

Learning Strategy Training in ELT: A Selective Review of Five Studies

Bu-han Pan

School of Foreign Languages, Huazhong Agricultural University, Wuhan 430070, Hubei, China

Abstract – This paper is a selective review of recent studies on learning strategy training from the perspectives of theoretic significance of strategy training research, applications of strategy training in different language skills, and evaluations of learning strategy training. Pedagogical implications of these studies are discussed collectively, and some areas for future research of the field are suggested at the end of the paper.

Index Terms – Learning strategy, Strategy training, ELT

1. Introduction

As O'Malley and Chamot [1] points out, most researches concerning learning strategy in second language acquisition focus on the "identification, description, and classification of learning strategies". Oxford's [2] comprehensive taxonomy of learning strategies is a good example of study results in these areas. While people gradually become clear about the nature of various learning strategies, other questions like whether learning strategies can be taught, how can they be taught, and whether strategy training are useful arise. Strategies are teachable and should be taught to language learners [2-3], because they are specific and necessary for learners to learn how to learn. Oxford [4] believes that the purpose of strategy training is to help students become more "self-directed, autonomous, and effective" in using learning strategies appropriate to their own learning styles. Many studies have shown some positive effects of strategy instruction, and also indicated the proper way of using it. Strategy training should be explicit and practical, and be integrated into the daily classroom [5].

As a foreign language teacher, realizing the potential application of strategy instruction in English language teaching, I would like to explore more about strategy training and its development. Thus, five recent journal articles are reviewed in this paper, with the hope of demonstrating recent development of learning strategy training from three aspects: (1) recent researches and discussions [6]; (2) applications of strategy training to improve reading, listening and speaking [7-9]; and (3) evaluation of learning strategy training [10]. Five studies in the articles are also presented in the above sequence, and their potential applications in ELT are discussed collectively in the section of pedagogical signification.

2. Current Issues in Learning Strategy Training

Rivera-Mills & Plonsky's [6] article is a comprehensive review of research literature regarding learning strategies and learning strategy instruction. Literature review is conducted in three categories: classification of learning strategies, strategy training, and strategy-related factors.

In types of learning strategies, the author introduces a lot of researchers' classification systems, but still regards Oxford's [2] system as "the most exhaustive hierarchy of learning strategies to date" [6].

In the analysis of strategies training, the author also discusses the relationship between learner autonomy and learning strategies. Since learner autonomy and the use of strategies both aim at improving self-directed learning [11], the question left for teachers is to find a way to promote learner autonomy through the use of learning strategies. Cohen [12] summarizes two functions of strategy training: raising students' awareness of learning strategies and guiding them to use strategies appropriately. As to the effectiveness of strategy training, the author reviews some empirical studies which support for it. For example, Nunan's [13] study discovers higher level of motivation, knowledge of strategies, and perceived usefulness of strategies among trained students.

In the section of strategy-related factors, three factors are particularly important to the study of strategy training: learning styles, motivation, and student and instructor perceptions. Students' learning styles are closely related to their learning strategy use. Styles are considered to be relatively stable within an individual, while strategy type may change owing to language learning experience [14]. Another finding concerning the relationship of the two is that the varying strategies may still remain consistent with learning styles [12]. This means that when teachers develop some strategy training programs, they should take students' different learning styles into account. With regard to motivation factor, one consistent finding in the literature is that students who are more motivated will use more strategies in their study [15-16]. Nunan [13] also makes a bold claim in saying that incorporating strategy training into the curriculum will promote students' motivation. As to different perceptions between student and instructor, the dialogue between the two groups should remain open throughout strategy training. Researchers suggest that instructors should begin the training program by finding out how their students understand the learning process [12][17].

In conclusion, the author suggests some areas for future research. One important area in strategy training, as Gan and colleagues [18] recommend, is the study of the extent to which student beliefs of language learning can be altered. With this approach, Rivera-Mills & Plonsky [6] believe that teachers can direct learners to "more effective and long-lasting learning strategies use".

3. Reading Strategy Training Through Mental Modeling

Pani's [7] study discusses a specific method of teaching reading strategies to L2 learners. In mental modeling, teachers demonstrate their reasoning processes in front of students by thinking aloud, which is useful to make the strategic reading process explicit for the learners [19]. In this way, students can see clearly the reading process by effective readers, and will be encouraged to imitate the process so as to become a successful reader. Some strategies use can also be displayed through teachers' modeling, which has the potential to develop students' reading strategies [7].

The research is based on realistic pedagogy which suggests that teachers should no longer rely on the transmission model of instruction. Teachers should develop strategies that will "help teachers and learners to be co-participants in the learning process [7]. The author also believes in Kumaravadivelu's [20] three parameters of a "post-method" pedagogy: particularity, practicality and possibility, and treat the research as an example of particularity which serves for the local needs.

The study is conducted in a three-month teacher training programme aiming at developing the trainees' reading strategies. The main activity is arranged in the sequence of group guessing of unknown words in texts, tutor's demonstration of mental modeling, and the discussion on the content of modeling. Data was collected by transcripts of discussions, mental modeling of the tutor, and retrospective notes of the tutor.

Findings from the study can be summarized in the followings. First, the learners tend to read the texts as a whole and establish a relationship between parts of the text. Second, the learners combine the use of background knowledge and textual clues. Third, the learners are highly motivated to participate in the activities of strategic reading. Fourth, Pani [7] suggests that interaction after the modelings should be emphasized in order to see whether learners really understand the tutor's reasoning, and a deliberate attempt to identify the strategies used should also be encouraged to help learners develop their reading strategies.

4. Improving Listening Through Strategy Training

In the ESL settings, many students are not confident to comprehend L2 oral information in their academic content classrooms. However, trainings in effective listening strategies are often not part of their ESL curriculum. Carrier's [8] study demonstrates the effectiveness of listening strategy instruction, and suggests that targeted listening strategy instruction should be part of the ESL curriculum.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on cognitive theory and strategy research [8]. Being an active learner, a person requires metacognition, or controlling their own learning [21]. One of the ways to achieve this purpose is to use strategies. Pressley [22] believes that "strategies are used to achieve cognitive purposes and are potentially conscious and controllable activities." Hence, students should be informed of various listening strategies so as to help them

consciously use strategies to construct meanings from L2 oral input [8].

The study is conducted with seven participants in an intermediate ESL class in a Midwestern U.S. high school. The procedure goes into three steps: pretests, listening strategy instruction, and posttests. Two pretests and two posttests are administered, measuring learners' discrete listening skills and video listening and note-taking skills respectively. The explicit listening strategy instruction includes ten sessions aiming at different strategies with a bottom-up process, from the training of rhythm and sounds to video listening.

The results of the study are comparisons between students' performances in pretests and posttests, which show a statistically significant improvement in students' note-taking, video and discrete listening abilities. However, the author also admits the limitations of the finding, since the sample is very small and the participants are initially more motivated learners. As for future research, Carrier [8] proposes that different strategies' relative contributions to effective listening should be determined. Another area need further study is to see whether students can transfer the listening strategies gained to other academic tasks.

5. Developing Discussion Skills through Strategy Training

Realizing the importance of oral skills, the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA) has introduced the small group discussion section into its public examination. At the initial stage of the new testing format implementation, few teachers are aware of the importance of interaction strategies and the strategy training in enhancing interactive speaking skills [23]. Against this background, Lam & Wong [9] want to probe the relationship between the training of interaction strategies and the development of oral competence by implementing and evaluating strategy training in group discussion.

Few studies have been done on strategy instruction in speaking. Bejarano *et al.* [23] propose that speaking is an interactive skill and students should be taught to "participate in the negotiation of meaning". Lam & Wong [9] contend that the negotiation process can be promoted by "training learners in the skilled use of interaction strategies during discussion".

The subjects of the study are 58 secondary sixth students in Hong Kong, and their language proficiency is at intermediate level. The research is designed through three steps: selecting strategies for training, developing training materials, and assessing the impact of strategy training. Three important strategies are examined: clarifying oneself, seeking clarification, and checking one's understanding of other people's messages. After three lessons' training on interaction strategies, subjects are asked to record a group discussion task for reviewing. The results of the study are based on comparisons between pre-training recordings and post-training recordings on task performances.

After analysing the data gained from the study, three findings can be summarized [9]. Firstly, the training of interaction strategies promotes the quantity as well as the

quality of strategy use in general. Secondly, more ineffective use of interaction strategies occurs in the post-training discussions. Thirdly, peer help and cooperation are crucial for the effective use of strategies owing to limited language proficiency.

6. Impacts of Strategy Training

A lot of studies have been done in the area of evaluating learning strategy training for second or foreign language learners. However, most of these studies are product-oriented or based on quantitative data. Chen [10] argues that such evaluation methods only depict a partial picture of the impact of strategy training, and some form of qualitative evaluation should be supplemented. The study in the article is an attempt to discover potential criteria for effective qualitative evaluation.

The importance of qualitative evaluation lies in the objectives of learning strategy training. Cohen [12] argues that “the ultimate goal of strategy training is to empower students by allowing them to take control of the language learning process” (pp. 70). So the focus of training effects should be on the learning process rather than on the product of learning. This process has something to do with constant changes in learners’ behaviors, which can be analysed from the perspective of task improvement, strategy maintenance, and strategy transfer [24].

The subjects of the research are 64 junior college students in Taiwan. They all learn English as a foreign language, and their general proficiency level in listening comprehension is low intermediate. The training program is conducted in the summer holiday, trying to minimize interference from other language courses [10]. Within each teaching session, instructor’s explanation of one or two listening strategies is followed by enough application practice and students’ self-evaluation of strategy use. Through the process of the program, trainees are asked to keep working journals and attend instructed interviews, which are the main sources of data.

The findings of the study can be discussed in eight categories which describe the changes of learners’ learning processes. For example, evidence of improvement in strategy repertoire, language proficiency, and strategy transfer can be gained through data analysis. However, difficulties in learning target strategies are also reported by some participants of the program. Therefore, in order to facilitate strategy training, teachers should also pay attention to some individual learning problems [10].

Another important result of the study is the author’s proposal for a model of strategy training impact. In the model, Chen [10] classifies four dimensions (eight categories) of criteria for evaluating strategy training. The model seems to adopt a comprehensive and balanced approach with learner-centeredness.

7. Pedagogical Significance

Since learning strategy training is closely related to language teachers, or even part of their teaching responsibility, researchers in the area tend to have a lot of pedagogical implications for teachers.

Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s [6] critical literature review not only brings to us a complete picture of current knowledge of learning strategies and learning strategy training, but also arrives at some recommendations for teachers. Firstly, it is important for teachers to identify students’ beliefs about learning and their mastery of learning strategies at the beginning of the teaching process. Secondly, teachers are responsible for showing students the effective use of learning strategies and motivating students to use them. Finally, teachers’ direct instruction of learning strategies from time to time is necessary.

Pani’s [7] study provides us with a novel teaching technique: mental modeling. Although there is some apprehension of language teachers’ linguistic competence in verbalizing their thoughts, teachers can their demonstration of mental modeling beforehand. In a sense, there would be some sort of artificiality and the practice may be lacking in spontaneity, but still it is an effective way to show the effective reasoning process and strategy use for students to imitate. When students try to demonstrate their mental modeling in group activities, they are allowed to use some L1 expressions for assistance. The focus will be effective use of reading strategies.

Carrier’s [8] study of strategy instruction raises three suggestions the English listening instruction. First, teachers should design the course and develop the materials properly so as to meet students’ real needs. Second, in strategy training, a balance of bottom-up and top-down listening strategies should be kept. Third, teachers should help students to use strategies to listen to information from a variety of different sources.

As for the study by Lam & Wong [9], two implications can be drawn for oral strategy training. Firstly, linguistic support as a supplement is very important for non-proficient learners in the training of interaction strategies. Secondly, interaction strategy training should emphasize on team work and peer help among students. Since speaking English is a kind of language production, cooperation is crucial and also very common in the effective use of oral strategies.

Chen’s [10] study shed light on the nature of learning strategy training by presenting us a balanced model of qualitative evaluation. It implies that teachers should shift their attention from final results or achieved proficiency standards to the important learning processes of learners. The success of strategies use can be observed in the changes of learners’ behaviors. In this way, teachers can use the eight parameters as criteria to help students develop their learning strategies.

8. Conclusion

One critical synthesis and four empirical studies are reviewed in this summary, in the sequence of answering three questions: (1) why do teachers need learning strategy training; (2) how do teachers conduct learning strategy training; and (3)

what impacts does learning strategy training bring to. Surely, the limited information in these five journal articles cannot provide sufficient and satisfactory answers to these three big questions, but the articles arouse my interest to read more in the topic. As a foreign language teacher, I may conduct strategy instruction in my own classes, and reading literature of the area is a way for me to get strategy training first!

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