act out new English words (Item7: $M=2.00$); I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign (Item9: $M=2.09$); I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them (Item2: $M=2.25$); I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word (Item3: $M=2.30$), etc. This finding was consistent with those in Oxford & Nyikos (1989) and may indicate that beyond elementary levels of language learning, students simply do not use this strategy very much, or that students are not aware of how often they actually do employ Memory strategies (Oxford: 1990).

Other strategies of high frequency involve: I try to learn about the cultures of English speakers (Social: $M=3.89$); I pay attention when someone is speaking English (Metacognitive: $M=3.59$); I try not to translate word-for-word (Cognitive: $M=3.55$), etc.

3.2 Research Question 2: The Effects of SBI on Listening Proficiency

In response to the second research question, regarding the effects of SBI on listening proficiency, the results of the comparison analysis shows that TOEFL Practice Test B of all the 7 students have outperformed their TOEFL Practice Test A, further indicating that the 20 days SBI has a positive effect on students' listening comprehension. (See Table 3 & Figure 1)

(Insert Table 3 & Figure 1 here)

The author of this paper further interviewed these 7 students, finding that their reactions to the previous strategies-based instruction were very well. Student No.5, who got the biggest improvement, said that the SBI benefits a lot, especially some specific strategies employed on the given TOEFL tasks.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Pedagogical Implications

The study was undertaken to determine whether SBI should have a role in affecting students' listening comprehension. It would seem that despite the limitation of the study, the results speak in favour of such a role.

Taking the frequency of students' strategies use in English major at Jiangsu University of Science & Technology, 5 out of the 6 categories of strategies fall into medium frequency with Memory strategies being the only group falling into low frequency of use; The author of this paper sensed the urgent need to promote students' awareness of employing more frequently these strategies during their English study. Preferably, if the instructors systematically introduce and

reinforce strategies that are specially designed for any given test and that can help students to improve their EFL proficiency, their students may well improve the performance on language tasks.

The study also endorses the notion of integrating strategy training into the classroom instructional plan and embedding strategies into daily language tasks unconsciously since strategies use has been frequently documented contributing to the success of L2 / FL learning.

4.2 Limitations of the Study & Suggestions for Further Research

As with all studies of this magnitude, there are various limitations. In the first place, the SBI in this study was conducted for only 20 days. Secondly, with regard to the sample and statistical analysis, and especially those involving in the second research question --- the effects of SBI on listening proficiency, the somewhat limited size in this sample (too small) meant that certain kinds of investigation were impossible. For example, the author of this paper did not analyze the correlation between SBI and gains in listening comprehension test. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a similar but much larger study so as to be able to run analyses of correlation according to the factors such as changes in frequency of use of given strategies, SBI, gains in tasks performance and the proficiency level of the students.

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Table 1. Response Frequency for Each Strategy Item in SILL

No.	Item Description	1 ¹	2	3	4	5	M ²
Part A : Memory Strategies							
1.	I think of connections between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	4.5 ³	6.8	40.9	38.6	9.1	3.41
2.	I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	25.0	36.4	29.5	6.8	2.3	2.25
3.	I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	36.4	27.3	11.4	20.5	4.5	2.30
4.	I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	13.6	27.3	36.4	22.7		2.80
5.	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	22.7	25.0	31.8	13.6	6.8	2.57
6.	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	70.5	27.3	2.3			1.32
7.	I physically act out new English words.	45.5	20.5	22.7	11.4		2.00
8.	I review English lessons often.	4.5	22.7	27.3	43.2	2.3	3.16
9.	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.	40.9	22.7	22.7	13.6		2.09
Part B : Cognitive Strategies							
10.	I say or write new English words several times.	6.8	6.8	34.1	36.4	15.9	3.48
11.	I try to talk like native English speakers.	4.5	22.7	25.0	38.6	9.1	3.25
12.	I practice the sounds of English.	2.3	9.1	34.1	43.2	11.4	3.52
13.	I use the English words I know in different ways.	20.9	32.6	37.2	9.3		2.35
14.	I start conversations in English.	9.3	39.5	32.6	16.3	2.3	2.63
15.	I watch TV shows or movies in English.	2.3	15.9	31.8	45.5	4.5	3.34
16.	I read for pleasure in English.	6.8	25.0	43.2	22.7	2.3	2.89
17.	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	22.7	43.2	29.5	2.3	2.3	2.18
18.	I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly), then go back and read carefully.	22.7	25.0	13.6	29.5	9.1	2.77
19.	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	25.0	15.9	36.4	18.2	4.5	2.61
20.	I try to find patterns in English.	15.9	25.0	27.3	27.3	4.5	2.80
21.	I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	18.2	22.7	29.5	18.2	11.4	2.82
22.	I try not to translate word-for-word.		13.6	31.8	40.9	13.6	3.55
23.	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	29.5	40.9	18.2	11.4		2.11
Part C : Compensation Strategies							
24.	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.		15.9	31.8	38.6	13.6	3.50
25.	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use body movement, or draw pictures.		15.9	31.8	38.6	13.6	3.50
26.	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	25.0	18.2	29.5	25.0	2.3	2.61
27.	I read English without looking up every new word in the dictionary.		6.8	9.1	63.6	20.5	3.98

28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	27.9	23.3	27.9		20.9	2.42
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.		7.0	14.0	48.8	30.2	4.02
Part D : Metacognitive Strategies						
30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	6.8	31.8	50.0	11.4		2.66
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	4.5	15.9	47.7	27.3	4.5	3.11
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	4.5		38.6	45.5	11.4	3.59
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	4.5	6.8	31.8	43.2	13.6	3.55
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	25.6	34.9	25.6	11.6	2.3	2.3
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.	27.3	38.6	25.0	6.8	2.3	2.18
36. I try to read as much as possible in English.	7.0	27.9	41.9	18.6	4.7	2.86
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	18.2	27.3	38.6	11.4	4.5	2.57
38. I think about my progress in learning English.	13.6	18.2	45.5	22.7		2.77
Part E : Affective Strategies						
39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	4.5	13.6	29.5	38.6	13.6	3.43
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes.	11.4	25.0	31.8	27.3	4.5	2.89
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	27.3	15.9	29.5	27.3		2.57
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	25.6	15.9	34.1	22.7		2.56
43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.	43.2	31.8	20.5	2.3	2.3	1.89
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	25.0	36.4	27.3	11.4		2.25
Part F : Social Strategies						
45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	6.8	15.9	20.5	45.5	11.4	3.39
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	22.7	31.8	29.5	9.1	6.8	2.45
47. I practice English with other students.	15.9	34.1	34.1	13.6	2.3	2.52
48. I ask for help from English speakers.	31.8	36.4	22.7	6.8	2.3	2.11
49. I ask questions in English.	11.4	36.4	36.4	13.6	2.3	2.59
50. I try to learn about the cultures of English speakers.		4.5	22.7	52.3	17.6	3.89

Note. ¹ 1 = never or almost never true of me ² 2 = generally not true of me ³ 3 = somewhat true of me ⁴ 4 = generally true of me ⁵ 5 = always or almost always true of me ² Mean ³ Percentages

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the 6 Types of Learning Strategies

Strategy	No.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Compensation	44	2.419	4.023	3.339	0.635
Cognitive	44	2.114	3.545	2.878	0.486
Metacognitive	44	2.182	3.591	2.844	0.678
Social	44	2.114	3.886	2.826	0.496
Affective	44	1.886	3.432	2.597	0.531
Memory	44	1.318	3.409	2.432	0.668

Table 3. Case Study

Case No.	Rank	Before SBI	After SBI	Gains
5	1	54 ¹	34 ¹	20 ²
2	2	20	4	16
6	3	36	20	16
7	3	26	14	12
3	5	22	14	8
1	6	16	10	6
4	7	16	12	4

Note. ¹ Rate of errors

² Percentages

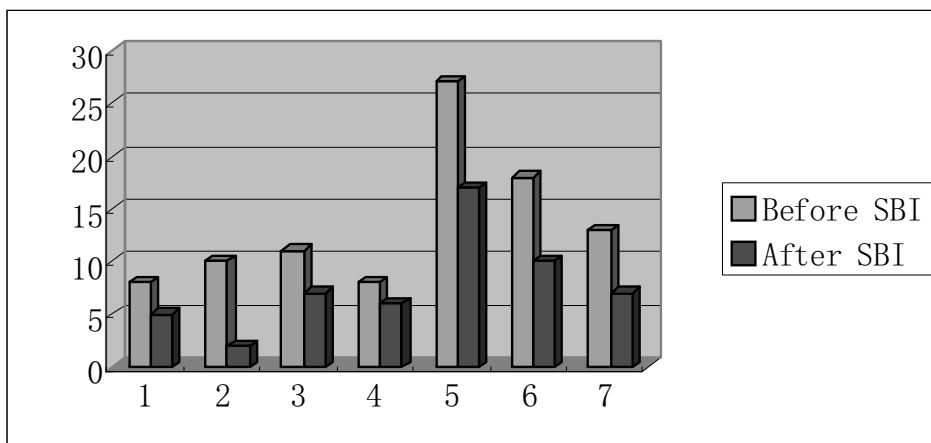


Figure 1. Case Study