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口說策略訓練之實證研究

Learner Training in Speaking Strategies: An Empirical Investigation

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1. 中文摘要

文獻顯示，過去二、三十年來在第二語言習得領域內，語言學習策略與策略訓練之研究雖如汗牛充棟，然著重在口說訓練，特別是與課程融合的研究仍相當缺乏。爰此，本研究以實證方法探討並評量將語言學習策略訓練-特別是口說策略-融合在大一英文課程的可行性及其實施效果。受試者為兩班(一為實驗組，一為比較組)大一英文的學生，學期初先收集其背景資料及相關英文成績。同時以前測、後測方式，收集其策略使用與二項口說活動的結果。學期結束時，實驗組另填寫口說策略查證表與課程評量表，以表達對此訓練課程的看法。研究結果顯示，二組學生雖在二項口說活動上無顯著差別，然在整體策略使用上實驗組卻有明顯的進步。此結果與本研究其他發現支持部分研究者的論點，即在大力提倡語言學習策略訓練之際，不能只看表象，應探究影響策略運用與特定語言能力實際進步之確實因素。

關鍵詞：語言學習策略、口說策略、學習策略訓練、英語教學、第二語言習得、大一英文

Abstract

This study investigated and assessed the practicality and effectiveness, if any, of integration of a learner training program into a college-level EFL classroom, with a focus on the fine-tuning of the link between language learning strategies and their use on specific language tasks, especially those of speaking. Two classes of Freshman English from a university in northern Taiwan, who participated in either Experimental or Comparison group, were recruited. During the first two weeks of class, all subjects' brief English learning background, JCEE (Joint College Entrance Examination) English scores and Quasi-TOEFL scores were collected. All subjects also completed the 50-item SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) and two speaking tasks (story-retelling and topic discussion) on a pre-posttest basis. In the posttest, the Experimental group subjects also filled out two other questionnaires: (1) Strategy Checklist and (2) Training Program Evaluation for

them to express their attitudes and reactions toward a program embedded in a regular EFL classroom. Results of the study showed that, among other things, while the Experimental group did not outstrip the Comparison group in the two speaking tasks, they did demonstrate greater strategy use after the semester-long training course. This finding urged us to probe deeper for underlying factors that might also have affected the implementation of strategies-based instruction, as several previous studies have already pointed out -- to reexamine its real bases lest it should become another passing fad in foreign/second language profession.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Speaking Strategies, Learner (Strategy) Training/ Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI), Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Second Language Acquisition, Freshman English

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the “near explosion” activity on “language learning strategies” and “learner strategy training” research since the early seventies [1], very few studies have been conducted with a focus on speaking strategies, particularly those designed to integrate learner strategy training into the foreign language classroom [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. In view of the paucity of research on learner training in speaking

strategies, an empirical study was designed to explore a possible link between direct, explicit strategies-based instruction and specific language abilities. In particular, this study assessed the practicality and effectiveness, if any, of integration of a learner training program into a college-level EFL classroom, with a focus on the fine-tuning of the link between language learning strategies and their use on specific language tasks, especially those of speaking.

3. Research Concerns, Questions, and the Related Hypotheses

Following are the two major concerns this study aimed to address, the questions it attempted to answer, and the related hypotheses it was undertaken to test:

(a) What is the educational potential of learner strategy training? That is, what is the relationship between direct, explicit strategies-based instruction and specific language abilities? Of particular interest to us, would the experimental group benefit from such training, i.e., the integration of strategy instruction into the course content, and perform better than the comparison group in the two speaking tasks (story-retelling and topic discussion)? By the same token, would the experimental group outperform the comparison group in frequency of strategy use? Furthermore, we would also like to find out if any relationship

exits between such training (as measured by two speaking tasks)/strategy use (as measured by SILL) and subjects' English test scores, sex, and major field of study? Translated into hypotheses, the above questions can be stated as follows:

- (1) The experimental group performs better than the comparison group in the two speaking tasks of story-retelling and topic discussion.
- (2) The experimental group shows greater strategy use than the comparison group as measured by SILL.
- (3) Subjects who score higher in JCEE English exam/quasi-TOEFL test/ Freshman English would also perform better in the two speaking tasks.
- (4) Subjects who score higher in JCEE English exam/quasi-TOEFL test/ Freshman English would also show greater strategy use as measured by SILL.
- (5) Male and female subjects would show no significant difference statistically in terms of the two speaking tasks.
- (6) Male and female subjects would show no significant difference statistically in strategy use as measured by SILL.
- (7) Subjects of different majors would show no significant difference statistically in terms of the two speaking tasks.
- (8) Subjects of different majors would

show no significant difference statistically in strategy use as measured by SILL.

(b) If we can answer the questions raised above in our first concern, then we will have a better chance to probe further and ask whether there exists a gap between theory and practice for strategy research. If such a gap does exist, what is the cause? Can it be overcome? And how and to what extent can learner strategy instruction be made an option/a reality in the foreign language curriculum – where theory can hope to meet practice?

4. Design of the Study

Two classes of Freshman English from a university in northern Taiwan participated in this study. One class of 45 students was arbitrarily assigned as the Experimental group, and the other class of 33 students, the Comparison group. During the first two weeks of class, all subjects' brief English learning background, JCEE (Joint College Entrance Examination) English scores and Quasi-TOEFL scores were collected. All subjects also completed the 50-item SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) and two speaking tasks (story-retelling and topic discussion) on a pre-posttest basis. In the posttest, the Experimental group subjects also filled out two other questionnaires: (1) Strategy Checklist and (2) Training Program Evaluation for them to express their attitudes and reactions toward the

program. During the course of one semester, the Experimental group, other than following the same syllabus as the Comparison group, was given instruction in a strategies-based format of three different types: awareness-raising, strategy training, and strategy practice, ranging from specific learning strategies to general dispositions for learning [7, 8]. The more specific strategy instruction was further incorporated into course content mainly through two kinds of classroom activities: oral journal and group discussion.

Two native speakers of English with over ten years' experience of teaching EFL at the college level rated the student tapes. Arrangement was made so that the raters did not know whether the responses to the two speaking tasks which consisted of each taped sample were from the Experimental or the Comparison group, nor whether they were from pre- or posttesting.

Discussion sessions were held before the two raters proceeded with the ratings. Based upon pilot-tested tapes (representing varying degrees of speaking ability) collected from the previous year of the same sample population as the present study, a set of five-point, multitrait scales were discussed and criteria, agreed upon. This procedure was to ensure that the interaction between the rater and the rating task be kept to a minimum.

Another measure taken to maximize the consistency of ratings by this pair of raters was to involve them in both pre- and posttests.

Other than the basics of pronunciation and comprehensibility, three scales of self-confidence, grammar, and vocabulary were used for topic discussion; two scales of key story elements and ordering/rendering of these elements for story retelling [2].

5. Results

Data generated from Background Questionnaire provided an overall structure of the sample population and yielded such information as sex, age, major field of study, study/travel in an English-speaking country, motivation to learn, and effort made in learning.

In addressing Research Concern #1, we formed eight hypotheses to test whether there was increase in the two speaking tasks and/or greater use of strategies across different groups of subjects. The results showed that, for Hypotheses 7 and 8, subjects majoring in different fields of study did not show significant differences in either the two speaking tasks or in frequency of strategy use. The same went with Hypotheses 5 and 6 for female versus male subjects. For Hypotheses 3 and 4, students with higher English test scores did not necessarily perform better in the two speaking tasks but they did show greater strategy use than those with lower English test scores. Similarly,

for Hypotheses 1 and 2, the Experimental group did not show, statistically speaking, significant improvement on the speaking tasks, but did demonstrate greater strategy use than the Comparison group after the implementation of strategy instruction for one semester.

As for the two questionnaires (Strategy Checklist and Training Program Evaluation) the Experimental group also filled out at the end of the semester, the results showed that with no exception, the means of “degree of usefulness” for all the speaking strategies and all types of activity/homework were greater than those of “degree of actual use/involvement.” In other words, a clear gap was found between what subjects believed was useful or important and what they had actually put into practice or got themselves involved in during the semester-long training program.

6. Discussion

The results of this study were discussed by addressing Research Concern #2.

First, to recap, in addressing Research Concern #1, we constructed eight hypotheses to examine the relationship between strategies-based instruction, strategy use, and student gains in speaking abilities. It was found that the learner training program did not significantly affect the speaking

performance of the Experimental group in the two tasks of story-retelling and topic discussion. Such finding may sound rather disappointing at first and may be the last thing researchers wish to see. Yet, when further analyzed to bring into consideration other factors such as the make-up of the Experimental group, their initial level of proficiency, and their interest, attitude and motivation in learning, the result we found may not be a total surprise. Following are some of the speculations/reasons for explanation of the insignificant results of the learner training program implemented in the study.

6.1 Entry Level/Overseas Experience

The background information generated clearly indicated that, as far as the initial level of English proficiency was concerned, the Experimental group scored relatively lower than its counterpart, the Comparison group, as measured by the English test on the JCEE. In order to show greater improvement in speaking skill, the Experimental group may need far more than one semester of instruction and practice. Furthermore, data from the Background Questionnaire also indicated that more students in the Comparison group rather than the Experimental group had the experience of traveling/studying in an English-speaking country, for a certain period of time. It should be reasonable

to speculate that the Experimental group was the disadvantaged one in terms of English learning in a more authentic environment.

6.2 Interest, Attitude and Motivation

Halfway through the semester, it was noticed that quite a few students in the Experimental group showed a lack of interest in the course. For this group of students, all majors in the College of Agriculture, Freshman English may not be on top of their priority list. They felt overwhelmed by the course requirements with lots of homework and practice/activities to work on both in and out of class [9].

Other data analyzed from Background Questionnaire also disclosed that while reporting either “medium” or “much” in their motivation to learn, students nonetheless spent very little time in studying both inside and outside the classroom. The mismatch between the reported level of motivation and the actual time/effort put into learning/studying was rather puzzling and disappointing at the same time. It prompted us to question the essence of motivation. It seemed to us that motivation remains only as motivation unless some action is taken on the part of the learners themselves. Cruel as it might be, the reality of foreign language classroom learning must be faced, which involves many factors that may not be in the immediate control of teachers/researchers [10]. Students can

feel however highly motivated to learn a foreign language but without action, the driving force of motivation will probably take them nowhere at all. Brown [11] points out that abstract concepts in the affective domain are hard to define. We should not be “tempted to use rather sweeping terms as if they were carefully defined (p.143).” It is advisable to think twice before we ever say “motivation” is the key to success in a foreign language.

6.3 The Time Factor: Strategy Use and Gains in Speaking Task Performance

Although the results of this study did not show significant increase in the speaking performance of the Experimental group in the two tasks of story-retelling and topic discussion, this group of students nevertheless did demonstrate greater strategy use after participating in a semester-long strategies-based instruction. On the one hand, the result reflects and proves what students learning in an input-poor environment generally perceive: speaking is a rather difficult skill and therefore could not easily be mastered in a short period of time. On the other hand, this finding also confirms what previous research has found about the teachability of language learning strategies. Having never been exposed to any language learning strategies before, the Experimental group did show that they benefited from such instruction:

their overall use of strategies had increased. Yet, again, in order to show greater, significant improvement on speaking abilities, students may simply need more time and cannot be rushed. Time seems to be a rather important factor for long-term learning especially when a tough task is involved. Given enough time, students' proven greater strategy use would have a good chance to produce and result in steady improvement and eventually more gains in speaking abilities.

7. Feedback on Strategy Checklist:

Students' Verbal Report Data

Perhaps the most insightful finding of this study in terms of students' strategy use comes from their own written open-ended comments on the individual strategies listed in the questionnaire of Strategy Checklist. Some of the negative feedback effectively points to the mismatch between what the students believe and what the teachers/researchers believe about the good/effective language learning strategies. Such information can certainly not afford to be ignored if future similar studies are aimed to produce in learners greater strategy use and better language proficiency.

8. Conclusion

It appears that what we found in this study suggests a "truth," not just a "face" value, in the integration of strategies-based instruction into an EFL

classroom. We might need to look into what lies "deeper," not limited to or discouraged by the "surface" result only. While embracing a new teaching/learning model, it is sensible for us to take a hard look with some hard evidence and in our case, to reexamine the real bases of learner strategy training lest it should become another passing fad in foreign/second language profession [12, 13, 14, 15]

8. References

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