

Factors which Influence the Learning Strategies of EFL Learners

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0: Overview

Globalisation has brought about major changes to the field of language learning. According to the Internet TESL Journal (2000), research on language learning shows that there has been a prominent shift in the field of language learning and teaching over the past 20 years with greater emphasis being placed on learners rather than on teachers and teaching. Focusing on language learners allows researchers to scrutinise the learners' choice of language learning strategies in detail. Choosing the appropriate language learning strategies can help learners achieve communicative competence. The development of communicative competence involves practical interaction among language learners in using contextualised language. Thus, language learning strategies help guide learners to participate fully and actively in an authentic communication setting so as to improve or increase their proficiency level. However, inappropriate language learning strategies may not help learners to increase their proficiency level or improve certain language skills. Hence, this study is needed to investigate factors that influence the choice of language learning strategies made by the learners.

This chapter introduces the background of the study, highlights its objectives and statement of the research problems, and raises some questions. The researcher hopes that the study would be able to provide valuable information and recommendations in the use of language learning strategies for language instructors (teachers) and language learners (students). Finally, the chapter concludes by noting the limitation and significance of the study.

1.1: Background of the Study

The study was being carried out in order to investigate factors or variables that influence proficient and less proficient learners of EFL in their choice of language learning strategies. These strategies are particularly important to motivate learners to develop greater self-motivation. Self-motivation is needed because language instructors are not always there to guide the learners, especially when the latter use the language outside the classroom context. Furthermore, self-motivation encourages each learner to take charge of his or her learning responsibility. Taking all the above into account, the type of learning strategy employed by students differs from one individual to the other because of individual preferences. This individual approach has resulted in an increasing number of studies being conducted to scrutinise the relationship between learners' performance and the strategies they adopted in acquiring proficiency in a target language.

With today's information technology, learners are able to independently gain access to language learning topics or strategies for improving their language skills, especially the English language. To reduce the gap between what used to be teacher-oriented methodology and student-oriented approach in a classroom setting, the educational organisations need to incorporate self-learning habits and instil them in the learners who employ language learning strategies in acquiring English language skills.

In Malaysia, English is used as a Second Language (ESL), and as a compulsory subject in all learning institutions. The language is also taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) to foreign students in institutions of higher learning. The significance of the language cannot be overemphasised, because English is being used as a medium of instruction, especially in private colleges or university colleges. For this reason, it is essential that both local and international students have sufficient knowledge of English so that they can understand the English lectures and be able to communicate fluently in both the written and oral forms. In addition, knowledge of English should be made a compulsory requirement for admission to universities and colleges. As far as government policy is concerned, English is considered as an important tool in the growth of the nation mastery of various fields.

However, proficiency in English among the foreign language learners is still disappointing. A Malaysian school teacher, Ibrahim Zakaria, has expressed his concern over the standard of English in Malaysian schools as reported in The Star online newspaper dated June 3, 2008.

(Source: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/6/3/focus/21429146&sc=focus>). According to Ibrahim, young graduates have trouble getting their ideas across in English other than their own mother tongue. The students struggle to master the language or are unaware of language learning strategies, because of various reasons.

Besides struggling with the English language, a “culture of shyness” among students needs to be taken into account. Students are often shy of using the language as they are afraid of making mistakes while conducting themselves in front of other classmates. Furthermore, the learners are not sure whether their learning strategies will be appropriate when they undertake language tasks. For this reason, the students remain “silent” and they at times, refuse to speak. A Malaysian citizen, Hassan Talib, has expressed his concern over the “shyness culture” prevalent among students learning English as reported in the News Straits Times online newspaper dated October 20, 2009.

(Source: http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/articles/18PROF/Article/)

Said Talib:

“The Education Ministry's approach should be to address the "shyness culture" at the primary [school] level. Importing English language teachers will not work if we fail to understand the Malaysian psyche”.

This “culture of shyness” is not only present in local universities, but also in private colleges or universities. Language instructors or lecturers often complain that students are literally “shy” to use English. Munawarah, Wan Nur Ayuni and Ikhwan Nisfu (2006) found that lecturers often complained that TESL Cohort 3 students were shy to use English in class. This was because the students were afraid to compete with one another and only had an average idea of what the language is all about. Thus, studies are needed to find out the other reasons that influence learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the choice of their language learning strategies.

According to Oxford (2001), there is a direct correlation between a student’s strategy and language proficiency. Language learning strategies are vital tools that can help solve problems or accomplish a task. Hence, language learning strategies are important to determine the learners’ level of proficiency, and develop their learning abilities.

In this study, the researcher will examine the factors that influence the choice of learning strategies of both proficient and less proficient EFL learners in an English Language centre of a private university college. According to Shmais (2003), first language, age, gender, personality, motivation, self-concept, learning styles and other variables had been identified as factors that played a crucial role in the way in which the students learnt the target language. Therefore, this investigation is essential to help mainly the teachers of this centre to understand factors that influence the learners' learning process and how the students employ strategies to develop their four language skills in a four-week intensive programme.

1.2: Statement of the Research Problems

Finding the best method to teach students to master the language has always been the aim of many foreign language teachers. The main problem in this study is to find out how many proficient and less proficient learners of EFL in this centre differ in their use of language learning strategies. Hence, an investigation is needed to explore why the proficient learners tend to excel better than the less proficient ones. In addition, it is imperative to examine why some learners fail to understand a learning strategy. Is it because they are not aware of certain language learning strategies? The second problem is that there is no single common pattern of strategy being used across all groups in this language centre, because of a number of important factors that influence the choice of strategy.

The third problem is that both groups do not employ similar strategies. They may have their own reasons that played a part in influencing their choice of strategies. Research instrument like Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) does not explain or elaborate what makes the learners employ those strategies. SILL tends to be used to assess mainly the frequency with which second or foreign language learners use various strategies. Due to the lack of understanding of learning strategies, the current research intends to explore the other areas that influence the learners' choice of learning methods.

1.3: Objectives of the Study

This study aims to find out the frequency of use of language learning strategies by both proficient and less proficient EFL learners in an EFL classroom of a university college called Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT). It identifies the patterns adopted by these EFL learners of this centre, and also compares the current findings with the previous related studies done by other researchers. Furthermore, this study aims to explore other possible areas that previous researchers might not have come across in their research.

1.4: Research Questions

To approach this study, the researcher will pose the following questions:

- 1) What is the most and least frequent pattern of learning strategy adopted by the proficient EFL learners?
- 2) What is the most and least frequent pattern of learning strategy adopted by the less proficient EFL learners?
- 3) What are the factors that influence the proficient EFL learners in using the language learning strategies?
- 4) What are the factors that influence the less proficient EFL learners in their choice of learning strategies?

1.5: Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to intermediate students who had at least one month of English lessons at an English language centre. The number of participants is limited to 30. These 30 students participate by answering the SILL questionnaires. Out of the 30 participants, 16 are selected based on the ongoing assessment results which determine their proficiency levels. The 16 students need to attend the semi-structured interview sessions to find out their choice of language learning strategies in detail. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be applied to all students in the centre.

With this limited sample of students, the researcher wants to investigate the differences in language learning strategies employed by both proficient and less proficient students regardless of their different backgrounds and proficiency levels.

1.6: Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in addressing language instructors and curriculum designers on the importance of identifying the frequency of use of language learning strategies by the learners in this learning centre. Acquiring an understanding of how students use different strategies in their learning method will considerably help the language teachers and curriculum designers enhance their teaching methods and develop more authentic learning materials. The findings are significant because the use of appropriate language learning strategies can go a long way towards honing the language skills of both learners and teachers. (Oxford and Crookall, 1989).

Moreover, a number of studies (Hosenfeld 1976; Abraham & Vann 1987; Chamot & Kupper 1989) conducted on language learners revealed that some students are more successful than the others. Thus, this study is important to gain an understanding of why some learning strategies have not been conclusive at this point. Additionally, the research is noteworthy because a comparison can be made

between the two different proficiency groups in their approach to strategies. Hence, the researcher hopes the comparison will encourage the teachers to further improve their teaching methods.

1.7: Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to scrutinise the causes that influence these learners in the selection of language learning strategies. These findings may assist language instructors to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the students and, in the process, train them to be more independent learners. The following chapter discusses the past literature reviews of language learning strategies.