The Study of Learning Strategies Used by Applied English Majors in Junior College

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, within the field of second/foreign language education, a gradual but marked shift in the focus of language research and instruction has taken place. There has been less stress on teachers’ teaching and greater emphasis on students’ learning. This change has been reflected in increasing numbers of studies undertaken from the learners’ perspectives, particularly in research on language learning strategies. More and more foreign language educators have now recognized that effective learning strategies can enhance students’ efforts to reach their language goals. Thus, students are often being encouraged to “learn how to learn English”, rather than to depend heavily on their teachers’ instructions.

Learning strategies are defined by Oxford (1990) as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p.8). These strategies encompass a wide range of learning behaviors that can help learners become more autonomous, self-regulated, and goal-oriented, resulting in improving their progress in developing foreign language skills.

Learning strategies are especially important to Taiwan’s English learners, since most of them lack enough exposure to authentic English at school. It is also impossible for English teachers to follow the learning path of each of their students either inside or outside of classroom. One of the possible ways to turn this situation around is to help students develop effective learning strategies and become self-directed learners. In fact, both teachers and students can benefit from the use of learning strategies, and more research based on Taiwan’s learning context is needed.

Though it is promising to see that the study of language learning strategies continues to receive increased attention, the emphasis of learning strategy research conducted in Taiwan has been mostly placed on students with non-English majors (Yang, 1992; Ku, 1995; Liu, 1995; Ho, 1998; Chen, 2000; Chung, 2000). Very little attention has been paid to college English major students. Yet, over the past few years, many applied English departments have been established around the island and become highly popular among young students. In view of this rapid-changing climate
of Taiwan’s English education, it seems important to obtain a current, in-depth understanding of how these applied English major students learn English. Thus, this study focuses specifically on applied English majors in a 5-year junior college, aiming at investigating learning strategy use situations among this particular student population and examining the relationships among learner variables such as grade levels, English proficiency, and their learning strategy use.

Major research questions addressed are as follows:

1. What kinds of English learning strategies do applied English major students report using? What are the most frequently used strategies by these students?
2. To what extent do these learners’ years of study at the applied English program relate to their use of learning strategy? Are there any significant strategy use differences among different grade levels?
3. To what extent do these learners’ English proficiency relate to their use of learning strategy? Are there any significant strategy use differences between more successful and less successful English learners?

References


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