

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TWO SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS OF DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

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Abstract

This article attempts to present a profile of two successful English language learners who are found to hold strong learning styles. Learning styles are considered as the factors that not only have great influence but are also embedded to the attempt for selecting the strategies used to attack the perplexing learning problems or tasks. The learning strategies as the factor leads a successful learning should be channeled into other factors that juxtapose with this factor. The present article would present how certain affective and cognitive domains of learning styles have made particular learning strategies become effective.

By means of a multi case study, that describes two different phenomena and compares them for reducing the risk of error, the present study tries to give more contribution towards the study on the Good Language Learner that has been so far being the concern of many scholars. Such an investigation would help other learners of the same traits or endowment to adopt as well as adapt the strategy. Besides, this can be used as a model for strategy training that is hosted to help less fortunate learners who study English.

Key words: learning style, affective and cognitive domain

Introduction

The successful language teaching and learning process is like a spider web that every line in it is well connected. The success of the teachers in teaching when the process carried out inside the class will not proceed smoothly without students' active involvement. On the other hand, students' success, though not in all aspects, is also contributed by the stimulus given by the teacher. However, when dealing with successful learning, specifically in this case- language learning- the main ingredient is the students, not the teachers. It has been revealed by the previous researchers that the success of the Good language learners are

not due to their reliance to the teachers, instead they show a full involvement in the language learning. They appreciate teachers who are systematic, logical and clear, but prefer to treat them as 'informants' rather than to rely on them (Picket 1978).

The successful language learners are worth researching for their awareness towards learning might be absent in those who are designated as less successful. Nunan (1999: 57) sets out to determine whether there were differences between effective and ineffective learners in terms of their awareness of different types of strategies. They found that effective learners are aware of the processes underlying their own learning and seek to use appropriate learning strategies to control their own learning. Nunan (1991) also found that one of the characteristics of the "good" language learner was an ability to reflect on and articulate the processes underlying their own learning. O' Malley and Chamot (1990) found indications that more effective learners differed from less effective ones in their use of strategies. In particular, the ability to identify the learning process one has carried out implies a high of control towards the process that has been carried out; this might be other reason why a successful language learner is worth researching. Another reason is that this sort of learner has gone through a long process of trial and error before he finally comes up with appropriate and effective learning strategies.

In the area of language learning, it is found that the effectiveness of using learning strategies gives a great support towards the success of learning. Brown (2001) confirms that successful mastery of the second language will be due to a learner's own personal "investment" of time, efforts, and attention to the target language in the form of battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language. He further explains that the learning skill of any skill involves the investment of one's time and efforts in learning. It implies that to be a successful learner, including a language learner, one requires persistent use of a whole host of strategies for language learning and he/she needs to invest his/her time and efforts for working on it. Thus, no matter how qualified the teacher is, if no personal endeavor to support the process of learning is coming from the learner himself.

The present study tries to value learning style as an important counterpart of the learning strategy that leads the learners to become the successful ones. By definition the term "learning style" refers to a person's general approach to learning and problem solving (Reid, 1995, 1997). Learning styles are "relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (Keefe, 1987). Learning style', according to Skehan (1998:237), is defined as the characteristic manner in which an individual chooses to approach a learning task. In this case, a style perspective contains two differences, which render it more attractive. First, it implies that there may be some

degree of disposition, so that the style someone adopts may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment. Second, there is the possibility that with the style, even though there may be a continuum of some sort with more or less of an attribute being possessed, all the advantages may not accrue to only one end of the continuum. Referring the idea that a learning style is more personal preferences than innate attributes

Synthesizing from the characterization made by several former researchers (i.e. Reid (1995), Skehan (1998:237), Willing 1987 in Skehan, 1998:247-248, Keefe, 1987), the learning style at this present study should not be seen synonymously with cognitive styles due to its broader terms that include cognitive along with affective and psychological styles. Focusing on two domains of learning styles, the present study classifies learning styles into two groups; firstly cognitive styles that comprise perceptual modality that involves auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and haptic types of learners, Reflectivity and impulsivity that deals with risk taking levels, constricted and flexible control that deals with susceptibility levels towards learning distractions; and secondly affective styles that involve persistence or perseverance of the learner to labor beyond the required time, extroversion and introversion, level of anxiety, tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity.

“Learning strategy” is a technical phrase that means any specific action or behavior a student takes, most often consciously; to improve his/her own learning (Cohen, 1990: O’Malley and Chamot, 1990: Oxford, 1990, 1994, and Brown, 1987). Learning style preferences often help shape the learner’s choice of learning strategies. For instance, a student who has strongly visual learning style tends to use the strategies of taking notes and outlining, whereas an auditory- style learner tends to use the strategies of recording lectures and listening to the tape after the class is over.

Numerous kinds of learning strategies exist. For example, Oxford (1990) classified, explained, and exemplified in six coherent groups. Although this classification system is still being refined, it is probably the most comprehensive, practical, and theoretically grounded one so far available. The six strategy groups are labeled memory, cognitive compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. The first three are known as “direct” strategies because they directly involve the subject matter, in this case, the target language to be learned; the last three groups are called “indirect” strategies, because they do not directly involve the subject matter itself, but are essential to language learning nonetheless.

Direct strategies are comprised by three groups of strategies. The first strategy is called memory strategies that are, by definition,

understood as strategies dealt with an activity to store and retrieve new information. The next is cognitive strategies used for manipulation or transformation of the target language. And, the last strategy is compensation strategies that commonly function to enable learners to use the new language for either compensation or production despite limitations in knowledge. Like direct strategies, indirect strategies also involve three groups of strategies. Metacognitive can be defined as beyond, beside, or with the cognitive; therefore, metacognitive can be referred to actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process. The next strategy group in indirect strategy is affective strategies that refer to emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values. Finally the last is social strategies that are required in learning a language in which it is seen as a form of social behavior; it is communication, and communication involves other people, and appropriate social strategies. All of these types of strategies allow the researcher to see close how the learners learn and become successful.

Student's degree of understanding of his/her own learning styles and on choosing learning strategies that fit the learning styles partially determine the successful foreign or second language development (e.g. Ehrman, 1996; Oxford et al., 1991; Reid, 1995, 1997). Unsuccessful language learners do not necessarily use fewer learning strategies than their more successful peers; rather, they simply employ strategies in a haphazard fashion, inadequately related to their own learning style preferences and to the task at hand (Oxford, 1996).

In summary, the learning styles and strategies are believed to have a harmonious connection that they influence one another. The learning styles that tend to become the learners' personal endowment will affect the selection of the strategies that are subject to change. The flexibility of the strategies underlies the present study to conduct an investigation on how typical, successful, language learners have benefited from the implementation of the strategies. The findings will contribute to help other learners who are still unable to use the strategies appropriately. The learning styles that are embedded to the strategy choices ensure the transferability conditions that are required when the strategies are proposed to be implemented by other learners.

Using a case study research design, this section will devote a brief description of the respondents and the pedagogical context in which the study took place. Instead of a single case, the present study uses two cases or multi case in order to minimize the risk of error resulted from the single case study. Therefore, the risk of error and transferability condition that signify a descriptive sort of study is served by comparing both cases to find out similarities and differences between the two.

Respondents

Respondent 1

Respondent one is a male English learner who is at present registered as one of the students of the English Department of Airlangga University. His successful attainment in language learning is officially marked by his high score in TOEFL prediction that reaches extremely excellent level of proficiency with the score of 600. Not only TOEFL prediction score, the thesis advisor also confirm his satisfying language competency that has allowed him to perform any sorts of tasks in English without difficulty. He never stays or studies abroad; however, his awareness of the learning style he endows has enabled him to choose appropriate learning strategies that are proven to be effective leading him to success.

Respondent 2

Unlike other less fortunate language learners, she has a chance of living abroad for three years at the age of 14. Her stay in New Castle joining her mother who undertook the Ph.D program there brought her a lot advantages. She went school there and directly immersed in real life English communication. However, her present success is not solely due to her stay in abroad, she has began acquiring the language since her preschool age when her curiosity grew to understand what her parents were saying in English. Moreover, her active attempt to seek opportunity for practice has become other assets to bridge her to success. Her latest TOEFL prediction score is 657 that not many students can attend such a high proficiency score. Her ability to use the language both in oral and written has received affirmation to every person near her. At present, she is undertaking her undergraduate program in the Industrial Engineering of ITS.

Procedures

Since it is a case study, the study is carried out based on the already existing phenomena that are worth researching. In this case, the phenomenon is directed to the learners of English who become extremely successful in carrying out the language learning process. A strong point of the phenomenon lies upon the learners' strong hold of both endowed and nurtured learning styles and their awareness towards the strategy selection that they believed to be effective. Then, the respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique, and then three-interview series proposed by Seidman (1991: 11). The first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it

occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience hold for them.

Finding and Discussion

This section discusses two issues: firstly, it deals with the learning styles of the learners; and the following is the learning strategies of the learners.

a. Learning Styles

Respondent one tends to endow more reflective than impulsive style that has so far driven him to be a person who is very keen in doing delayed types of learning tasks. He requires more times to prepare before finally a task can be accomplished. His introversion allows him to work more intensively when alone rather than working in a team or group. However, he cannot be categorized as unsociable sort of individual, his strong motivation to success has led him against his introversion. He never feels hesitate asking questions to every individual including his lecturer or his close friends to give assistance when problems hamper learning. He has nurtured perceptual modality learning style, the so called, auditory learning styles that have so far enabled him to persistently spend more than to hours every day listening closely to English films. A strong hold in listening does not only pay for comprehending the message sent by the films, but this learning style empowered his effort for successful learning. By relying on his ability to understand the spoken text he hardly used memory strategy to restore new input he just received. His introversion and reflection endowment did not bother him to reach high language learning attainment. His reflective had allowed him to be a person who was less spontaneous so that he almost completely failed every time he was assigned for completing an immediate sort of tasks, in which he was not given a chance to think and to make even brief preparation. Due to his introversion and reflection styles, this learner prefers to work in isolated room where he can work under comfortable atmosphere that does not allow any sort of disturbances break his attention. He is a type of person who is less tolerance toward any sort of ambiguities in learning. Noises or other unnecessary activities will easily disturb his attention that in fact he demands for focusing on what he listens to. He can hardly do something else while focused listening.

Unlike the first respondent who is less confidence and tends to be very introvert, respondent two is more extroverts that the styles have benefited a lot for her for a rapid oral skill development. Her impulsive tendency helps her become more flexible in carrying out various sorts of learning tasks, immediate and delayed task. Despite her impulsivity, she is not a sort of careless person who can settle down the tasks in a messy

way. She prefers having time to prepare if there is a time since she is a sort of perfectionist that always wants everything done in a well end. Unlike respondent one who relies more on his ability to perceive information through his hearing sense, this learner has been imposed to an atmosphere that stimulate the development of her visual sense. Her nurtured visual style and her high perseverance allow her to keep reading in a relatively long time without any stop. She can stand reading novel for three hours without any pauses, and her reading habit grows from her hobby for reading various genres of novels. Her high tolerance of ambiguity enables her to ignore any sorts of disturbances that might affect her attention. She gets used to keep reading while surrounded with noises, say she can keep reading while she lines in a queue. Her high confidence lets her to be a very independent person that she can conduct herself to do every job without any hesitation at all

b. Learning Strategy

The study confirms a proposition that a successful language learner has acquired high awareness towards the learning strategies they use. Both respondents accept that they have found appropriate strategies that they keep using up to now after a long process of trial and error of the strategies.

The first respondent once attempted to use reading bilingual comics; however he found himself not very persistent doing the activity. But, as soon as he found watching film interesting, he then integrates this hobby for learning. At first he did not realize that he could make use of his hobby for watching films as a means to study the language. By the help of the technology advancement that can provide various language subtitles, he began realize the benefit he could take from his hobby. He checked the unknown words or expressions he heard from the English subtitles, and then he could feel that his vocabulary subsequently developed. This experience taught him to have more intensive activity to listen to the dialog of the film he watched. Then, he made use of his spare time alone at home for watching films from the player he has in his room. He devotes himself to stay in front of the television set in his room two hours every day for watching film. He patiently spent more time for watching the same film more than once in order to get better understanding of the story as well as the words or expressions that are new to him. His hearing sense becomes even stronger as he uses this sense to comprehend the lesson at his college. Listening with high concentration has helped him learn. He takes the benefit of the lecturers' explanation to understand information; therefore, he makes himself understand to what he listens to. Guessing game is used to attack the unknown words or expression rather than looking up dictionary that

becomes his final destination when he found himself fail to guess. If it happens that he still cannot understand well, he will personally ask the lecturer to give him more on his problem. He also seeks assistance from friends when perplexing problems hampered. His introversion does not allow him to involve actively in communication or using the language orally, therefore, he acts out or speaks aloud while alone in her room mimicking the expressions used by the actors on the film. This seems to be very effective for rehearsal and memorizing new information so that it can be retrieved easily when it is needed. Realizing that, he cannot work under pressure, he prefers to allot some times preparing before the task is really completed.

In terms of strategy uses, this learner is very creative integrating the whole host of strategy types. Some sets of Memory strategies, though without any direct effort to memorize information, are employed in the way that he attempts to store new information by reviewing the films he watch very well. Only learner of high perseverance like this respondent can stand watching the same film several times for the sake of retrieving some new words or expression encountered in the films. His way of memorizing is also employed through his attempt to employ an action. Due to his introversion that hampers him to initiate a conversation with others, while he is alone he imitates the actors' expression, and this found to be effective to regulate his good way of using oral language. This effort is at the same time involved practicing in cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies as well as compensation strategies are carried out when he found difficult expression from the film, guessing games is actually a strategy that requires high mental process to derive closest meaning by relying on the prefacing and following information, and it is also used to compensate the missing previous knowledge. Besides direct strategies, some sets in indirect strategy groups are applicable to this learner. Metacognitive strategies are employed in the way he needs to be alone watching the film so that he can pay more attention and listen more closely. And finally social strategies are used for assisting him to quickly solve his learning problem through asking question.

Unlike the first respondent who relies upon his hearing sense, this learner endows strong visual endowment. Her ability to withstand in a painstaking learning situation has led her to success. What mainly becomes a very strong asset of her is her high awareness to keep her English alive after her returning home from New Castle. Learning from her experience loosing her Spanish that she learned there, she strives hard to find ways using the language actively. Realizing that it is impossible to keep using the language in her real setting now, she actively seeks opportunities to keep using the language. she is lucky to have some of her lecturers who teach in English, however, she is bounded with her mates demand that require her to provide them notes

in Bahasa Indonesia. She seems not easily surrender to see this fact, she finds communities where her eagerness to use the language can be served properly. She eventually joins a debating contest and actively involves in students association that concerns the importance of nurturing the English competency. Surfing through various activities in English with this association she at least can benefit for keeping her English alive. More recently, she receives a part time job, only on Saturdays for six hours, to be a visitor guide in a museum. She accompanies foreigners to see around the museum, and she finds this job challenging since she meets many different sorts of person that not only her language but also her ability to socialize with different sorts of persons is highly demanded. However, all of those activities cannot serve as regular exercise so that she feels that she needs more intensive practices. Therefore, she then realizes that she cannot leave her habit of reading that has been nurtured since she was very young. Every day she spends hours for reading novels, her favorite reading materials. She even can spend three hours simultaneously for reading one novels. Sometimes for classical one she has to read it more than once. She can overcome the unknown words encountered on the text by making deductive analysis, by understanding the clue found in the prefacing and following sentences, or by understanding the parts of the words before guessing the meaning. Sometimes, when necessary, asking questions, though not often, can be much benefited. As social being she admits that she cannot work completely individually. For this learner, music is not only entertaining, but by listening to music she can feel relaxed; therefore, she likes listening music while she has to concentrate on something she reads.

Based on the above account, the second respondent who tends to be more auditory, impulsive, and extrovert, chooses some direct strategies that are suitable with the learning styles she has. Instead of using memory strategies, this learner prefers to use more strategies in cognitive group. In the use of cognitive strategies, this learner keeps herself practicing in order to maintain the language he has long been acquired. At the same time, her effort for practicing can be categorized as metacognitive strategies in indirect strategies, in the way that she actively seeks various sorts of activities to serve her needs of exercising. Like the first respondent, he has a very high perseverance that she can keep reading in three hours without stopping. Rather than spending more in using direct strategies, she more often employs indirect strategies. This might be due to her already stable quality of using English, so the strategies she needs are those to help her maintaining the language. Metacognitive is also exercised by centering her learning in which she realizes her strong habit of reading, so she focuses her activity on reading

while to pay the attention, since she is highly ambiguity tolerance, she does not need quite setting in order to help her concentrate. To see her attempts to find various activities for learning the language before finally she decides to put the emphasis on reading, it implies that she can monitor her own progress. She can understand herself very well, and this is displayed through her ability to control her impulsive learning temperature, by exposing music while reading or concentrating, she uses music to help her relaxed. Supported by her strong personality, confidence, and extroversion, socializing is not at all difficult. Surfing into various activities that demand other people involvement has helped her to find effective way maintaining the language.

Closing

Based on the above accounts, both learners who conduct different learning styles have some similar ways for being successful. High perseverance do exists in both learners to let them successful. Though characteristically different, one is strongly auditory while another one tends to be highly visual, both learners can withstand in certain extent of time devoting themselves working on the same task. High perseverance is also displayed by both learners in the way they find various ways to solve the learning problems. To overcome the unknown words or expressions hampered in learning, guessing game becomes very beneficial aids to compensate the missing meaning. Their willingness and ability to manage questions help them to seek assistance to help them solving the problems. According to Oxford (1989: 145) asking questions is one of the most basic social interactions; an action from which learners gain great benefit. Asking questions helps learners get closer to the intended meaning and thus aids their understanding. It also helps learners encourage their conversation partners to provide larger of "input" in the target language and indicates interest and involvement. Moreover, the conversation partner's response to the learner's question indicates whether the question itself was understood, thus providing indirect feedback about the learner's production skill. In summary, the present study recommends the learners of the strategy trainers to hear to the body so that the learning styles can be identified to help choosing the appropriate strategies.

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