

Original Article

A Case for Integrating Study Skills and Learning Strategies into an EFL Curriculum

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This short paper presents reasons for implicit instruction of first-year junior college students in fundamental study habits and the need to incorporate learning strategies into their curriculum. It also points out the importance of recognizing individual learning styles and the need for teachers to realize differences in learner styles and preferences. In doing so it examines responses to a questionnaire administered to 80 students in an English immersion preparation class as well as providing information from students after one semester of study in Canada.

Key Words: study habits, learning strategies, learner styles, learner preferences, homestay, motivation

Introduction

EFL instructors naturally strive to provide students with optimal language acquisition opportunities while allowing for institutional and curriculum differences. Studies of successful language learners (SLLs) indicate that they share a number of characteristics that their less successful counterparts do not possess (Daley, Onwuegbuzie & Bailey, 1997; Chamot, 2005; Mochizuki, 1999; Takeuchi, 2003). The role of study habits, learning styles, both cultural and individual, and language learning strategies (LLS) all combine to help shape the overall language development of second language learners. This paper provides a brief inspection of the impact these three areas have on successful language acquisition. It also examines the results of a pre-departure questionnaire that was given to four groups of first year junior col-

lege English majors who were members of a home-stay/ESL immersion preparation class. It concludes by presenting results from returnee junior college students' interviews conducted after one semester of ESL studies in Canada.

While overall academic performance, as indicated by grade point average (GPA), has shown to be the best predictor of SLL, effective study habits are closely related to such success (Bailey & Onwuegbuzie, 2002). In their research, Bailey & Onwuegbuzie identified note taking, time management and study techniques as the three primary study strengths. Based on their findings, they encourage foreign language instructors to incorporate study skills training as an essential part of class content. Study skills training has proven to be effective in improving GPA and to some extent also aids in reducing student attrition (Polansky, Horan & Hanish, 1993). Student dropout rates from individual classes, and higher education as a whole, are a cause for concern for many instructors and administrators. If students enter college or university lacking good study habits and strategies, intervention in the form of direct instruction, could help to improve

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their chances of succeeding in individual classes and ultimately, in graduating.

It is questionable, however, just how often department curriculum and/or individual instructors introduce study habits and learning strategies into lessons. In Japan higher education classes often meet only once a week for 90-minutes, and many feel that adding more content to an already crammed schedule is not feasible. Including instruction on study habits such as time management, note taking and study techniques can help to improve learning, but it is equally important to address inactions and ineffective techniques like having a TV on while studying, taking notes on scraps of paper, waiting until deadlines to work on assignments, or cramming for exams.

Learning strategies, whether direct or indirect, require conscious decisions and actions on the part of the learner while attempting to successfully attain a language learning goal (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003). In her 1990 book, *Language Learning Strategies-What Every Teacher Should Know*, Oxford divides second language learning strategies into six groups. (1) cognitive, (2) compensatory, (3) memory-related, (4) metacognitive, (5) affective, and (6) social. These are further divided into direct (1, 2, 3) and indirect (4, 5, 6) strategies. Given the fact that successful LLS can be learned, instructors can assist learners by introducing and encouraging the use of such strategies (Griffiths & Parr, 2001).

In recent years there has been much discussion of the teacher's newfound role as facilitator and various approaches toward achieving a more student-centered learning model. Instrumental in these new approaches to learning is the concept of individual learning styles. There exist a number of paradigms for learning styles. One that is quite applicable to language learners is that based on the work of Felder. The learner's preferences are categorized in terms of five pairs of opposing style choices: sensory-intuitive, visual-verbal, active-reflective, sequential-global, and inductive-deductive (Felder & Henriques, 1995). When the learner's preferences and the teacher's preferences differ widely, learning becomes more difficult and can result in diminished motivation, passive disruption, and general apathy on the part of the learner. It may also cause the teacher to underestimate or miscalculate the learner.

The recognition and acceptance of individual

learning styles has been slow in developing in Japanese education (McVeigh, 1995). Rausch (1996) goes so far as to contend that, "... Japan on the one hand, outright ignores or ultimately overpowers any individual natural learning style preference, and on the other hand, emphasizes instrumental motivation for language learning". If this is true, the motivation to integrate with the English speaking community does not become a factor until the learner physically becomes a part of that community, and thus begins immersion studies at a distinct disadvantage. Lack of recognition of individual learning styles can also affect teaching styles and material development, as a good lesson should include sections that emphasize one style over another, while taking care to integrate all styles into the lesson. In this way all students, regardless of their preferred styles, have a better opportunity to succeed. Once aware of their own learning styles and personal preferences, students can more easily adopt learning strategies to suit their needs.

In discussing Japanese students McVeigh (1995) states that, "Their study habits, preparation tactics, and attitudes toward learning are quite appropriate for an exam-based system." It is however, arguable that the behaviors that are appropriate for this system are ones that aid in language acquisition and fluency. It is also questionable as to whether or not these methods transfer well to the North American classroom when the students who participated in this study join the ESL immersion classes.

Questionnaire Results

As part of a one semester, 15- class preparation for students planning to participate in a one-month immersion and homestay program at a college in Vancouver, Canada, students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire (see Appendix). The questionnaire included five multiple-choice questions and three open ended questions related to personal study habits and learning strategies. Students were instructed to answer anonymously. The survey was conducted with classes in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2006. In total, 80 students participated in this study. It was administered to first year students at the start of the second semester. All participants were junior college English majors. Initially this

study was conducted out of simple curiosity as the writer thought these students would possess better study habits and be more highly motivated, since they had a clearer and more practical goal for learning English than most of their counterparts in the English Department. It was also intended to stimulate student thinking about how they study and how they can take personal responsibility for learning, as learner autonomy is necessary to successfully participate in immersion programs. Since there were no significant variations between different years, all data were combined.

Question #1 dealt with frequency of study. Results show that only 18% studied outside of class on a daily basis. While 22.5% studied every other day, 28.75% of respondents studied only once a week and 28.75% only before a test. 2.5% said that they hardly ever studied outside of class. With 60% of the students studying outside of class less than once a week, the prospect of their becoming fluent users of English is unlikely. It also causes one to question their motivation.

Question #2 asked about the length of time students spent when studying outside of classes. Not too surprisingly only 5% said they studied three or more hours, while 16.25% studied for 2-3 hours, 25% for 1-2 hours, 47.55% between 30 minutes and one hour, and 6.25% studied for less than 30 minutes. One student studied every day and for 3 hours or more.

Question #3 related to kinds of study and multiple answers were allowed. Only 4.8% reviewed the day's work, while 11.1% prepared for the next day's classes. 10.6% read for pleasure, 8.4% did some type of listening practice, and 22.6% studied vocabulary. These results illustrate a lack of implementation of two of the most basic study habits, reviewing and previewing, on the part of the vast majority of students in these groups.

Question #4 concerned what students did outside of class when they encountered something they could not understand. In response, 13.8% asked a teacher for help in class, and 5% asked a teacher outside of class. The overwhelming majority, 65%, asked a classmate for help, while 15% checked the library or Internet, and only 1.25% did nothing. While it is good that students seek help from one another, it is a sign of poor learning strategies that so few asked

their teachers for assistance both in and outside of class. It is encouraging to see that 15% are developing autonomous strategies and seeking answers independently.

Question #5 inquired about students' primary purpose for studying outside of class. Multiple answers were allowed. 15% responded that the sole purpose of studying was for completing homework assignments and preparing for a test. Another 11% said that doing homework was their only study outside of class while 11% only studied for a test. Overall, 28.6% and 21.9% identified these two purposes among their choices. While homework and test preparation are natural for students of any discipline, a mere 2.4% studied to improve weak points. Only 20.1% studied to enjoy using English. These results infer that Rausch's contention regarding instrumental motivation is correct.

Question #6 asked how students studied outside of class when there was no homework involved. The vast majority of those answered that they listen to English songs and watch videos and movies. It is however, questionable as to just how much of song lyrics are actually comprehensible to these students. Are they understanding the stories presented in most American and British songs, or merely hearing individual words or catch phrases? Given my experience in teaching a class in American Popular Culture for seven years, I expect that few can identify what the songs are about, even when reading the lyrics. Such activities however, can be very positive motivators if students enjoy them.

Question #7 checked on attitude changes toward studying English, which occurred since entering junior college. 24% did not answer this question while others misunderstood it and wrote about skill improvements. Among those who did reply, 10% said they enjoyed English more, 5% enjoyed reading in English, and 5% said they wanted to study harder. Other responses included increased interest in foreign cultures, trying to speak English more often, not sleeping in class, not arriving late for class, and a desire to submit assignments on time.

Question #8 asked what kind of advice or information could be provided to help them study more out of class. 44% did not reply to this question. Many of the replies indicated that the question was misunderstood as answers indicated what students them-

selves saw as ways to study outside of class. 5% stated that keeping the school library open longer would help them.

It is often stated that SLL's use of metacognitive strategies is instrumental in their language acquisition. Seeking out opportunities to use the target language, making a concerted effort to practice regularly, forcing oneself to use the language and establishing and enacting a plan for studies are metacognitive strategies most frequently employed by SLLs. Ironically, these are the very strategies found lacking in most of the study participants. The fact that these students were planning to study abroad only four months after the questions were answered makes this even more ironic.

There are flaws in the questionnaire that need to be addressed. Primarily, questions, particularly #'s 6, 7, and 8, should have been presented in Japanese to facilitate better understanding. This could have resulted in a larger number of responses with better information. However, there is also a possibility that the Japanese education system's penchant for formulaic and multiple choice answers over essays and expository writing to measure learning contributed to the large percentage of students not responding to the open-ended questions.

Results of a study involving 184 college students in the United States suggests that learner anxiety about the target language is strongly correlated with learner achievement (Daley, Onwuegbuzie & Bailey, 1997). It is quite plausible to suggest that anxiety levels could be lowered through the use of good study habits, thus improving achievement. In a communicative learning environment, awareness and use of affective strategies are essential for successful learning outcomes. The ability to feel comfortable when using the target language, self-esteem, risk taking, tolerance for ambiguity, motivation and lessening inhibition all correlate highly with success. All too often, Japanese students strive for perfection, which hinders risk taking and guessing. This, coupled with the stress inducing examination process, shyness being viewed as a virtue, and the inhibiting atmosphere of traditional teacher-student roles appears to increase learner anxiety, thus making the use of positive affective strategies more difficult.

Returnee Feedback

The study abroad program for English majors at the junior college has recently been expanded to include a full semester of ESL immersion in Vancouver, Canada. The only prerequisite is that students maintain a sufficient GPA for their first three semesters. The first group of four students completed this program in December 2006. From videotaped interviews conducted with three returnees, distinct changes in study habits and strategies can be seen in all three students. Foremost is the fact that they studied outside of class everyday. Before departure, two stated that they hardly ever studied out of class. It was evident that they only gave serious thought to learning strategies once they arrived in Canada. They also became aware of the need to seek opportunities to converse in English well before their departure, echoing Rausch's point on instrumental motivation of Japanese students. In retrospect, they would have transferred time spent studying for the TOEFL exam to more active learning through speaking and listening activities. They all found it necessary to adopt strategies of reviewing and previewing to keep up with class work in Canada. These are strategies which one of them never employed when studying in Japan. All three agreed that there was more independent learning done in Canada and that they needed to follow-up more outside the classroom. They also checked with their teachers more after classes if there was any confusion regarding assignments or they had any questions about the day's content. Interestingly, none were allowed to use dictionaries in class and had to ask the teacher or classmates for assistance if they encountered an unknown word. It was only after the class that they had the opportunity to check a dictionary. This practice is in accordance with learning strategies outlined by Oxford (1990) and others.

The author is currently attempting to integrate LLS into a second-year writing class. As part of the class, students are required to keep a journal. In past classes, students were free to write on whatever topics they wished, in an attempt to get them to write more frequently and to lessen anxieties over writing in a second language. Now the English majors participating in this class are provided with short questionnaires for 12 weeks of the 15-week

semester. These questionnaires are from the book, *Strategies for Success: A Practical Guide to Learning English* by H. Douglas Brown. They are being used to help students consider how they learn and to introduce other behavior possibilities. It is hoped that by reflecting on their individual learning styles, habits and strategies and providing written personal examples, goals and ideas, their learning will improve as their awareness increases. There is a plan to collect their writing on these 12 topics and analyze samples as part of future research. Since three students from this class will study abroad next semester, the aim is for them to have a more enriching learning experience and be better prepared for life in a Canadian classroom.

Future Considerations

In conclusion, it is the writer's belief that providing explicit instruction and information regarding study habits and learning strategies, either in individual lessons or as part of first-year student orientation would benefit future English majors. By incorporating such a program into existing orientation activities all students would be better equipped to begin their college studies with a greater opportunity for success. Instructors would be able to have more uniform expectations of students, and students would be aware from the outset that they are part of a culture of learning and study, with serious expectations of their approach to learning.

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Appendix I

Self-Study questionnaire

- 1) How often do you study outside of class?
 - a) everyday b) every other day c) once a week d) before a test e) hardly ever
- 2) About how many hours do you spend when you study outside of class?
 - a) more than 3 hours b) 2-3 hours c) 1-2 hours d) 30 minutes- 1 hour e) under 30 minutes
- 3) What kind of study do you usually do?
 - a) review of the day's classes
 - b) prepare for the next day's classes
 - c) homework assignments set by your teachers
 - d) study for a test in a class
 - e) study new vocabulary
 - f) pronunciation practice
 - g) listening practice
 - h) reading for enjoyment in English
 - i) any other
- 4) When you are studying outside of class, what do you usually do if you find something you cannot understand? Please choose one answer only.
 - a) ask a teacher about it in class
 - b) ask a teacher about it in private
 - c) ask a classmate or friend about it
 - d) go to the library and research the answer yourself
 - e) do nothing
- 5) What's your main purpose for studying outside of class?
 - a) to do homework
 - b) to prepare for a test
 - c) to improve your English ability
 - d) to improve your weak points in English

- e) to understand difficult points better
- f) to enjoy English

6) Apart from homework assignments, how do you study English outside of class? What kind of materials do you use? For example, listen to English music, write in a vocabulary notebook, watch videos in English, etc.
(Please write your answer in English or Japanese.)

7) After one semester of study at this school, what changes, if any, have you noticed in your attitude towards studying English?
(Please write your answer in English or Japanese.)

8) What kind of advice or information about studying outside of class would help you to study more?
(Please write your answer in English or Japanese.)

Appendix II

The following are transcriptions from three returnee student interviews in which they address differences between studying in Vancouver and Japan, and offer advice to other students. (I=interviewer)

S1: I did lots of homework, much more than here. . . I like the teaching style. They were more casual, but also strict.

(before going to Vancouver) I was focused to get a TOEFL score but I didn't well prepare about speaking stuff. So I should have been more study about speaking. I advice to have to make an environment to speak English. And lots of studying English in Japan. Read newspapers, read homepage, go to American homepage, you know, just read and speak more (in English).

S2: In my writing and reading class I wrote the essay once a week. It was very, very hard, but it was god for me. . . They (teachers) were very strict, for example, they expect homework on time and they gave me lots of homework. . . Sometimes I couldn't understand what should I do about homework, but after class I tried to ask the teacher.

I: How long did you usually study each day?

S2: Two hours each day. . . I had two 90-minute classes each day. . . If I have free time on the day off, I went to school and I studied. In Japan that never happens.

S3: We can get many opportunities to speak. Even we can't

speak perfectly, we can help each other. . . After class, the teacher always stayed. . . (In school study lounge areas) We can ask many questions. We met higher level (students) and we ask (questions) without teacher. They know, they teach us, so that part is different. . . If I have a problem in the part of class, I have to check dictionaries, or ask other students, or ask homestay (family).

The teachers come from Portugals or Singapore. . . I expected to everybody is native, but it doesn't bother me.

I: But they spoke only English in class?

S3: Yeah.

I think the time to speak. For VCC, we must speak, but in Chutan everybody speak Japanese. We know we have to speak English, but we speak Japanese, almost everyone. So that part is different. . . Class size is very small. Here (Chutan) it's over 20 so we cannot get enough opportunity to ask teacher because we have some tensions.

We have to prepare not only homework or next class we have to solo, how can I say?

I: Do it alone, independently?

S3: YEAH! Independently. If you don't study independently, maybe you can't follow the next class, next class, next class. . . Review is very important.

I: Did you preview?

S3: No. Teacher told us next class we gonna take this lesson, or this part of this paper, or we can ask the next class what will we do? So we can do more and more.

I: You also said that at VCC you often studied with groups and classmates. Did you do that in Japan?

S3: No.

S3: In class we can't use dictionaries. Of course teacher told us, if this word we cannot understand, the teacher explain, in English of course, so it's not perfect for us, so after class we check dictionaries.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. (in Vancouver) if I don't understand, I must ask. In textbook or dictionary it's just stuff. They teach us a very different way that we cannot think. . . (with the teacher) it's personal. Of course, they really want students to ask. They really expect. If you don't ask, they think this student don't like to study English.

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