Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Student Perspectives and Cultural Considerations

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Every language teacher hopes to help develop students who will leave their course motivated and equipped to continue on with their studies independently. Language learning strategies are usually considered a part of this notion of 'learner empowerment'. But much of the discussion on language strategies has been relatively 'teacher-centered', focusing on issues like the classification of various kinds of strategies, which of those strategies should be taught, and what is the best way of teaching them. A point often overlooked is that learners might have ideas of their own about the usefulness of various strategies. Wenden (1987) and Horwitz (1987) are two of the few researchers who have actually attempted to discover what students think about learning a language. We need more of this, because it seems a bit like putting the cart before the horse to recommend specific strategies before discovering the preferences of the people who will ultimately be using them.

This is particularly true in a second language classroom where students of different nationalities or different L1s often learn together. It would seem unlikely that students from different parts of the world, coming from education systems with different historical backgrounds and emphases, would have homogeneous ideas about language learning strategies. In fact, there is a considerable amount of evidence that learners from different cultures react to various language learning strategies in different ways (see O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.171-175, for one example of this). But even in a typical classroom in a local situation, where the teacher and students all come from the same locality and speak the same L1, learners can have differing needs and desires when it comes to their strategic approach to language learning. The teacher may well have some ideas about which learning strategies are appropriate for his/her students, but this paper suggests that much better decisions can be made if students are asked for their opinions beforehand and included in the selection process.

The Study

To illustrate how eliciting students' opinions of language strategies can prove illuminating (and also demonstrate that students from different cultural backgrounds do not necessarily have the same perceptions), this article will focus on an aspect of language acquisition that most students are likely to have given some thought to - learning vocabulary. Schmitt (in press) developed an inventory of vocabulary learning strategies and then surveyed 600 Japanese students about their perceptions of the usefulness of each of those strategies. This article compares those original findings with three other language groups. The first group consisted of 16 students (6 Turkish, 4 Czech, 2 French, 2 Italian, 1 Portuguese, and 1 Spanish) either already studying at a British university or taking courses in preparation for entrance. The second group was made up of 16 Taiwanese PhD students, also studying at a British university [henceforth **PhD**]. The final group included 55 Taiwanese 1st-year university students studying in Taiwan [henceforth **1st-year**]. Subjects in all of these groups were given a list of 49 vocabulary learning strategies and asked whether they thought each strategy was useful or not. The percentages from the four groups were averaged and the top 16 strategies put into the table below.

Cultural Differences

The figures show quite clearly that there are indeed differences between the various culture groups. In general, fewer of the students in the 1st-year group rated the vocabulary strategies as useful, as compared to the other three groups. Where all of the top 16 strategies were rated as useful by 60% or more of the other three groups, only half of the strategies were so rated by the 1st-year group. In addition, one might have predicted that the two Asian groups surveyed in their home countries (the 1st-year and the Japanese) would have produced similar responses. But this is not the case, with the Japanese responses being more similar to the Turkish/European results than the 1st-year students. So it seems unsafe to assume that students will have similar perceptions of strategy usefulness just because they come from countries which are geographically close and have, what seem to Western eyes, like comparable cultures.

Of course, it is probably unwise to think of 'culture' as a monolithic entity. Teachers inevitably insert their personal beliefs and biases concerning learning into a classroom, and students will naturally absorb these beliefs to some extent. Thus we can say that attitudes toward and beliefs about learning are in themselves largely 'learned behavior'. To the extent that teachers in a cultural area share and exhibit similar ideas, it makes some sense to speak about a generalized 'learning culture'. But to be more precise, it might be better to consider each classroom, or even each student, as a distinctive product of unique shaping forces. Undoubtedly, the views of the subjects in this study have been shaped to a large degree by their previous teachers.

Student Perceptions of Strategy Usefulness

Vocabulary Strategy	Turkish/European	Taiwanese PhD	Taiwanese 1st-year	Japanese
Use English-language media (TV, movies, music)	94	94	69	*
Take notes in class about new words	94	94	67	84
Practice using the new word in sentences	94	94	69	82
Use a bilingual dictionary	81	69	86	95
Verbal repetition	94	100	53	84
Say the new word aloud when studying it	86	94	60	91
Guess meaning from context	88	88	64	73
Check pictures or gestures to understand meaning	94	94	40	84
Ask teacher for English paraphrase or synonym	88	88	49	86
Study the "sound" of a new word	86	75	64	81
Ask teacher for a sentence using the new word	94	88	40	78
Written repetition	63	81	62	91
Continue to study the word over a period of time	81	81	51	84
Test yourself with vocabulary tests	81	81	47	76
Study the word's synonyms and antonyms	81	81	29	88
Use a monolingual English dictionary	81	100	20	77
	86.52	87.63	54.38	83.6

Figures indicate the % of group judging the strategy to be useful
*This strategy was not listed on the original Japanese survey

Other Differences

We can also see that perceptions about strategies are not solely dictated by culture. The PhD students have very different evaluations from the 1st-year students, even though their cultural background is the same. On the assumption that the PhD students were exposed to the same 'learning culture' in their earlier schooling as the 1st-year students, it is clear that they have evolved and now have a much more positive view of vocabulary learning strategies in general. There are several possible factors which may explain this development. The first is that the PhD students are living in the UK, and so see the benefit of strategies which can maximize the advantage of living in a country where the target language is spoken. The 1st-year students live in an environment where English is much less common in the community, and this fact may cause their perceptions to be less positive. Motivation is another factor. One would guess that the PhD students' absolute need for English might motivate them to see the possible benefit of a wide variety of vocabulary strategies, while the 1st-year students in Taiwan might be less inclined to do so. A third factor is proficiency. The PhD students almost certainly had a higher proficiency than the 1st-year students, perhaps helping them to put the various strategies to use more effectively. These three factors recur throughout the strategy literature as well, so it seems safe to say that the type of language environment, motivation, and proficiency can all have an effect on our students' perceptions of strategy usefulness.

Bilingual vs. Monolingual Dictionaries

So far we have looked at the strategies in general, but looking at student perceptions of individual strategies can be illuminating as well. Using a dictionary is one of the most important skills for any second language learner, although the debate between the benefits of monolingual vs. bilingual dictionaries continues. It is perhaps unsurprising that the percentages of 1st-year students and Japanese who judged bilingual dictionaries to be useful were higher than the percentages of those who judged monolingual dictionaries to be useful. We did find it a bit surprising, however, that only 20% of the Taiwanese 1st-year students surveyed think monolingual dictionaries are helpful. This would indicate that teachers wishing to use monolingual dictionaries with Taiwanese students like these will probably have to first 'sell' the benefits of these dictionaries before introducing them. Equal numbers of students in the Turkish/European group felt that both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries were useful, however, among the PhD students, monolingual dictionaries were rated even more positively. While most think bilingual dictionaries are useful, ALL of them think monolingual dictionaries have value. (In addition, all of them reported USING monolingual dictionaries.) This suggests that teachers should encourage their advanced students to at least look into obtaining monolingual dictionaries if the students have not done so already.

Repetition vs. Memory Strategies

One of the most traditional ways of remembering a word is through repetition. While it must be admitted that many students have used this strategy on the way to successfully acquiring a second language, modern psycholinguistic research suggests that the level of cognitive effort (how much one manipulates a word and how 'deeply' one thinks about it) is a very important factor in remembering that word's meaning (see Ellis, in press). Memory strategies,

such as the Keyword Method (Nation, 1990 p. 166-68) are considered much more effective than simple repetition. Despite this, the survey shows that both written and verbal repetition are relatively highly valued. Three reasons for this suggest themselves to us. The students simply may never have been exposed to alternative strategies before, and thus do not realize they can be more effective than simple repetition. This would argue for introducing students to a wide range of strategies once they have reached a suitable proficiency level, and then allowing them to decide individually which work best for them. On the other hand, the students may have been introduced to a variety of strategies, but not in enough depth to where they could use them independently with confidence. More thorough and effective strategy instruction would be the answer in this case. A third possibility exists, one that is not often brought up in the literature. Regardless of what the 'experts' might think, students may wish to stick with strategies they are familiar with and have had (some) success with in the past, even though they know other options exist. If this is their decision, we must learn to accept it and not be too prescriptive, even though we may have our own reservations.

Conclusion

This brief article has attempted to hint at the wealth of information available if we only take the time to ask our students what they think. Readers can undoubtedly add other observations to the ones we have highlighted here. Gaining this information does not require any formal survey instrument; a simple questionnaire or classroom discussion will do. The point is that it can be difficult to predict what learners' opinions about various strategies will be, with factors like culture, proficiency, motivation, and language environment all affecting their perceptions. Instead of just guessing or making assumptions, asking student opinions *before* strategies are introduced into the classroom, in a kind of needs analysis, can tell us which strategies are likely to be readily accepted and which may require more encouragement and explanation of the possible benefits. This simple bit of interaction with our students should lead to greater eventual acceptance of the strategies which can help them to be independent learners throughout their lifetimes.

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LEARNER INDEPENDENCE WORKSHEETS, L. Harrison (Ed.), published by IATEFL, £ 7.00

At the conference in Brighton we were shown the book, and asked to buy it, by a very impressed and proud Jenny Timmer. Louis Harrison has put in a lot of time and work in getting together and organising all the materials and notes contributed by the members of the working group. The end-product is impressive.

The book has been organised into three sections: teacher training and setting up a self-access centre, helping students to become independent learners, promoting independent learning in listening/watching, reading, writing, speaking and vocabulary. With each worksheet the user gets some notes on 'suggested level, aim, approximate time and remarks on the worksheet for the teacher'.

For the potential user who may not be very experienced yet in promoting Learner Independence, Barbara Sinclair has written a very helpful introduction, covering the aims of learner training towards independence and discussing some of the publications in this field. Her bibliography, of course, covers most of the relevant books published over the past ten/fifteen years.

In short, teacher trainers and practising teachers at last have the book they need to introduce the concept of Learner Independence and make it work both inside and outside the classroom.

Wout de Jong