Language Learning Strategies
An Evaluation of Compensatory Strategies

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Abstract

Learning strategies which are presumed as goal oriented, purposeful and controlled behaviours encourage learners' performances in foreign language learning skills. In this context, use of the strategies can be considered as part of the assessment of learners' performances in foreign language teaching.

Strategies are divided into various groups and, for the assessment of strategies, various methods are used. This study highlights the assessment of compensatory strategies through strategy questionnaires in writing and speaking skills of English language learners. The aim is to find out how learners perform strategies in these language skills.

The analysis of the data collected through questionnaires was computed statistically and percentage calculation was applied on the same data set. The overall results indicated that the learners of English at the English Language Department at Trakya University, in Turkey, employ similar strategies in both skills. In addition, they consciously employ the strategies in their activities.

Key Words: learning strategies, compensatory strategies, writing skill, speaking skill, ELT

Defining Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are intentional, planned, controlled, and oriented behaviours. Mayer (1988) describes learning strategies as behaviours of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information. In this sense, learning strategies can be conceived as tactics employed by learners.

In various fields of education, various strategies are used by learners. Within second language or foreign language education, learning strategies are defined as attempts and thoughts/behaviours used by learners to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in target language and to comprehend, learn or retain new information (Tarone, 1983; O'Malley and Charmot, 1990).

Major Strategies

Learning strategies, which are defined as purposeful and goal-oriented, are divided into various groups. The major ones are

1. Cognitive strategies, in which mental processes are directly concerned with the processing of information in order to learn;
2. Metacognitive strategies, an awareness of what one is doing and an ability to manage and regulate consciously the use of the learning strategies for different situations;
3. Memory strategies, which aid in entering information into long-term memory;
4. Compensatory strategies, to overcome any gaps and limitations in knowledge of the language, particularly in writing and speaking; affective strategies, to control feelings, motivations and attitudes related to language learning;
5. Social strategies, to cooperate with others (Williams and Burden, 2000; Oxford, 1993; Ellis, 1994; Rubin and Thompson, 1994).

All those mutually supportive language learning strategies are related to the features of control, goal-directedness, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Oxford, 2002; Purpura, 1999; Green and Oxford, 1995).

Usefulness of Strategies

In recent years, the explicit teaching of strategies has received a considerable amount of attention in English Language Teaching - ELT- and various models for teaching strategies have been proposed. Some are concerned with teaching strategies separately and others are concerned with integrating the strategy instruction into language tasks (Williams and Burden, 2000). Such strategies are helpful for raising awareness of second language or foreign language learners in listening, speaking, writing and reading skills (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In this sense, strategies can be linked to motivation and particularly to a sense of self-efficacy in all language skills. In attempting to outline a communicative approach to skill integration, which skills are normally integrated in learning environment needs to be taken into consideration.

Ways to Assess Strategies

Strategies used by learners can be assessed in different ways such as through observations, interviews, verbal reports, strategy diaries, strategy questionnaires, and so on (Oxford, 2002). There have been numerous studies carried out on learning strategies. The research indicate that greater strategy use is related to higher level of language proficiency (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 2002; Cohen 1998; Çubukçu, 2007; Erten, and Williams, 2008) and learning strategies can be taught to create positive effects on language proficiency (Johnson, 1999; Chamot et al., 1996; Nunan, 1997). It is also stated that all types of learning strategies seem to be deployed in both naturalistic and tutored learning (Alptekin, 2007).

Aim of This Study

In this study it is aimed to assess strategy use through questionnaires in speaking and writing skills which signify a learner's productive skills in foreign language learning process. Although such an assessment, in general, deals with all strategy types, it, in particular, focuses on compensatory strategies of learners. Because this strategy type mainly deals with

speaking and writing skills which encompass communication strategies within the concept of language use (Cohen, 1998).

Speaking activity which is targeted for the improvement of communication strategies develops in connection with the development of cognitive domain as well as of the psycho-motor domain (Demirel, 2004). Writing activity, which is viewed as a communicative act, also helps strategy training as well as cognitive and literacy development (Reid, 2002). In this context, this study discusses the role of strategy use in writing and speaking activities and how learners employ strategies in language use.

Method

The survey method was selected to generate quantifiable data so as to make comparison between the groups of language skills. The gathered data were analysed to explain and to evaluate the use of compensatory strategies in speaking and writing activities.

Participants

The participants of the study are 52 first year students from English Language Teaching department at Trakya University, in Turkey.

Instruments

For collecting data, two questionnaires were administered on the participants. The questionnaire on speaking was adopted from the "Learning Strategy Questionnaire" previously applied by National Foreign Language Resource Center in Georgetown University/ Center for Applied Linguistics. In addition, the questionnaire on writing was developed by the researcher. The questionnaires include 18 items comprising statements about learning strategies. The responses were analysed statistically by using SPSS program. Four items were excluded from the questionnaires which comprised 22 items after they were first piloted with 20 students. The Alpha Coefficient for Speaking Questionnaire is ,8371 and for Writing Questionnaire is ,8514. Percentage calculation was applied on the same data set.

Findings

The questionnaires were analysed separately in two tables. The items in the questionnaires examine the employed strategies by the students during pre, while and post activities in both writing and speaking.

Table 1. The percentage values of responses for writing skill

	never	rarely	sometimes	usually
1. I decide my goal for writing and I write depending on this goal	-	3.0	22.0	75.0
2. Before writing I think of what I know about the topic	4.0	12.0	12.0	72.0
3. I make an outline before writing	2.0	9.0	16.0	73.0
4. I determine my writing strategies regarding the text type: If write an argumentative text, I determine the criteria of such text	-	1.0	15.0	84.0
5. Before writing I plan the introduction, development, and conclusion parts of my writing	2.0	11.0	15.0	72.0

6. In my writing, I organize the sentences coherently regarding linguistic rules	-	-	11.0	89.0
7. I organize the coherence of sentences regarding unity of ideas	-	-	15.0	85.0
8. I choose the proper words regarding the contextual meaning of the words	-	2.0	23.0	75.0
9. I always hesitate to use the same words repeatedly	10.0	16.0	22.0	52.0
10. I carefully use the proper forms of the words such as adjectives, verbs, nouns, etc.	3.0	9.0	8.0	80.0
11. I always encourage myself by repeating "you can manage to write"	-	-	12.0	88.0
12. I complete the text I am writing with the help of my classmates	30.0	46.0	20.0	4.0
13. While writing, I always check how comprehensible my writing is	6.0	9.0	19.0	66.0
14. I always check whether there are linguistic errors or mistakes	-	-	17.0	83.0
15. I read my text after writing in order to check if it is comprehensible	-	-	17.0	83.0
16. I determine the weak and strong points of my text after writing it	4.0	9.0	15.0	72.0
17. I evaluate whether the strategies I determined before writing are effective or not	-	9.0	18.0	73.0
18. I evaluate whether my text is consistent with my purpose I determined before writing it	-	5.0	17.0	78.0

Table 1 displays the percentage values of the items. As seen in the table, before writing activity, most of the students determine a goal and write in the direction of the goal (%72), make an outline (%72) by reviewing their knowledge about the given topic (%72) and regarding the text type criteria (%84), and plan the parts of the text they will produce (%72).

While writing, most of the students arrange the sentences coherently regarding both linguistic rules (%89) and unity of ideas (%85) and they state they pay attention to choose words appropriate for the context of text type (%75). But some of them (%52) avoid using the same words repeatedly. On the other hand, they pay attention to the forms of the words (adjective, verb, noun, etc. forms) (%80).

More students (%88) declare that they always encourage themselves for coping with writing. But most of them (%76) do not work cooperatively with the classmates to complete writing. They also state that, while writing they check linguistic errors and mistakes (%83) and if the text is comprehensible (%66).

After writing, they again check if the text is comprehensible (%83) by determining the weak and strong points (%72). In addition they confirm they apply the strategies (%73) and if they have written the text as consistent with the determined goal (%78).

Table 2. The percentage values for speaking skill

	never	rarely	sometimes	usually
1. I determine my goal about the topic before speaking	-	2.0	19.0	79.0
2. I think about my speaking strategies before my speech	-	-	21.0	79.0
3. I try to find out what I know about the topic	-	-	32.0	68.0
4. I try to choose the proper words while speaking	-	10.0	34.0	56.0
5. I check whether I effect my audience by my speech	3.0	7.0	23.0	67.0
6. I use simple language structures to convey my ideas clearly	-	-	35.0	65.0
7. I focus on the common topics while speaking	4.0	7.0	29.0	60.0
8. I practice speaking on my own in order to be fluent	-	-	12.0	88.0
9. I use real objects to express my ideas clearly	17.0	52.0	21.0	10.0

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Language Learning Strategies: An Evaluation of Compensatory Strategies
Muhlise Cosgun Ögeyik, Ph.D.

334

10. I use body language while speaking	-	-	8.0	92.0
11. I encourage myself while speaking	-	5.0	14.0	81.0
12. I talk to my classmates in English to gain fluency in my spare times	-	-	4.0	96.0
13. If I forget what to say, I try to carry on my speech with proper contextual information	-	7.0	36.0	57.0
14. After I finish my speech, I check whether I have been understood by the audience	-	2.0	20.0	78.0
15. I assess myself after my speech	-	3.0	24.0	73.0
16. I evaluate whether I have achieved my strategies I determined before my speech	3.0	17.0	16.0	64.0
17. After my speech I assess whether I managed to talk in the direction of my goal	3.0	16.0	15.0	64.0
18. I determine the weak and strong points of my speech after I finish my speech	-	-	22.0	78.0

As indicated in Table 2, before speaking, most of the students determine their goals (%79) and speaking strategies (%79). They also state they check what they know about the topic they will talk about (%68). However, some of the students (%56) are able to choose appropriate words while speaking. More than half of the students declare that they check whether they affect the audience (%67).

More than half of them also use simple language structures (%65) by focusing on the common topic (%60), but do not mostly use real objects to express their ideas (%69).

The common strategies among the students are that they usually practice on their own (%88) and with their classmates for being fluent speakers (%96).

Another common strategy among the students is using body language while speaking (%92). They state that they apply encouragement strategy for coping with speaking activity (%81). But some of the students (%57) can usually manage to maintain their speech when they forget what to say.

After speaking, they check whether they have been understood by the audience (%78) by assessing themselves (%73) and whether they have applied the strategies (%64) and the goals they determined efficiently (%64) by finding out the weak and strong points of their speaking performance (%78).

Discussion

In the study, the compensatory strategies used by learners in writing and speaking skills were identified and evaluated. Compensatory strategies that are used for speaking and writing skills- often known as communication strategies- are determined only for language use (Cohen, 1998). In this sense, those strategies are part of the assessment process.

The data showed similarities between the two skills in terms of compensatory strategies. The findings of this assessment study revealed that the learners use compensatory strategies in writing and speaking activities efficiently.

Before writing, the strategies of deciding on the goal for writing, making an outline, making plan regarding the text type were used by most of the learners. During the while-writing process, producing texts regarding text criteria such as coherence of sentences both

structurally and semantically, appropriate use of words, and the unity of text pragmatically were applied by most of the learners.

Among the declared strategies, encouragement by himself/herself is an evidence of self-confidence. During the post writing process, the learners declared that they could evaluate the texts they produced both structurally and pragmatically by shaping the weak and strong points of the text. Moreover they assessed if the goal determined before writing was achieved. Such points demonstrate that the learners in this study apply learning strategies efficiently in their writing activities.

The similar points were emphasized for speaking skill by the participants. The learners generally apply strategies in their speaking activities. But some lower values, when compared with writing activity, were determined in speaking activities in terms of using proper words, keeping on speech when they forget what to say, assessment of speech goal and efficiency. Such an outcome could be due to the difficulty of speaking in English by non-native speakers and the spontaneous creativity in oral language. Indeed, both writing and speaking activities as productive skills require creativity and self-confidence of language learners. In this sense, the more consciously students use strategies, the more successful and creative they become due to self-confidence.

Since styles and strategies help determine a particular learner's ability in language learning and use (Tarone, 1983; O'Malley and Charmot, 1990; Purpura, 1999.), they guide educators to introduce teaching of strategies into curriculum. Thus, learners who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences in language learning process can be directed to use all those strategies consciously.

Such an approach allows for deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class. In other words, if educators intend to maximise learners' potential, efforts need to be made to train learners to use strategies that can improve their learning effectiveness. Generally, it seems to be that it is the attitudes, skills and strategies learners possess that dictate whether or not they will be able to grasp the intricacies of language (Oxford, 1993; Nunan, 2000). Therefore, this study which is a sample assessment of strategies of learners may be guiding for educators and learners.

The success can also be attributed to strategy use in language learning. All those mutually supportive foreign language learning strategies, as mentioned by Oxford (2002) can raise awareness and self-efficacy by directing goals. Teaching strategies directly or explicitly may take learners' attention to the strategy taught, thus, learners can allowed assessing themselves consciously.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) offer some procedures for strategy teaching which can be summarised as: first helping students to identify or become aware of strategies they are using, then presenting and explaining a new strategy, with a rationale for using it. But while directing learners for strategy use, the individual differences need to be taken into account.

The more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their language instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven

into language instruction, matched to those style preferences. For understanding and evaluating learners' strategy use, assessments need to be applied. This descriptive study can be a model for the evaluation of learners' strategy implementation.

Some Limitations of This Study

This study has some limitations. It deals only with compensatory strategies by focusing on two basic skills-writing and speaking. The participants of the survey are 52 students from ELT department of Trakya University. Further research can be carried on all skills by describing all strategy types. Besides, different participant groups from other universities may be involved into further research and the responses of those groups can be compared. Another point is that action research on teaching learning strategies can be carried out and data can be evaluated in consequence of such application.

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Muhlise Coşgun Ögeyik, PhD
English Language Teaching Department
Faculty of Education
Trakya University
Edirne
TURKEY
muhlisecosgun@trakya.edu.tr
muhliseogeyik@hotmail.com