Situational influences on EFL and ESL learners' beliefs and strategies use

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Abstract

Although many researchers have studied the relationship between learner beliefs and strategies use in language learning, few have examined how the learner's educational situation may affect these beliefs and strategies use. This study investigates the relationship between beliefs about language learning and learning strategies use among Thai ESL and EFL learners. Some interesting differences were found, and pedagogical implications were then discussed.

Introduction

Understanding learners' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies, as well as the factors which influence these beliefs and strategies use, is essential to planning appropriate language instruction. Although many researchers have studied the relationship between learner beliefs and strategies use in language learning, few have examined how educational situations may affect these beliefs and strategies use.

This study, therefore, explores and compares the beliefs about language learning and the learning strategies use of two Thai learners who have different English learning backgrounds; one (Tan) has been studying English in an ESL context, and the other one (Pen) in an EFL context.

Literature review

Beliefs about language learning

Different theoretical orientations and concerns have produced somewhat different, nevertheless clearly related, views of the nature of beliefs (Dole, and Sinatra, 1994; cited in Sakui & Gaies, 1999). In *cognitive psychology*, beliefs about learning are viewed as a component of metacognitive knowledge (i.e. knowledge about task, self as a learner, learning, and strategy). In *social psychology*, a prominent view of beliefs is that they are understandings which arise from an individual's life history and educational experiences and which are basis for value judgments (Dole, and Sinatra, 1994; cited in Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Collectively, beliefs are both outcomes of formal and informal learning experiences and determinants of subsequent learning (Sakui & Gaies, 1999).

There are many research studies on belief about language learning (Victori and Lockhart, 1995; Sakui and Gaise, 1999; Yang, 1999). Horwitz develops the instrument called *Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory* (*BALLI*) to assess students' beliefs about language learning in five major areas: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; cited in Yang, 1999).

Victori and Lockhart (1995) discuss differences between 'insightful beliefs' which successful learners hold, and the 'negative or limited beliefs' which less successful learners hold, and conclude that:

> …if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action…they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous (p. 225).

It is postulated that learners' beliefs about their ability will affect their goals and motivational pattern, which in turn will influence their learning behaviors and strategies use (Yang, 1999).

Language learning strategies

Strategies are referred to as techniques, behaviors, actions, thought processes, problem solving, and study skills. Oxford and Crookall (1989) state that language learning strategies are useful in both formal (academic) and informal (nonacademic) settings. Oxford (1990) further states that 'learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to a new situation' (p. 8).

Strategy classification systems are many and varied. Cohen (2003) provides four main strategy classification schemes, which are classifications (1) by goal either to learn a language or to use a language, (2) by language skills, and (3) by function.

The research on language learning strategies shows that effective second language learners use a variety of strategies, while less effective learners not only use strategies less frequently but also often do not choose appropriate strategies for the task. Rubin (1975; cited in Oxford, 1989) states that a good language learner uses a more variety of learning strategies than does a less successful language learner. Moreover, the more advanced language learners diminish their use of less useful strategies and use strategies more directly to the language learning task (Tyacke and Mendelsohn, 1986; cited in Oxford, 1989). In fact, successful learners use an array of strategies. Optimal learners find ways to tailor their strategies use to their individual needs and requirements. They develop combinations of strategies that work for them (Oxford, 1990).

Horwitz (1999) studies beliefs and language learning strategies of the learners from different cultural groups; such as American, French, German, and Japanese. The research results show a number of within-cultural group differences in the belief, which might be more attributable to the difference in learning circumstance rather than cultural difference. She suggests that the within-group difference, whether related to individual characteristics or differences in instructional practices, should be examined more closely in the future research. However, to my knowledge, no study has focused on differences of language learning situation, and proficiency level which might influence learners' beliefs about language learning, and their learning strategies use.

The study

Research sample

The research participants are Thai learners of ESL/ EFL namely *Tan* and *Pen*. The profile of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Social profile of respondents

Name	Tan	Pen
Age/Gender	28/Female	29/Female
Native Language	Thai	Thai
Current Education	MBA at the University of Denver, Colorado	MBA at Assumption University, Thailand
English Proficiency	Advanced	Intermediate
English Education Background	- Started when she was eight years old at the school in Thailand. English is one of the required courses. - At a high school in the US.	- Started when she was eight years old at the school in Thailand. English is one of the required courses. - At the University where English is a medium of instruction and every student has to attend English Intensive Courses. - At a language school in Australia (EAP course)

The results

Beliefs about goal and motivation of language learning

When **Tan** first came to the US, her goal to learn and use English was to become part of the society. She believes an increased level of English education in the US and the situational

factors such as her classmates and teachers motivated her to put more effort in learning and to encourage herself not to be shy to speak. She remembers her high school teacher told her that her writing was too difficult to understand, so she tried to improve it by thinking about the reader more before she wrote. In learning the language, Tan has both integrative (i.e. to be accepted by the community, to understand the US culture), and instrumental motivation (i.e. to achieve a good score, to respond to her teacher's feedback).

Pen's main goal to learn English is for achievement in her career in the travel and tourism industry. Her other goal is to learn English for reading. She likes reading. Many good books, especially those in the areas of travel and tourism, are available in English. She did not have the motivation to read when she was young because she did not have a chance to explore to the world of interesting books. When she started to have an interest in reading, it helped her to want to learn English more. She believes learning English is a pathway to improve her reading skills. Pen has mainly instrumental motivation (i.e. to fulfill her need to improve reading skills, and for success in her career) in learning the English language.

Listening and reading strategies

Generally, for the listening task**, Tan** tries to understand as much as she can, when she doesn't understand certain words, she tries to guess according to the context or from the topic of the conversation. She said she never pretended that she understood something she didn't really understand. Instead, she would ask questions. In reading for pleasure, she mentioned reading line by line with joy. For non pleasure purposes, she read the first couple of sentences of each paragraph to get a basic idea of what the reading was about to continue with the rest of the reading. She never takes notes or uses summaries because she thinks those are memorizing aids. She thinks when she reads she has to understand the content. Once she understands the content, she can criticize it, discuss it, and that will help her remember it automatically.

What she heard into **Pen** said if the task was difficult (such as listening to the lecture), she would listen and translate what she heard into Thai in her mind. If the task was easy, she would just pay attention to the main idea and try to understand by guessing from context clues. If she does not understand what the other person is saying, and if that is not really important, she will just pretend that she understands or changes the topic. However, if she feels it is

important she will ask the person to speak again. In other words as she listens she has to think about whether it is necessary to listen or not. In the reading tasks, she said *'I'm a speed reader; I read fast, I read only for the main idea, but if I find something interesting I might stop to think'*.

Speaking and writing strategies

Tan used to just speak it out when she was young, now she thinks before she speaks, and adjusts her speaking styles according to who she is talking to. She cares about her speaking to make other people understand her, '*it does not have to be a beautiful speaking, that does not matter for me because that is not my style'* she said. She uses the reading aloud technique to improve her writing and to check if what she wrote is correct. *'When you look at your or other's writing you cannot notice that there is something wrong, but when you read it aloud you will notice the mistake easily'*. Her teacher in the writing course taught her this technique. She tried it out and found it was so effective for her, that she still uses today.

Pen normally uses easy words just to make sure that the message is conveyed. If the listener could not understand, she would start to think about how to deal with it in order to make him or her understand. Her technique to improve speaking is to watch the cable TV in English and speak along. '*It doesn't help knowing much more words because I don't really pay attention to, but it helps me familiar with the accent and some chunks of words'* she said. In the formal writing task such as essay writing, she said she had to plan before writing, but for informal writing that she just wrote it and corrected it later. Her technique to improve writing is to read a lot of books. She suggested, '*When you read a lot of books, it helps you aware of many styles of writing, and you can apply them to your own writing'*. Her other technique is to ask native friends or professor to check her writing and tell her how to improve it.

Conclusion

Tan has opportunity around her to learn and use English. *Tan* has both instrumental and integrative motivation to learn English. On the other hand, *Pen* - as is the case with other Thai students - has limited chances to practice her English with native speakers. As a result integrative motivation is less meaningful for her. If Pen had more opportunities to learn how to learn a language, to use a language in an authentic atmosphere, and to get feedback from an

expert, she might be a better language learner or she might develop her language proficiency better than in her current situation.

An EFL learner like *Pen* can benefit from having her learning situation emulate, as much as possible, a second language immersion situation and simulations of real life events and activities that the learner would naturally encounter (Crookall, and Oxford, 1990; cited Oxford and Ehrman, 1995). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) suggest that the more a foreign language classroom becomes a 'language experience' situation, the more likely the students find their needs and the will to use language learning strategies and the more rapidly they will advance toward proficiency. This does not mean that structured instruction should be totally omitted; but it does mean that lively, authentic chunks of language interaction using role-plays and simulation are also needed.

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