Grammar Learning Strategy and Students’ Perception of Grammar Learning and Teaching

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Language learning strategies are the specific actions and thoughts that students use intentionally to make improvements in developing second language learning. Studies focus on the use of language learning strategies by second language learners have been favored by researchers over the past decades. The following five articles investigate the grammar learning strategies and students’ perception of grammar learning and teaching, which discuss the importance of empowering second language learners with effective learning strategies and getting to know more about students’ perception of grammar learning and teaching. First, in Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s article (2007), the current issue of language strategies and learning strategy instruction are clarified. Bade (2008) then investigates students’ attitude towards grammar learning. In addition, the two studies made by Pawlak’s (2009) Tılfarlıoğlu (2005) further explore the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and language attainment by second language learners. Moreover, Kemp’s study (2007) discovers the grammar learning strategies adopted by multilingual leaners.

To begin with, Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s article (2007) analyzes the current issue of language strategies and learning strategy instruction in general. The use of learning strategies applied by second language learners is defined by researchers as the actions and thoughts learners applied intentionally when they are attempting to increase their learning of the second language (p. 553). The article discusses the learning strategies and strategies instruction primarily in three categories, that is, types of learning strategies, learner autonomy and strategies training and other strategy-related factors, which allows me to gain an overall understanding of
learning strategies, the factors that influence the use of learning strategies and the learning strategies instruction.

Learning strategies are divided into direct and indirect strategies according to Oxford’s demarcation. In terms of direct strategies; it includes memory, cognitive and compensation strategies (as cited in Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). For indirect strategies, there are metacognitive, affective and social strategies. However, there is no certain learning strategy that works perfectly for every second language learner. As the authors suggest, effective usage of learning strategies is influenced by several interrelated factors such as learner autonomy, metalinguistic awareness, learning styles, gender, motivation, language proficiency level and student versus instructor perceptions.

Among these influential factors, I consider the perception of student versus instructor perceptions is crucial, since it affects the strategy instruction to some extent. For instructors, it is important for them to be aware of the learning strategies being used by students. In this way, it builds the bridge between instructors’ beliefs about students’ strategies use to the practices in classroom, which might contribute to students’ language learning. As the authors recommend for teaching implication, instructors can design surveys before the course starts to identify and assess students’ perception of language learning and their usage of learning strategies. Throughout the course, instructors can develop engaging interaction with students regarding students’ usage of learning strategies. Additionally, it is also suggested to explicitly provide students with learning strategy training (p. 543).

Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s article (2007) leads me to the various language learning strategies adopted by second language learners and enables me to gain a comprehensive overview of the factors affecting the use of language learning strategies. It not only helps me
identify the different kinds of learning strategies used by second language learners, but also, it makes me become aware of the importance of the learning strategies and strategies training to language learners, for “a trained learner will be better at learning than an untrained one” (p. 537), as the authors claim.

Equally important, in Bade’s article (2008), he investigates students’ attitude towards grammar learning. The study is conducted with ESL students who attend a 20-week course named “English for Living and Working in New Zealand”. The course is to help students actively and appropriately participate in New Zealand community and workplace setting, in which grammar instruction is considered as an important aspect. For the 14 students enrolled in that course, a questionnaire is given to students in the first week of the course, which intends to find out what the students are doing with their knowledge and why they are doing it to learn grammar. Thus, the instructor of the course can use the appropriate approach to teach grammar with this group of students. For instance, what kinds of resources they should select to assist students’ language learning, what are students’ preferred methodology of teaching and learning grammar? By analyzing the students’ immediate needs, their prior learning experience and the approaches to being taught grammar, variations of what students want to be taught in the course emerged.

In this empirical study, the author finds that students’ individual needs affect their attitude about grammar learning. Students seem to have a clear goal of the how they want to be taught and in what aspect they need to improve. Accordingly, the course is taught as tightly in meeting students’ need, which in turn, leads to students’ gradual improvement in general. Throughout the course, not only students are offered with self-monitoring strategies, teachers, as well, would explicitly teach students by using the cognitive strategies. To put it another way,
students are taught with the following self-monitoring strategies that can assist their learning: students acknowledge their own mistakes, evaluating suggestions or feedback from teachers and peers, being reflective and active of the learning process, being aware of their own grammar goals. Teachers, at the same time, would explicitly teach students using the following cognitive strategies by modeling sentences, adapting rules and examples, analyzing form and meaning, revising grammar point and demonstrating with variations in sentence structure (p. 179).

I find this initiative of being sensitive to students’ need truly important. Using the learner-centered questionnaire helps the instructor know more about students themselves, hence, can better address their problems in grammar learning more effectively. Also, letting students realize how they learn, and their learning and teaching preference can also enhance their overall achievement. And this pre-course questionnaire assessment also corresponds to what Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s article (2007) recommends: knowing more about students learning, how they learn, and their expectations, since it helps teachers plan the course and assists students learning. Besides knowing more about the learning strategies students use in their grammar learning, one thing I find really crucial is to let Students set their own goals during the pre-class session, since a clear goal will enable students learn in a more conscious and active way and think more of the rationale behind certain grammar aspects.

Recognizing the learning strategies adopted by second language learners is beneficial for both teachers and language learners. However, can the use of learning strategies have a positive impact on students’ language achievement? The following two studies made by Pawlak’s (2009) Tılfarhoğlu (2005) further explore the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and language attainment by second language learners.
In Pawlak’s (2009) study, he investigates the relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies (GLS) by ESL students and target language attainment. The participants are 142 English major students who take many practical English classes, with different focus on grammar, conversation, writing and other skills. These 142 students are all advanced users of English, who have learned English for an average of almost 10 years. The data come from three resources: a questionnaire, the grades of the end-of-year examination in English and a survey, which seeks to investigate students’ view about the importance of learning grammar and their favorite ways of studying it.

In the study, the three main GLS strategies investigated among the 142 advanced ESL students are: implicit L2 learning that includes a focus on form, explicit inductive learning and explicit deductive learning. For implicit L2 learning with a focus on form, it indicates that students be aware of the grammatical structures that cause problems with meaning or communication, and pay attention to how more proficient people say things and imitating noticing correction of erroneous utterances. In terms of explicit inductive L2 learning, new patterns and rules on the basis of the input data are discovered through students’ own learning. As for explicit deductive learning, students might preview the lesson to identify the key grammatical structures to be covered, memorizing how structures change their form, etc.

According to the author, this study failed to find a strong positive relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and attainment. The only positive finding is that the explicit deductive learning correlates to students’ achievement. The reason why the findings are discouraging lies in the fact that there are a number of variable factors affecting the learning attainment of students, for example, the instruction mode, the assessment procedures, students’ individual nature of learning. Therefore, in order to help students learn grammar more effectively
and efficiently, teachers should also consider their own instruction mode and the assessment tool of how to better help students learn grammar.

Similarly, another study made by Tılfarlioğlu (2005) attempts to discover the relationship between use of grammar leaning strategies of the students in prep school at the University of Gaziantep and students’ language achievement. The study tries to find out the relationship between students’ choice of learning strategies in grammar and foreign language achievement. The findings of this empirical study are listed as follows: (1) Most of the students (70.20%) use grammar learning strategies in their learning. (2) There is no significant difference between unsuccessful and successful students in using the grammar leaning strategies. Students, no matter they are successful learners or not, use grammar learning strategies in equal amount, for instance, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies, affective strategies. (3) The use of grammar learning strategies by female is higher than males’ students. (4) Students who have English background of 1 to 3 years use grammar leaning strategies higher than those who have study 6 to 10 years English. New students try to use more strategies to acquire grammar better. All the results indicate that even though all learners, irrespectively of successful or not, use grammar learning strategies in their own learning. However, the more successful second language learners are conscious of the strategies they use and why they use them. They would adapt their strategies to different given task to meet their need. On the contrary, students who are less successful are unaware of how to select the appropriate strategy and how to use them in a different task in different context. (p. 166)

When I read the two articles, what impresses me most are the findings of the two studies. I thought there would be a strong positive relationship between the use of grammar learning strategies and students’ attainment. However, these two studies have failed to prove the strong
positive relationship between them. In other words, the use of grammar learning strategies cannot fully guarantee students can master certain grammar aspect. Truly, using grammar learning strategies can help students learn more effectively and efficiently along with the instruction they receive in class. However, the way to evaluate their language attainment might, to some extent, influence students’ actual achievement as well. From my point of view, it might not be a good idea to test students’ grammar knowledge in the examination (using translation, multiple choice tasks) as what Pawlak (2009) implements in the study. Passing the exam with a high score does not always imply that the students have real excellent command of grammar. On the contrary, failing the test sometimes cannot prove either, that students fail to master the grammar they learned. Additionally, even though Tılfarlıoğlu’s study (2005) shows that most ESL learners use grammar learning strategies in their learning, it is difficult for learners who are less successful to select the appropriate strategy and to use them in a different task in different context. As a result, I think these two studies pose an instructional need of grammar strategies training to second language learners.

English language learners come from different countries, with different linguistic background. Some of them learn English as their second language, some of them learn English as a third or fourth language. Therefore, I am interested to find out if multilingual use more strategies when learning grammar.

In Kemp’s study (2007), the use of grammar learning strategies of 144 participants who know between two to twelve languages are examined via a questionnaire. What Kemp finds in this study are: multilingual are faster at processing language. They use more grammar strategies when learning grammar. The more language they know, the better they are when internalizing grammar point in their learning.
Besides the results found in this study, what inspires me most are the different types of grammar learning strategies listed in the questionnaire (p. 247) The questionnaire are divided into six parts regarding how students learn grammar: memory for grammar, thinking about grammar, analysis of grammar, communicating using grammar, organizing grammar learning, and using grammar with other people. I find some of the strategies really inspiring to me as a language learner and as an ESL teacher. For instance, when learning a new grammar point, students remember the structure by drawing a picture or diagram, or visualizing the new structure in their mind in order to memorize the grammar structure. This is also what I learned in the grammar class this semester, using visualized pattern to teach students grammar. Thus, I consider it imperative to make use of the frequently used grammar learning strategies in my actual teaching, making the grammar learning strategies more related and meaningful to more language learners.

**Reflection and inspiration**

As an ESL learner myself, who has studied English since elementary school and learned four years of German as my undergraduate major and reflecting upon my experience as a second language learner, I think I had a conscious use of learning strategies when I acquired a second language, either English or German to learn certain grammar point. I believe that good language learners all have their own language learning strategies that can be shared with more learners. Therefore, I am curious to find out more on the different types of strategies second language learner use which influence their grammar learning. How do the uses of language learning strategies help them learn grammar better? How do students perceive grammar in their English learning? Moreover, I am also eager to sharing the learning strategies with more students to assist their grammar learning. To this end, reading the five articles about grammar learning
strategies and students’ perception of grammar learning and teaching not only broadens my own knowledge about learning strategies as a second language learner, but also, it is beneficial for my future teaching practice in the following aspects.

First, I consider the pre-course inquiry about students helpful for both the instructor and students. I will use a survey or questionnaire or individual one-on-one interview before the course to know more about students learning strategies and their view of grammar learning and teaching as what Bade (2008) did in his study. For example, I will ask what their linguistic background are, what their beliefs in grammar learning are, what the common strategies they use are in their previous grammar learning experience, what the goals they set for themselves to learn grammar in this course are, etc. With these inquiries in mind, it would be easier for me to design the grammar course that is closely related to meet students’ needs and their learning style. A good example can be seen in my tutoring experience in the IECP tutoring center this semester when I tutored grammar to ESL students. Before each tutoring session, I asked few questions to students regarding the strategies they adopted when they learn grammar. I found that my tutees used both direct and indirect strategies in the tutoring session as he reported. For example, when we studied simple present tense, he created mental linkage (memory) between his prior knowledge he learned to help him understand when to use the simple present tense. When he spoke or wrote the sentences in simple present tense incorrectly, he would ask questions (social strategy) to me intuitively for clarification and explanation. Thus, when I tutored him, I would try to address his questions in a way that is more acceptable to him and easy for him to practice in his future learning.

In the meantime, it is also beneficial for students to do the pre-course evaluation. As students, they might not be aware of the types of learning strategies they use in their learning.
Thus, it is a good opportunity for them to recognize their own learning strategies so that they can use them more consciously and actively in their future learning. In addition, I think it is helpful for them to set their study goals of grammar learning. It reminds me of how I learned English grammar. At that time, when I was learning, I did not have a clear goal for myself. I just followed what the teacher told me to do and simply followed the instruction. Consequently, my grammar learning experience was considered mechanic and passive. I think if I had a clear goal and expectation for myself, I would learn more consciously and actively and think more of the rationale of why I use certain grammar aspects and how it is used.

Additionally, besides let both students and teachers be aware of the grammar learning strategies and their perceptions, I believe that offering more grammar strategy training would be effective to assist students’ learning, as Rivera-Mills & Plonsky’s (2007) recommend. And except for the explicit training in class, throughout the course, I will also spend time to meet my students individually to help them develop their own learning strategies that can better meet students’ individual needs. In this way, students can use grammar learning strategies more consciously and thus develop their own style of learning that can have a positive long term effect in their future learning.

With regard to explicit grammar learning strategies instruction, it reminds me of the time when I learned German grammar at college. As English and German belong to same language family-Indo-European, they share lots of similarities in aspects such as alphabet, phonology, morphology and syntax. Thanks to my high sensitivity of language strategies use, I always am conscious to choose the appropriate strategy. So when I learned German grammar, I compared and contrasted the same grammar point in English and tried to investigate a faster and more effective way to master certain grammar point. For example, when I learned the model verbs
(Modal Verben) in German, I compared the form, use, meaning of each pair of modal verbs (must/ müssen, should sollen, can können, etc.) to find the similarities and differences of the two languages. Later, I also shared my learning strategies with all my classmates in class and I found it was also beneficial for their learning due to the explicit strategy training. Thereafter, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the topic of Kontrastive Analyse: Syntaktische Funktionen und Bedeutungen von den Modalverben des Deutschen und Englischen (contrastive analysis: syntactic function and meaning of the model verbs in German and English), which I hoped to help more second language learners who studies the same grammar aspect.

To sum up, as the five articles stated, students’ learning strategies are influenced by many other factors as well, in my future teaching practice, it goes far beyond just realizing students’ strategies and perceptions of grammar learning and teaching. I should also keep in mind the variables related to the use of learning strategies, such as motivation, gender, assessment method, etc. Empowering students with language learning strategies is a complex issue that requires more than merely offering strategies training. Facilitating successful language learning, especially in grammar aspect, needs more careful planning.
Reference


