
An Empirical Study of Language Learning Strategies and Speaking Abilities

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ABSTRACT

The importance of oral English learning has been paid more and more attention from English majors. However, inefficient oral English learning is an outstanding problem for many English majors in English learning. In addition to the linguistic environment, the lack of an effective strategy guide is also one of the key factors causing this problem. In order to figure out whether the use of the language learning strategy is helpful to the English major students' speaking ability or not, in this study, thirty-five English major students are surveyed by a questionnaire on their oral English learning and strategy use. It is found that most of the students use learning strategies in their oral English learning. What's more, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies are the most useful strategies for students' oral English. In other words, the use of learning strategies is helpful to college students' speaking abilities. Therefore, to improve students' oral proficiency, this paper proposes that teachers should systematically guide students in oral learning strategies, especially in cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies training.

KEYWORDS: English learning, language learning strategies, oral English learning strategies, English major

Introduction

The ultimate goal of English learning is to apply it in practice. In recent years, the teaching level of spoken English in China has been greatly improved. However, due to the influence of the traditional college English teaching mode, students have encountered great obstacles and difficulties in communicating with each other in English. What's more, the College English Classroom Teaching Requirements formulated by the Ministry of Education in 2007 stipulates that the goal of college English teaching in China is to "cultivate students' comprehensive English application capabilities, especially listening and speaking skills. To enable students to communicate oral and written information effectively in English in their future work and social contacts" (Hou & Jiao, 2018). It requires that college foreign language teaching should change the mechanical classroom that pays attention to grammar practice in the past, and provide students with effective instruction in oral learning strategies, so as to cultivate and improve students' oral skills. A lot of studies have been done on second language learning strategies both abroad and in China. Research on learning strategies abroad

has emerged since the middle of the 1970s. Rubin (1975) found that good language learners of all ages share seven common characteristics. Firstly, the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser, in other words, a good guesser is one who gathers and stores information in an efficient manner. Secondly, they have a strong desire to communicate or to learn from communication. Thirdly, they are often not inhibited, that is to say, the good language learner is willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate. What's more, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form, which means they constantly look for patterns in the language. In addition, the good language learner prefers to practice, such as pronouncing words, making up sentences or initiating conversations with his fellow students in the target language. Besides, the good language learner monitors his own and the speech of others. Last but not least, they attend to meaning. That is, the good language learner knows that it is not sufficient to concentrate on the grammar of the language or to the surface form of speech (Rubin, 1975). From then, Wenden, Cohen, O'Malley, Chamot, Oxford and so on engaged in the research on learning strategies in second language acquisition (Lu, 2013). In China, the study of language learning strategies began in 1984 (Wen & Wang, 2004). Wen Qiufang and Wang Lifei (2004) pointed out that the study of English learning strategies in China has made great progress. The research results of more than 30 years have not only introduced the theory of language learning strategies and its research situation (Gu & Zang, 2017), but also have empirical research on Chinese students. These studies mainly focus on the following aspects: study on differences of learning strategies in English (Wen, 1995; Peng, 2014), reading strategies (Liu, 2002; Xu, 2003;), listening strategies (Wang, 1992; Li, 2007; Ling, 2012; Chang, 2016; Zhao, 2016), vocabulary learning strategies (Gu, 1994; Wu & Wang, 1998; Zhang, 2001), relationship between communication strategies and English grades (Level) (Wen, 1995; Wang, 2002; Li & Zhang, 2018), and study on the relationship between learning conception and motivation and English language proficiency (Wen, 1995; Li & Liu, 2015). Wu and Wang (1998) found that Chinese students use a variety of strategies including metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies to learn English vocabulary. When it comes to listening strategies, metacognitive strategy teaching can effectively help learners improve their listening performance (Chang & Hao, 2016). However, the research on learning strategies of listening, speaking, reading and writing language skills is seriously unbalanced, especially in phonetic and intonation and grammar learning strategies. The study of social and affective strategies is still relatively poor. So far, no empirical study has been conducted on how Chinese students overcome anxiety. In comparison, the studies about vocabulary learning strategies are better (Wen & Wang, 2004). In addition, the relationship between learning strategies use and language achievement or level needs to be further studied, and there is a lack of comparability between the different studies (Zheng, 2011). From 2000 to 2009, only 3% of the articles were written on oral strategies (Jiao, 2013). Various studies on the relationship between learning strategies use and English ability have emerged as time moves on. Yet the studies on the relationship between English learning strategies and English-speaking ability are not commonly seen. Until now, only a few studies have demonstrated the nature of the relationship (Wang, 2014). Therefore, in this paper, 35 English major students are surveyed by a questionnaire on their oral English learning and strategies use, which aims to answer the following two research questions: (1) How about the general use situation of English major students' language learning strategies? (2) Whether the use of the language learning strategy is helpful to the English major students' speaking ability or not? If yes, which language learning strategies are more helpful? The Definition and the Categories of Language Learning Strategies Many key figures give us different definitions of learning strategies in the field of second language acquisition. As is stated by Rigney, learning strategies are programs that students use to obtain, preserve, and extract knowledge and operations (Rigney, 1978). According to Duffy and Roethler (1982),

learning strategies are implicit rule systems. Stern (1983) held that learning strategies refer only to “the basic ideas adopted by language learners in their learning process.” Oxford (1990) maintained that learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and transferrable to new situations. Besides, Ellis (1999) defined that “learning strategies are the means or steps that learners use to develop inter-language.” In short, language learning strategies are the methods or behaviors adopted by learners to improve language learning. Scholars at home and abroad have classified learning strategies from different perspectives. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) divided learning strategies into metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social-affective strategies. According to Wen (1995), learning strategies have two categories: management strategies and language learning strategies. Moreover, learning strategies were classified into language learning strategies and language using strategies by Cohen (1998). Oxford (1990) classified the strategies that are directly related to the language are direct strategies, including memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies; The strategies that are not directly related to the language are indirect strategies, including metacognitive strategies, emotional strategies, and social strategies. Memory strategies are those strategies that can help learners learn and memorize language knowledge in various techniques and methods. For example, in China, English learners were required to memorize the words to help themselves to enlarge the amount of vocabulary. Memory strategies are regarded as the most basic strategies. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies that make learners understand a new language by a variety of useful means. Such strategies are a varied lot, ranging from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing. With all their variety, cognitive strategies are unified by a common function: manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner (Oxford, 1990). As Oxford (1990) stated, compensation strategies could be helpful for the learners to learn and use the new language when they lacked language knowledge. For example, when students don’t know how to express a new word, they choose to use body language as compensation strategies at this time. Metacognitive strategies are self-monitoring and self-regulating activities, focusing on the process and product of reading. They are the learner’s awareness and understanding of their psychological state. Affective strategies refer to learner’s emotional state, for example, their emotions, attitudes, and values. It is very helpful for students to cultivate self-confidence and control their emotions and learning attitudes. Social strategies are used by learners who try to practice spoken English in all kinds of social occasions. Social strategies can provide more social contact for language learners. As is discussed before, language learning strategies play an important role to help learners recognize and effectively regulate their cognitive learning activities and improve language learning efficiency. This paper mainly holds Oxford’s classification, which is widely used and involves thousands of learners (Ellis, 1994: 539).

Methodology

This paper aims to investigate the use of oral English learning strategies among English major and their oral English ability, so as to find out whether the use of the language learning strategy is helpful to the English major students’ speaking ability or not. To be more specific, this study will solve the questions raised above as well as provide useful findings for oral English learning and teaching. Participants The participants are English majors from the School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University. Thirty-five students took part in this survey, all of whom are from Grade 2018 and 2017 taught by the same teacher in spoken English. The reason why these students were chosen as the subject of the survey was that freshman and sophomore have foreign English classes, and foreign teachers could assess the students’ spoken language level. The results will be more reliable. In

particular, sophomore students basically no longer have formal oral classroom learning after the second year. To improve their oral skills further, they need to study by themselves. Therefore, helping these students to develop effective oral learning strategies at this stage is very conducive to the self-study of oral English in the future. Instruments and Procedures A questionnaire and an oral test paper are employed in this study. The form and the content of the test paper are mainly from a foreign language teacher, which is more reliable and valid than an informal quiz in evaluating the college student's spoken English. The full mark is 100 points, the score over 90 points is excellent, under 60 is considered to fail in the test. The questionnaire is based on the model developed by Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. Two parts are designed in this questionnaire, basic information and questions about strategies. Students have been told that the questionnaire is only used for academic research and would exert no influence on their academic grades. In the end, 30 questionnaires were collected totally, and all of them were valid.

Grades	Total
96-100	19 (63%)
91-95	7 (23%)
86-90	3 (10%)
81-85	1 (3%)
Total	30

Table 1: Oral Test Results From the table, we can see that more than half of the students' grades were above 95 points, their oral English are at a high level. In other words, high-level speakers are more than the low-level ones among the students.

Category	Main idea
Memory strategies	Remember something (1-4)
Cognitive strategies	Employ the mental processes (5-7)
Compensation strategies	Making up for missing knowledge (8-11)
Meta-cognitive strategies	Organize and evaluate the knowledge (12-15)
Affective strategies	Manage the emotion (16-19)
Social strategies	Learn spoken English with others (20-24)

Table 2: The Structure and the Main Content of the Questionnaire. The table, clearly showed the structure of the questionnaire. The options of every question are as follows: 1 = Never or hardly, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always or Almost Always. The Questionnaire data was collected and input in the computer, and then was analyzed by SPSS Software. Thirty-five English majors are surveyed, and thirty questionnaires are valid.

Mean score	Frequency	Evaluation
1.0-1.5	Low	Never
1.6-2.5	Low	Usually
2.6-3.5	Medium	Sometimes
3.6-4.5	High	Usually
4.6-5.0	High	Always

Table3. Descriptive Statistics

The analysis of these statistics shown in the above table is based on the scale described by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford's interpretation of averages, if the mean score is above 3.5, it is regarded as high use of that strategies; when the average score ranges from 2.5 to 3.4, that means this sort of strategies are sometimes used by learners; and that the mean score under 2.4 indicates that this sort of strategies is generally not used by learners.

Frequency	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Usually not	Never
Average scores	4.6-5.0	3.6-4.5	2.6-3.5	1.6-2.5	1.0- 1.5
Number/Percentage	0	5(17%)	21(70%)	4(13%)	0

Table 4. Frequency of the Oral English Learning Strategy Used. According to the table, most of the students use learning strategies in their spoken English learning.

Results and Analysis

General Use of Students' Language Learning Strategy.

Strategy Category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Memory strategies	3.20	.74
Compensation strategies	3.20	.70
Cognitive strategies	3.26	.81
Meta-cognitive strategies	3.15	.75
Affective strategies	2.93	.53
Social strategies	3.07	.68
Total	3.13	.53

Table 5 The Average Scores of Students' English Learning Strategy Use After data processing, the mean score (Mean) and standard deviation (SD) in each of the six categories for all participants can be displayed in table 5. As can be seen from the above table, it is not difficult to find that despite the differences in the level of use by strategy group, all means for the six strategy categories fall within 2.5-3.4 (medium use). From the above table, we can see that the overall average frequency of students' oral English learning strategies use is 3.13, which means that the subjects just use English learning strategies sometimes for improving their oral English. Generally speaking, English majors use oral English learning strategies in their speaking consciously. Among the means of six strategy categories, the mean of cognitive strategies is relatively the highest. In other words, the most commonly used learning strategies among those are cognitive strategies. For example, "I watch English TV programs, English movies or listen to English broadcasts", "I have mastered some fixed sentences and used them in my oral study." In other words, students use cognitive strategies, memory strategies and compensation strategies more often than the other strategies. In addition, another type of strategy is also comparatively often used by learners, which is meta-cognitive strategies, followed by cognitive strategy, memory strategies and compensation strategies. The least used strategies are affective strategies. Oxford (1990) considered learners' emotions and the mood as the main factors influencing the learning effect, but it seems that college students are not good at using affective strategies. Students said, "When I speak English, I feel nervous and I cannot control myself."

The Influence of Language Learning Strategies Use

Strategy Category	Significance
Memory strategies	.118
Compensation strategies	.112
Cognitive strategies	.016
Meta-cognitive strategies	.004
Affective strategies	.779
Social strategies	.038
Total	.012

From the table, we can see that $P=.012$. It means that the use of language learning strategies can reflect the college students' speaking abilities. In other words, the use of oral English learning strategies is helpful to the English major students' speaking ability. Most of the students can more or less use learning strategies in spoken English learning process, the more strategies the college students use, the better their spoken English are. The significance of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies is .016, .004, and .038. The studies show that these strategies are the most useful strategies for students' speaking ability. These strategies can help students make learning plans and evaluate the effectiveness of their spoken English learning, summarize effective learning methods. If the students want to

improve their spoken English efficiently, they should put emphasis on learning how to use these strategies appropriately.

Conclusions and Implications

According to the data collected from the questions designed to find out how the general use situation of English major students' language learning strategies, the study results have shown that English majors just use English learning strategies sometimes for improving their oral English. Relatively, their levels of using cognitive strategies are the highest; the least used strategies are affective strategies. This finding is in contract with Lu's (2013) study. Based on the analysis, English majors can benefit from the application of oral English learning strategies. As a consequence, it is necessary for students to learn some effective strategies. Firstly, the findings have already shown the significance of integrating language learning strategies into oral English learning. In addition, from the table, we have found that cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies are the most helpful strategies for students' speaking ability. Consequently, in teaching, teachers should attach great importance to train students consciously to use these strategies. In other words, it is important to integrate language learning strategies into oral English learning. For instance, teachers can guide students to develop the good habit of watching English TV programs, English movies or listening to English broadcasts; help students to master some fixed sentence patterns and use them in oral learning and encourage students to try to use English to express their ideas in real life and learning, Secondly, students are not good at using affective strategies to improve spoken English. As a consequence, teachers should encourage students to speak and hold the right attitude towards their speaking errors. Besides, teachers play significant roles in helping learners create more opportunities for students to speak English and take a variety of oral practice activities. For students, they should cultivate interest and control their emotional conditions in spoken English learning. Moreover, students should try their best to learn more English learning strategies, and be clear about the functions of the strategies.

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