Researching Language Teaching and Learning:

An Integration of Practice and Theory

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Learning from Good Language Learners in a Specific Context

Initial studies on good language learners (GLLs), such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Stevick (1989), show that GLLs tend to share strategies for language learning and thus indicate that research on their strategies would help facilitate our understanding on the learning process of a second/foreign language. Since then, quite a few studies have been conducted to find out the strategies favoured by GLLs (see Oxford, 1990 for review) and the factors affecting their use (see Takeuchi, Griffiths and Coyle, 2007 for review). Recently, attempts to teach strategies to second/foreign language learners also have been made all over the world (Cohen, 1998; Dadour and Robbins, 1996; Graham and Macaro, 2008; Ikeda and Takeuchi, 2003, 2006; among others).

Some Asian studies, however, argue that the strategies favoured by GLLs in an Asian EFL context differ drastically form those in the North American ESL context (e.g., Gu, 1996; LoCastro, 1994; Takeuchi, 2003a; Takeuchi and Wakamoto, 2001). They also argue that the strategies preferred in the beginning stage of learning are not the same as those preferred in the advanced stages (e.g., Takeuchi, 2003b). Therefore, researchers come to feel the pressing need to return once again to the contexts in which they are doing research and probe the learning strategies preferred by GLLs in these contexts, while paying careful attention to the stages of learning. The two descriptive studies to be reported below are attempts for that purpose.[1]

Study 1

Purpose

The purpose of the first study was to ascertain the strategies preferred by college-level GLLs in the Japanese EFL context. Comparisons were also made of the strategies used by GLLs with those by 'poor language learners' (PLLs).

Participants and Method

The participants of this study were 153 female senior college students majoring in English, yet studying the language only in the Japanese EFL context. Their starting age of learning English was confirmed to be above the age of 12, which is considered to be after or near the end of the critical period (Scovel, 2001). No participants had lived more than one year in English-speaking countries after starting to learn the language. The teaching method experienced by the participants was a mixture of grammar translation, audio-lingual habit formation, cognitive-code learning, and communicative methods.

The participants took a conventional 40-item cloze test (Mean 25.52, SD 3.95, Range 0–40). A total of 24 students with a test score of above 30 constituted the GLL group, while the PLL group was made up of 24 participants whose score on the test was below 21. The average scores of these two groups were confirmed to be statistically different on a *t*–test (t=24.56, df=46, p<.00001, r=.96). For further confirmation of proficiency difference, five participants from each group were randomly selected and asked to tape-record their spontaneous speech in English. A native speaker of English judged the samples. The judgement indicated that there was a difference in fluency between these two groups: Three out of five in the GLL group were rated 'very fluent (5)' and two were rated 'fluent (4)', while three out of five in the PLL group were rated 'average (3)' and two were rated 'poor (2)'.

Students in these two groups were then asked to write their language learning biographies (Schumann, 1997), or records of English learning, beginning at the age of 12 and up until recent days. The biographies or records were written in their native language and included reviews of their learning environment, their attitude toward learning, and their learning strategies in specific skill areas (with the period in which the strategies were mainly used). Training on how to write learning biographies had been given to the participants beforehand. For detailed discussions on verbal reports such as learning biographies and dairies, see Bailey (1990) and Matsumoto (1994).

The author conducted the analysis of the records according to the pre-determined definitions and the categories of strategies. Some samples (about 10%) were selected randomly and re-analysed by another researcher. The agreement of the analyses was approximately 80 percent, which is considered to be satisfactory.

Results – Metacognitive Strategies

One of the most striking differences between these two groups was the volume of descriptions in the biographies. The volume provided by GLLs was much larger than that by PLLs. In addition, the descriptions by GLLs contained much more information on their learning than those by PLLs did. This might indicate that GLLs had more concrete awareness of their learning process and strategy use.

Another intriguing difference was that GLLs had tried very hard to find and increase their opportunities to use English as a means of communication. This effort seems to be especially important in an EFL context, in which relatively few occasions to use the language are available. According to the biographies, finding and increasing opportunities started just after their learning of English had begun. GLLs also expressed the importance of pushing themselves into a situation where they had to use a slightly more advanced form of English to finish the task at hand. PLLs, on the other hand, reported that they tended to avoid such a situation. The following excerpt from one of the biographies is an example of stressing the importance of 'pushing'.

(*From the intermediate stage on*) I have always tried very hard to push myself in a situation where task's demand goes a bit beyond my English ability. Pushing myself to the limit, I believe, is an indispensable step for the improvement of my English ability (S1YY-S, translation mine).

Results – Strategies in a Specific Skill Area

Listening

GLLs seem to strike a balance between 'deep listening' strategies and 'broad listening' strategies. The 'deep listening' strategies include such activities as dictation, and demand deep processing of aural input. 'Broad listening' asks listeners to look for the outline of the input. GLLs reported that they had spent much time on deep listening at the beginning stage of their learning and then shifted to broad listening. PLLs, on the other hand, reported few activities in deep listening, while they mentioned a lot about broad listening. The following two excerpts are from the biographies written by a GLL and a PLL respectively.

(*From the beginning to early intermediate stages*) I listened many times to tapes of recorded short stories and wrote down every single word that I under-stood. My emphasis was on dictation, not on understanding the meaning. […] Recently, I try to put my focus on understanding the outline of the input, though (GLL: S1KRi-L, translation mine).

(*From the beginning stage*) English has always been background music to me. I have not paid any special attention to it. But it has always been there. […] I don't care much about understanding the details. I just would like to know the rough meaning of the input (PLL: S1SH-L, translation mine).

Reading

Reading aloud many times is one of the most frequently mentioned strategies by GLLs. They reported that they had spent time on reading aloud especially at the beginning stage of their learning. PLLs, on the other hand, did not mention it at all. Reading analytically is the strategy mentioned both by GLLs and PLLs. GLLs, however, seem to

think much of this strategy, while PLLs do not. Analytical reading, according to some comments, seems to promote deep processing of passages. Reading a lot in the field where learners have interest is a strategy mentioned only by GLLs. They seem to like using this strategy at the intermediate stage of their learning.

Speaking

As for speaking, many GLLs claimed that they had memorised a large number of basic sentences at the beginning stage of their learning. In memorising the sentences, they reported that they first grasped the meaning and then intensely listened to a taped recording of the sentences to be memorised. After the process, they repeatedly wrote down the sentences and read them aloud many times. In addition, GLLs reported that they spent time on pattern practice of the memorised sentences. After consolidating the basic sentences upon which their output is based, they reported that they had begun to speak in English to themselves. Trying to have conversations with native speakers of English, by using memorised sentences, was also mentioned frequently by GLLs. On the other hand, PLLs made very few comments on speaking. Some of them just reported that they tried to have conversations in English with native speakers of the language, but no further details were available. The following excerpt is from one of the biographies written by a GLL:

> (*From the beginning*) I think I memorized more than 500 basic sentences that appeared in a radio course in English. In memorizing, I vocalized them many times, while listening to a taped recording of the sentences to be memorized. I also spent time on pattern practice of them (S1HK-S, translation mine).

Vocabulary

Many GLLs wrote that they had embedded target words in sentences and memorised the whole sentences. They reported that they had vocalised and written them down many times while memorising. Also, they guessed at the meanings of unknown words and later checked them in dictionaries. PLLs, on the other hand, reported that they had

preferred to make a word list and memorise words one by one from the list. PLLs did guess at the meanings of unknown words, but did not seem to confirm them later in dictionaries.

Pronunciation

Imitation seems to be a key strategy for good pronunciation and intonation. GLLs, with few exceptions, wrote that they made repeated attempts to imitate the taped recordings of natural English at the beginning and intermediate stages of their learning. They then recorded their own pronunciation and speech on tape and corrected it or had it corrected. In addition, beginning at the intermediate stage, some GLLs started 'shadowing' practices,[2] which are often used in training interpreters. No concrete descriptions on improving pronunciation were made by PLLs, which is a sharp contrast with GLLs. The following excerpt is from one of the biographies written by a GLL:

> I was, and I still am, very much interested in pronunciation of English. So, from the beginning, I have tirelessly spent a lot of time on imitating the taped recordings of natural English spoken by native speakers of the language. I don't know why, but I like the sounds of English (S1KY-P, translation mine).

The aforementioned results show that EFL learners do share some of the strategies with ESL learners. Some of them, however, are unique to the Japanese EFL context. For example, memorising basic expressions a lot, vocally repeating them, and pattern-practicing them are rarely mentioned strategies or strategies not emphasised in recent North American ESL literature. This is also the case with reading aloud. The author, however, cannot conclude anything definite just by analyzing the learning biographies of a limited number of college-level GLLs. So, he now turns to an analysis of interviews with highly advanced learners of English to test the validity of the results reported in the first study.

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2   Shadowing is 'an act or task in which (the) learner tracks the heard speech (in a foreign language) and vocalizes it as exactly as possible while listening attentively to the incoming information' (Tamai, 2001).

Study 2

Purpose

The purpose of the second study was to investigate the strategies preferred by highly advanced learners (HALs) of EFL and to test the validity of the first study.

Participants and Method

The participants of the second study were 18 HALs of EFL. All of them were born and raised in Japan. About half of them were college-level instructors of English, while the rest were simultaneous interpreters, a diplomat, and company employees. All of them started the full-scale learning of English after the age of 12. The teaching method experienced by the participants of this study was a mixture of traditional grammar translation method and audio-lingual habit approach. They had had very little experience in English-speaking countries before they started their jobs. Their family language was Japanese. English proficiency of most participants was evaluated and rated 'highly advanced' (being exceptionally good at English) by a native speaker of the language and by a Japanese teacher of English, both of whom had extensive experience in the field of TESOL. Some of the participants were not formally evaluated. However, since they were interpreters and a diplomat by profession and were regarded as extremely competent in English by their colleagues, we could conclude that their proficiency of English was highly advanced.

The author interviewed the participants on an individual basis in a relaxed atmosphere. The average time of the interviews was about an hour, and they were conducted in Japanese. Some of the participants who were not available for the interviews answered a questionnaire that included the same set of questions that the author had asked in the interviews. Additional questions were asked of them by e-mail or telephone.

Results – Metacognitive Strategies

A first finding is that HALs were fully aware of their learning process and the strategies they had used. They talked a lot about their own learning behaviors, and their explanations were very concrete and consistent, as was the case with the college-level GLLs. A second finding is that most of them reported that they had literally immersed themselves in English at the intermediate stage of their learning process. Asleep or awake, they fully devoted themselves to the learning of English. One participant commented:

> Studying English had always been great fun for me. I had spent a whole month or so, (doing nothing except) listening to English radio programs, reading English books and comics, and memorizing useful expressions I found. I even listened to English tapes while I was taking a bath. But, everything was fun (S2N-1, translation mine).

A third finding is that regularity is a key for the success of language learning. In the interview data, the author found many times words such as 'everyday', 'every morning', or 'at least four times or five times a week'. These words seem to suggest that our participants had done the same kind of activities regularly. One participant re-marked:

> Everyday, I saved about 30 minutes for listening to English on short-wave radio such as VOA. I also spent about one hour every night reading paperbacks or magazine articles in English. Yes, literally 'everyday' (S2T-1, translation mine).

As was the case with GLLs, the participants in this study reported that they had tried to maximise their opportunities to use English. They were eager participants in occasions in which they could use the language. And, if they could not find such occasions, they even talked to themselves in English. According to one comment:

> Having opportunities to use the language in communication increased the motivation for learning. This in turn led to better communication and consequently higher motivation. It was kind of a good circle, I think (S2T-4, translation mine).

Lastly, remarks on 'pushing oneself into using the language' were also often observed in this study. One participant commented:

> Once I got used to speaking, I really pushed myself into a situation where I had to speak a slightly advanced form of English. (…) In a sense, I had always tried to put some load on myself in terms of speaking English (S2K-2, translation mine).

Results – Strategies in a Specific Skill Area

Listening

HALs seem to have put relatively more emphasis on deep listening than on broad listening. One participant commented:

> According to my own experience, concentrating on each word in input was a good way to improve listening ability, at least at the beginning and the intermediate stages of my learning. I think just listening for meaning does not guarantee any improvements. You need to concentrate and listen many times to the unintelligible forms in the input, which leads to better listening ability (S2T-3, translation mine).

HALs, however, did use broad listening strategies, too, at the latter stages of their learning, which indicates that they shifted strategies according to their learning stages.

Reading

In reading, translation is a strategy avoided by HALs. They forced themselves to abandon translating by reading a lot at a fast rate. Paperbacks, according to the interviews, were considered to be a good source for their input. One HAL commented:

> I read really a lot. Paperbacks were my favorites. In reading, I tried not to translate. Reading a lot at a fast pace was a good way to avoid translation (S2K-1, translation mine).

As for the treatment of unknown words in reading, most HALs preferred not looking them up in a dictionary. They just guessed at the meanings or looked them up only when the words appeared many times in the text.

Speaking

All HALs reported that they had memorised a large number of basic constructions and sentences, while increasing the opportunities to use them. It seems that memorising and using went together hand in hand in the learning process of HALs. One participant commented:

> I memorized about 1000 English sentences that included basic conversational expressions and important structures. They are, in a sense, the resources or foundation upon which my output is based. Just memorizing, however, did not assure me a good command of speaking English. I did a great deal of pattern practice. And, then, I tried to use them actively in conversations. The pattern practice and the active use really worked (S2A-1, translation mine).

Vocabulary

As for vocabulary, as was the case with GLLs, many HALs wrote that they had embedded target words in sentences and memorised the whole sentences. They reported that they had vocalised and written them down many times in memorising. Always checking the pronunciation of new words was also a strategy often mentioned by HALs.

Pronunciation

The interviews indicated that imitating and shadowing the way native speakers of English speak seem to be key strategies for good pronunciation. HALs, with few exceptions, also remarked that they had strong concern for pronunciation accuracy. Their concern was not limited to the field of segmental sounds. They seemed to have a strong desire to imitate the suprasegmentals such as intonation and rhythm. One participant said:

> I broke two tape recorders in learning English. Why? Because I had re-played and imitated the tapes hundred of times, which might be fatal to tape recorders. I tried to imitate the sounds, the stresses, the rhythms, and the intonations. I tried to be a native speaker of English (S2N-1, translation mine).

These comments are compatible with the findings of some empirical studies such as Purcell and Suter (1980), and Moyer (1999), in which concern for pronunciation accuracy and receiving training on suprasegmental aspects might be good predictors for native-like pronunciation in adult learning. Lastly, some HALs told that they had watched carefully on the video the way native speakers moved their mouth, lips, and tongue.

Writing

As for writing, borrowing expressions and sentences from good samples is a strategy mentioned by some HALs. The interviews indicated that our participants had found good samples on their own in reading. So, in a sense, reading a lot and borrowing expressions led to the expansion of their writing ability. They also reported that writing a lot and having their writing corrected was a good strategy for the improvement of writing skill. One HAL remarked:

> I read a lot. I borrowed every useful expression and used it in writing. I also asked a native speaker of English to correct my writing. Then, I learned the corrected version by heart. That's all I did for improving my writing. You know, good writing does not come from nothing. You've got to read a lot and borrow expressions. You've got to have resources or foundation for writing (S2K-3, translation mine).

Grammar

Many HALs reported that they had thought much about grammar in their learning. They considered that grammar was a kind of scaffolding upon which they could climb up the hill of language learning. Participants commented:

> Knowledge of grammar was essential for my success in learning. I used and still am using the knowledge actively in many situations, in many ways (S2T-1, translation mine).

> I think focusing on forms and grammar was a good way to improve the accuracy of my speech (S2S-1, translation mine).

Lastly, HALs often emphasised accuracy over fluency at the latter stages of learning. Since they reported to prefer emphasising fluency over accuracy at the beginning stage, this seems to be an example of shifting strategies according to their learning stages.

The picture that has emerged is quite similar to the one found in the first study reported above. It is true that the use of some strategies is different. For example, GLLs in the first study did not mention much about 'learning intensively', but HALs talked a lot about the strategy. Likewise, GLLs did not report 'emphasising accuracy over fluency', but HALs did report the behaviour. There are indeed some differences, but the fundamental preferences observed are certainly very similar.

Discussion

Table 20 below is a summary of the findings, which seems to indicate that there are strategies uniquely preferred in the Japanese EFL context. These strategies are i) metacognitive strategies related to maximising input in English and, above all, the opportunities to use the language, ii) skill-specific strategies related to conscious language learning, iii) memory strategies related to internalising the linguistic system of English, and iv) cognitive strategies for practicing the language such as imitating, shadowing, and pattern-practicing.

As for i), since the participants in the two studies reported above were all in the EFL environment, opportunities to use the language had to be sought vigorously by them, which resulted in the unique use of some metacognitive strategies. As for ii), in adult language

learning, as some studies (e.g., DeKeyser, 200l; Schmidt, 1990) indicate, conscious learning plays an important role and thus our participants often used strategies related to conscious learning. As for iii) and iv) above, in the EFL context, building and expanding the linguistic foundation or resources do not come as easily as it does in the ESL context. EFL learners must devote time and energy to memorizing a certain number of basic sentences, and also must be sensitive to foreign sounds/prosody and imitate them as perfectly as possible. Accumulating static knowledge, however, does not seem to promise any success in language learning. Learners have to spend time and energy on pattern-practicing and then putting the knowledge to practical use. This is why some memory strategies for internalising the linguistic system of English and cognitive strategies for practicing the language are preferred uniquely in the EFL context.

A second finding is that the use of some strategies is common not only to the learners in the EFL context, but also to those in the ESL context reported in the North American literature. For example, 'emphasising fluency over accuracy' at the beginning stage, which was found to be a prominent strategy in the EFL context, is also a strategy often mentioned in the ESL literature (e.g., Rubin and Thompson, 1982). The author thus assumes that the use of the common strategies might well fit the underlying learning process, which is common to us all. On the other hand, the use of context-specific, or environmental-unique strategies might promote the survival of learners in the environment. So, the distinction between the common learning strategies and the context-specific learning strategies could be important in categorising strategies.

Finally, the results indicate that the use of some strategies is closely connected to a certain stage of language learning. Our participants often reported a shift in their strategies according to their learning stages. Further attention, therefore, should be paid to the concept of 'the stages of learning' in the future research.

Strategies	*PLLs*	*GLLs*	*HALs*	*Stage*
Metacognitive strategies				
Knowing their own strategies concretely		X	X	ALL
Practicing regularly			X	B-I
Maximizing opportunities to use the language		X	X	B-I
Learning intensively			X	I
Pushing oneself into using English		X	X	I-A

Summary of the Two Studies Reported

Strategies in a specific skill area	*PLLs*	*GLLs*	*HALs*	*Stage*
Listening				
'Deep' listening		X	X	B- I
'Broad' listening	X	X	X	I
Reading				
Reading aloud		X	X	B- I
Reading analytically	X	X	X	I
Reading a lot		X	X	I
Reading in a specific field		X		I
Avoid Translation			X	ALL
Speaking				
Memorizing sentences		X	X	B
Pattern-practicing		X	X	B
Speaking to oneself in English		X	X	I
Emphasizing fluency over accuracy		X	X	B-I
Emphasizing accuracy over fluency			X	A

Summary of the Two Studies Reported (continued)

Vocabulary	PLLs	GLLs	HALs	Stage
Embedding new words in sentences		X	X	B
Always checking pronunciation of new words			X	B
Vocalising and writing many times		X	X	B-I
Guessing and confirming meanings		X		I
Making a word list and memorising words	X			B
Pronunciation				
Paying special attention to sounds/ prosody		X	X	B-I
Imitating, (recording,) and correcting		X	X	B-I
Shadowing		X	X	I
Watching carefully NS's lips and tongue			X	?
Writing				
Borrowing expressions from good samples			X	I
Writing regularly/ having their writing corrected			X	I-A
Grammar				
Learning consciously/Attention to forms			X	I

Summary of the Two Studies Reported (continued)

Table 20. Legend: 'X' in Table indicates that the strategy was frequently mentioned. 'PLLs' means 'poor language learners', while 'GLLs' indicates 'good language learners' in Study 1. 'HALs' means 'highly advanced learners' in Study 2. 'Stage' indicates the estimated learning stage in which the strategy was used most (B: Beginning, I: Intermediate, A: Advanced, ALL: All stages). A blank in the 'Stage' column means 'not enough data available for estimating the learning stages in which the strategy was used'.

Conclusion

This chapter reported on two descriptive studies about good foreign language learners conducted in the Japanese EFL context. The first study examined the learning behaviours appearing in the language learning biographies written by 40 college-level good learners of EFL. The second study investigated the strategies frequently used by 18 highly advanced EFL learners. Results suggest that 1) there are some metacognitive/cognitive strategies especially favoured in the Japanese EFL context, 2) the distinction between the common learning strategies and the context-specific learning strategies could be important in categorising strategies, and 3) the use of some strategies seems to be closely connected to the stages of learning. These findings confirm the results of Gao (2006), and Takeuchi (2003a), showing that paying due attention to both a) the contexts in which learners are learning a foreign/second language and b) the stages of learning in which learners are situated is indispensable for a deeper understanding of strategy use.

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