

The Relationship between Learning Strategies and Learning Beliefs in EFL Taiwanese Technical and Vocational College Students

Shu-Feng Tseng

Department of Applied Foreign Language,
Cheng-Shiu University in Kaohsiung,
Taiwan (R.O.C.)

E-mail: shufengtseng@yahoo.com.tw

Abstract:

This study identified the strategies and belief of students who were in technical and vocational colleges in Taiwan. The study assessed variables of culture, language, stage of learning, age, motivation, EF, and SL settings, previous language learning experience, learning styles, and gender. The research used Dr. Cindy Huang's SILL and BALLI questionnaires to modify with a sample of 927 technical and vocational college students randomly selected from three Taiwanese vocational colleges. Students were from St. John's and St. Mary's Institute of Technology, national Taichung Institute of Technology and Cheng Shiu University.

An overall return rate of 927 students (84.3%) was achieved. Findings emerged from this study include the following. (1) Female students used better social, metacognitive strategies than male students. (2) Students who attended English cram schools employed better cognitive, social, and metacognitive strategies than those who did not attend English cram schools. (3) Continuing Education Division in Two-Year College students had better learning strategies than those who were in a Two-Year College in the day Division, Four-Year College in the day Division, and Continuing Education in a Four-Year College. (4) Scoring 80 and above were superior to those scoring lower in learning strategies. (5) The students with good English proficiency used learning strategies more frequently. (6) The students attended English cram schools revealed a stronger motivation in learning beliefs. (7) Scoring 80 and above were superior to those scoring lower in communication.

Key words: learning strategies, learning beliefs, variables of culture

1. Introduction

Within the field of education over the last few decades a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. This change has been reflected in various ways in language education and applied linguistics. Students in foreign/second language education have focused on learners, especially on learners' learning styles, learning strategies, and their belief about language learning in the last decades of this century (Rubin, 1975; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Holec, 1987; Horwitz, 1987; Schmeck, 1988; O'Malley & Uhl Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

English as a foreign language (EFL) has been a required course in vocational colleges for a long time in Taiwan. The static teaching model of teacher-centeredness is widely used in Taiwan (Huang, 1989; Lo, 1996), little attention has been paid to vocational college students' learning. How do vocational college students learn a foreign language? What are their perceptions of language learning, such as English? Students' voices can never be ignored in successful language learning. Moreover, students in language learning strategies and beliefs show great potential in the field of second language acquisition (ku, 1995). Therefore, answers to the above questions have to be highlighted if educators are to better meet their learners' needs to improve EFL education.

Though there are a lot of studies that focus on the above questions, few studies have investigated Taiwanese vocational colleges EFL learning strategy use and learning beliefs. Because of this lack, I would like to focus my research on the language learning strategies and learning beliefs of vocational college students in Taiwan who are studying English as a foreign language.

2. Review of Literature

2-1. Background of learning strategies

Since cognitive theory matured during the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant focus became learning as knowledge construction. Mayer (1992) noted that: "... as a result, the view of the learner changed from that of a recipient of knowledge to that of a constructor of knowledge, an autonomous learner with metacognitive skills for controlling his or her cognitive processes during learning" (p. 407). Based on the studies, while the traditional Stimulus-Response approach implied a focus on teaching strategies, the newer cognitive approach encouraged educators to consider learning strategies as well as teaching strategies.

2-2. Factors Influencing the Choices of L2 Learning Strategies

2-2-1. Cultural Background

Culture has taken an important place in language teaching and learning studies. Some research findings (Huang & Van Naerssen, 1987; Politzer, 1983; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986) indicate that Asians prefer strategies involving rote memorization and a focus on the linguistic code. Asians also showed more reluctance than Hispanics to try new learning techniques and did not respond well to strategy training (O'Malley et al., 1985). Reid (1987) found differences among ESL students of different cultural backgrounds in their tendency to use or avoid certain strategies or approaches to learning.

2-2-2. Language Studied

Research suggests that the language studied partly determines the use of learning strategies (Chamot, O'Malley, Kupper, & Hernandez, 1987; Oxford, 1990a; Polizer, 1983).

2-2-3. Stage of Learning

Learners at different learning stages use different strategies, with more frequent and more effective strategy use by more advanced learners (Bialystok, 1981; Chamot et al., 1987; Green & Oxford, 1985; Politzer, 1983). An alternative explanation may be that only successful language learners progress to advanced-level courses, with weaker ones simply dropping out.

2-2-4. Age

Age has been found to be a factor affecting learning strategy use. Older learners often use more complex, sophisticated strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Leaver (reported by Oxford, 1990) discovered that the differences between adults and children in the use of strategies were due to the ways in which they obtained their language skills, and were not simply a result of age; the younger subjects had acquired a language in a natural way and the adults had in a classroom setting.

2-2-5. FL versus SL Settings

Differences in strategy use are apparent between FL and SL settings. In general, learners in SL learning environment use strategies more frequently than those in FL learning situations (Green & Oxford, 1995).

2-2-6. Previous language Learning Experience

Anecdotal evidence reported in Larsen-Freeman (1983) and some studies (e.g., Klein, 1995;

Thomas, 1988, 1992; Zobl, 1992) suggest that bilinguals do indeed have an advantage, particularly in terms of employing enhanced metalinguistic and cognitive skills, lexical knowledge, and a less conservative learning procedure.

2-2-7. Learning style and culture

Research suggests that learning style determines strategy use (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Rossi-Le, 1999), and it also reveals the existence of a wide range of individual learning styles among students from different cultural and language backgrounds (Reid, 1987). Hofstede (2001) defined Culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another”. Culture can be conceptualized as “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations” (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, p. 15). Joy and Kolb (2007) concluded that culture has an impact on the learning style scales that is comparable to that of some of the demographic variables. Therefore, culture has the ability to shape the ways in which its members receive, process and act on information and experience.

2-2-8. Gender

Sunderland (1994) cited studies suggesting that girls display superior verbal ability in both first and second languages, that in many countries first or second languages are seen by teachers and students as girls’ subjects, and that girls worldwide tend to select language study more than boys do. Coleman (1997) wrote that “females are typically superior to males in nearly all aspects of language learning, except listening capability.” (p. 112)

2-2-9. Factors Affect Learner Beliefs

Factors that have been thought to determine or influence learner beliefs are numerous and include:

1. Family and home background (Dias, 2000; Schommer, 1990, 1993);
2. Cultural background (Alexander & Dochy, 1995);
3. Classroom/social peers (Arnold, 1999);
4. Interpretations of prior repetitive experiences (Little, Singleton & Slivius, 1984; Gaoyin & Alvermann, 1995; Kern, 1995; Roberts, 1992); and
5. Individual differences such as gender (Siebert, 2003) and personality (Furnham, Johnston & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997)

2-2-10. Relationship between Beliefs and Strategies Use

In many cases, researchers have suggested that learners' preconceived beliefs about language learning would likely affect the way they use learning strategies and learn a second language (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Nyikos & Oxford, 1989; Wenden, 1986a, 1987b).

Some language learners believe that one should not say anything in the new language until one can say it correctly, and some believe that if beginning learners are allowed to make errors in the new language, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later.

In addition, Abraham and Vann (1987) have also referred to the relationship between learners' beliefs and learning strategy use when reporting their case study with two ESL learners—one successful and one unsuccessful. They suggest that learners' 'beliefs about how language operates, and consequently, how it is learned' may affect the variety and flexibility of their strategy use (p. 95).

3. Methods

3-1. Sites

The sites selected for this study were the St. John's and St. Mary's Institute of Technology at Taipei County, in the northern part of Taiwan, the National Taichung Institute of Technology at Taichung city, in the central part of Taiwan, and Cheng Shiu University in the southern part of Taiwan.

3-2. Population and Sample

The population of vocational college EFL learners in these three institutions in the fall (2015) of 1,100 students were selected at random for participation in this study.

3-3. Instrumentation

The survey was modified by Cindy Huang (1997). The researcher obtained permission from Dr. Shenghui Cindy Huang (See Appendix) to use her modified survey.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics including means, standard deviations, *t*-test, one-way analyses of variance, product-moment correlation, and regression.

4-1. Summary of the findings

The following table shows the result of the statistical analysis of the learning strategy of technical and vocational college students with different background variables:

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| Mode of entrance | | | | -2.99** | -2.67* | | -2.14* |
| Attending English cram schools | | | | | | | |
| | | | 3.09** | 2.07* | 2.48* | | 2.37* |
| Educational systems | | | | | | | |
| | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | Two-Year college > Continuing education division in Four-Year college | 7.069** * |
| Midterm grade | | | | | | | |
| | 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 80 and above > 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 60 to 69/70 to 79/80 and above > below 60 | 40.277** |
| English proficiency | | | | | | | |
| | Good/average > poor | Good/average > poor | Good/average > poor | Good/average > poor | Good/average > poor | Good/average > poor | 83.454** |

The following table shows the result of the statistical analysis of the learning belief of technical and vocational college students with different background variables:

| Background variables of individual learning beliefs | Essence | Aptitude | Satisfaction | Communication skill | Motivation | General learning beliefs |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| Gender Mode of entrance attending/not attending English cram schools | | | 2.78** | | 2.08* | 2.07* |
| Educational systems | | | | | | |
| Midterm grade | | Below 60/60 to 69 to 80 and above | | 2.75* | | |
| English proficiency | | poor > average | | | | |

The first hypothesis of the study is that technical and vocational college students with different background variables show a difference in their general and individual learning strategies. Results of the study are as follows:

1. Gender and learning strategies

Study results showed a significant difference in the general learning strategy as well as the social and metacognitive learning strategies of male and female technical and vocational college students.

2. Mode of entrance and learning strategy

Results of the study did not show a significant difference in the general and individual learning strategies of technical and vocational college students with different modes of entrance.

3. Attend English cram schools and learning strategies

Results of the study showed a significant difference in the general learning strategies as well as the cognitive, social and metacognitive learning strategies of students in technical and vocational colleges who attended English cram schools and those who did not.

4. Educational systems and learning strategies

Results of the study showed a significant difference in the general learning strategies as well as the cognitive, social, metacognitive and memory-related learning strategies of students in different educational systems. The findings indicated that students in Two-Year colleges had more superior memory-related, affective and metacognitive learning strategies than students in the Continuing Education Division in Four-Year College. In terms of cognitive, social and compensation learning strategies, the Two-Year College students are also superior to students in Four-Year Colleges and the Continuing Education Division in Four-Year College.

5. Midterm grade and learning strategies

Results showed a significant difference in the general learning strategies of technical and vocational college students with different midterm grades. The differences were also in their cognitive, social, metacognitive, memory-related, affective and compensation learning strategies. In terms of the memory-related, affective and social learning strategies, students scoring 60 to 69, 70 to 79 and 80 and above were superior to students who scored below 60. In the metacognitive and compensation categories, students who scored 60 to 69, 70 to 79 and 80 and above were superior to students who scored below 60. Those scoring 80 and above were superior to those scoring 60 to 69.

6. English proficiency and learning strategies

Results showed a significance in the general learning strategies of technical and vocational college students with different levels of proficiency in English. The differences were also in their cognitive, social, metacognitive, memory-related, affective and compensation learning strategies, with those at the “good” and “average” levels superior to those at the “poor” level.

5. Conclusions

The following conclusions are based upon the data obtained from the statistical analyses of the data.

1. Results of the study suggest that vocational college students do not have enough confidence in their performance.
2. Students with better English learning strategies have higher achievement.
3. There is a significant difference in the learning strategy of students with different gender.
4. There is a significant difference in the learning strategy of students who attend English cram schools.
5. There is a significant difference in the learning strategy of students from different educational system.

6. There is a significant difference in the learning strategy of students with different midterm grade.
7. There is a significant difference in the learning strategy of students with different level of English proficiency.
8. In terms of learning belief, a significant difference is observed only between students who attend English cram schools and students who don't.
9. There is a positive correlation between their compensation learning strategy and the essence of their learning belief.
10. The students' cognitive, metacognitive and compensation learning strategies have a negative correlation with their learning aptitude.
11. The affective and social learning strategies have a positive correlation with learning satisfaction.
12. The cognitive, social, metacognitive, memory, affective and compensation strategies have a positive correlation with communication skill in learning.
13. The social and metacognitive learning strategies of the students also have a positive correlation with their learning motivation.
14. The predictive ability of the students' learning strategies with regard to their learning beliefs is significant only in the social learning strategy. But the social variable accounts for a mere 1.1 % of the learning belief variance³ explained, which means the relationship between the two variables is rather weak.

6. Recommendation for Practice

Based on the study, the following recommendation for practice are made.

1. In order for learning to be effective in achieving desired outcomes, educators need to have an awareness and understanding of students' learning strategies and learning beliefs. Taiwanese vocational college education teaching should seek to move beyond the enhancement of performance within a narrow spectrum of activities and considerate the development of foundation skills, such as self-directed learning. Teachers need to collaborate actively as a community, beyond traditional constraints, rigidity, and absolute paradigms.
2. To improve Taiwanese vocational students' English proficiency, educators need to know more about students' English proficiency, educators need to know more about students' background. Most vocational college students don't come from a rich family, only 3.2% of the students who attend English cram schools. The study shows the students who attend English cram school have a better learning strategies. The educators of MOE should listen to the voice of Taiwanese vocational college students and have a better language policy to help them.

3. It is better to offer more free EFL Remedial Instruction for Taiwanese vocational college students to learn on campus. The more English classes they take, the better learning strategies they will have. This is a pathway for them to get a good English proficiency. Educators in Taiwanese vocational colleges should pay more attention to building relationships with students. Most students' English performance is not good enough for them to have confidence.
4. Teachers should be flexible, with a variety of useful techniques they can use, while keeping interaction central among the teacher and students, students and the teacher, and students themselves, interaction should be active rather than passive, cognitive rather than behavioristic, nondirective rather than directive, and personal rather than manipulative. The EFL teachers should remember that ancient Chinese proverb:
Tell me and I will forget,
Teach me and I will remember,
Involve me and I will learn.
In EFL learning, a student-centered approach is more popular than a teacher-centered one in the EFL learning.
5. EFL teachers should provide meaningful, purposeful, authentic, and functional learning activities and tasks, where students can engage themselves in social interactions and enhance their learning experience, and accommodate their learning strategies and beliefs. The improvement of the Joint Vocational College Entrance Examination (JVCEE) is essential because preparation for the examination directs learning, and there is a general neglect of cultivating listening and speaking ability.
6. Curriculum planning and development plays a very significant role in the educational process. The mandate of any educational program lies its curriculum. Hence, the heart of whatever efforts there are to teach students EFL should be consolidated within the language curriculum and consequent language policies (Judd, 1987). At the same time, it is also important for the language curriculum to develop their sensitivity to difference across culture and strengthen the students' sense of being a Taiwanese who respects and accepts other cultures.

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