

Learner's First Language and the Impact of LLSs Instruction: A Study on Assamese ESL Learners

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) instruction on the reading and writing proficiency of Assamese ESL learners with regard to their first language. It is an intervention study conducted on a sample of 225 undergraduate learners from three colleges in Assam, India. The participants in this study consisted of 129 Assamese as L1 and 96 learners belonged to other L1 background. The independent samples t-test revealed that before strategy instruction the mean score of Other L1 learners ($M=14.85$, $SD=4.34$) was significantly higher ($t=6.893$; $p=.000$, $p<.05$) than the Assamese as L1 learners ($M=10.83$, $SD=4.33$). But after the LLSs instruction the Assamese as L1 learners outperformed their counterparts. The mean score of the Assamese as L1 learners ($M=30.91$, $SD=2.11$) found to be statistically significantly higher ($t=2.954$; $p=.003$, $p<.05$) than the Other L1 learners ($M=30.19$, $SD=1.55$). Thus, it can be concluded that the Assamese as L1 learners received more benefit of the LLSs instruction.

Keywords: Assamese ESL learners, Language Learning Strategies, LLS instruction, first language in second language learning.

Introduction

Classrooms in Assam are mostly multilingual in nature because learners come here from variety of first language (L1) backgrounds such as Bangla, Santali, Sadri, Oriya, Bhojpuri, Panjabi, etc. It is, therefore, natural that this diversity of first language background influences the teaching and learning of English. In Assam English enjoys the status of a Second Language. Motivation for learning the language is quite favorable. The knowledge of English is a prerequisite for better employment opportunity and social or economic status. There is an ever growing demand for the language in the society. Parents bestow greater emphasis on making their children learn the language right from early childhood. English is also a compulsory subject in the educational curriculum.

Despite having a favorable teaching learning atmosphere, learning English is still considered to be very difficult by many. Even in the undergraduate level, having learnt English for twelve years, Assamese ESL learners exhibit poor competence and performance in the language. Various factors are accountable for this. One of the important factors is the teacher centeredness of the ESL scenario in Assam. Different aspects of the teaching and learning of

the target language such as curriculum development, text-book preparation, teaching and evaluation etc., concentrate primarily on what the teacher is expected to do in the class and how the learners are expected to perform in the examinations. Little or no attention is paid on how the learners are expected to approach the learning task.

The modern research on language learning investigates not only *what* to learn but also *how* to learn a language. It recommends that learners should be autonomous, and teachers should merely be facilitators of learning. The educational system should prepare learners for autonomous learning because in this era of information explosion it is not possible for any educational system to teach learners everything. Autonomy in language learning can be achieved by the application of LLSs. The teacher's primary role in the language classroom is to provide awareness and training of LLSs to his/her students. However the ESL teaching-learning situation of Assam does not focus on the learner autonomy and provide training of LLSs to the learner.

On the other hand, the multilingual set up of the ESL classrooms is often ignored while teaching the target language. It is therefore essential to investigate the impact of LLSs instruction in this multi-lingual set up. In this context, the present study is undertaken to investigate how Assamese ESL learners' first language affect the impact of language learning strategies instruction.

Theoretically, this study will help us understand if learner's first language plays any role on the impact of LLSs instruction. This is going to be a fresh insight into the theory of LLSs research as such investigations are limited in nature so far as Assamese ESL learners are concerned. Pedagogically, this study will help us address the learner's need effectively. We will be more equipped to customize the ESL classes in accordance with learner's L1.

Review of literature

It has been a common observation that some students are more successful in learning a new language than others. The focus of the early research in LLSs dealt with the investigation of the causes that differentiate the language learning ability of learners.

As pointed by Rubin (1975:45):

“...if all people can learn their first language easily and well (although some have more verbal skill than others), why does this innate ability seem to decline for some when second language learning is the task?”

Modern researches in the field of language learning have been providing insights into how the learners of a language approach the learning of a language. It has been pointed out that learning a language is a type of problem solving for which learners use different LLSs (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Bialystok, 1978; Chamot & O'Malley, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1996 etc.). Language learning strategies are specific methods or techniques used by individual learners to facilitate the comprehension, retention, retrieval and application of information for language learning and acquisition (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, success in learning a language is attributed to a certain extent in the selection and use of Language Learning Strategies (Griffiths, 2004). Research consistently shows that less successful language learners lack strategy awareness and often use fewer numbers of LLSs. Moreover, they use inappropriate LLSs for

their language tasks. In other words, the less successful language learners use the same strategies over and over again and do not make significant progress in their task (Anderson, 2005).

As mentioned already, the advantage of the LLSs is that they have their base in cognitive psychology, therefore, they are teachable. Students who are taught to use strategies and are provided with sufficient practice in using them will learn more effectively than students who have had no experience with learning strategies (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987:240). It is therefore evident that effective language learning can be achieved through LLSs training. During the last forty years, various studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of teaching LLSs. Learners from variety of backgrounds such as age group, culture or ethnicity, learning environment, gender etc. were involved in these studies. Results of such studies are mixed and varied. In most instances, LLSs intervention studies are found to be effective in increasing strategy awareness and effective language learning ability of learners. To mention a few: O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Pressley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasi & Brown, 1992; Cohen, 1998; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Harris, 2003; Graham & Harris, 2003 etc.

It has been observed that learner differences play a crucial role in determining the choice and acceptability of LLSs. Similarly, these learner differences determine the impact of LLSs instruction on learners. For example, as it is found that women use more LLSs than men, therefore, after strategy instruction both women and men demonstrate distinct strengths in strategy use (Oxford, 1990: 238-239)

There are limited number of studies on the investigation of the impact of LLSs instruction on learner differences (for example, Philip & Hua, 2000; MacArthur & Lembo, 2009; Karbalaei & Rajyashree, 2010). Philip and Hua, (2000) found that metacognitive strategy instruction (MSI) was effective for both low proficiency (LP) and high proficiency (HP) learners. The authors observed that the LP learners, despite their lack of strategic behavior, did indicate their sense of strategy use which might develop them as strategic readers with more practice opportunities. The HP learners, on the other hand, received reinforcement of their strategic ability farther. However, Karbalaei and Rajyashree (2010) found that LLSs instruction was more beneficial for lower proficiency learners. On the other hand, MacArthur and Lembo (2009) discovered that there was no difference of impact of LLSs instruction on adult and young language learners.

Hypothesis and research question

H₀: There is no significant difference in the impact of LLSs instruction on Assamese ESL learners' proficiency with regard to first language.

Research Question

Does the impact of LLSs instruction depend on Assamese ESL learners' first language (i.e. Assamese or any other)?

Methodology

This is an Intervention Study where the subjects were pretested before LLSs treatment. Then they received LLSs instruction for four weeks on different LLSs pertaining to reading and writing in English. After the treatment sessions, the subjects were again post tested on the

same reading and writing activity questionnaire in order to identify the difference of impact, if any, of the LLSs instruction with regard to their L1.

The entire study was done in two stages: (i) Pilot Study and (ii) Current Study. It is needless to say that the methodology for both the studies was the same. The aim of the pilot study was to check the validity of the instruments and the experimental design. The feedback obtained in the pilot study helped in the improvement of the instruments and the research design.

Participants

The target population in the study was the first semester undergraduate Assamese ESL learners from the humanities and allied subjects of Dibrugarh University, Assam. The study was conducted on a sample of 225 undergraduate learners from three colleges. There were 129 Assamese as L1 learners, and the remaining 96 learners belonged to other L1 background which includes Bangla, Santali, Sadri, Oriya, Panjabi and Bhojpuri. They had 10 to 12 years of English learning experience at the time of the experiment. The average age of the participants was 19 to 20 years. Colleges of Dibrugarh University are located in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Therefore, the study included participants from colleges of all the three locations.

In the pilot study, a total of 20 participants, 10 from an urban college and 10 from a rural college participated.

Instrument

A reading and writing activity questionnaire was designed to test the participants' reading and writing proficiency in English. The questionnaire contained a total of 20 multiple choice comprehension questions, 5 each from four passages, to test the reading comprehension ability of learners. Out of the 5 multiple choice comprehension questions, there were 2 main idea questions, 2 factual information questions and 1 inference question. There were four options for each multiple choice comprehension questions and the participants were required to read the passage and mark the correct option. Two passages were selected from previous undergraduate level question papers of the Dibrugarh University and the rest two passages were based on the TOEFL (2005). In order to make the task challenging and to sustain learners' interest, the passages having difficulty level of slightly above the learners' usual proficiency level were selected.

Learners' proficiency in writing skill was assessed with the help of two summary writing activities and an essay writing activity incorporated in the reading and writing activity questionnaire. The learners were asked to write summaries of two passages given for the reading comprehension task. Topics for the essay writing activity were selected from TOEFL (2005). These included topics of general interest of learners which help in the assessment of learners' ability for descriptive and argumentative writing. There were four options for the essay writing task. The questionnaire contained space in it for writing the summaries and the essay.

Results and findings

Results for the research question:

Does the impact of LLSs instruction depend on Assamese ESL learners' first language (i.e. Assamese or any other)?

An independent samples t-test is carried out to identify the difference if any between the two groups of learners before the LLSs instruction.

Table 1: Mean Scores of the Learners in Proficiency Test as per L1 in Pre-test

First language		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading and Writing	Assamese	129	10.83	4.325	.381
	Other	96	14.85	4.341	.443

a. Experimental Group or Control Group = Experimental Group

Table 2: T-test of Learners' Score in Proficiency Test as per L1 in Pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Reading and Writing	.019	.891	-6.893	223	.000	-4.025	.584	-5.175	-2.874
			-6.889	204.415	.000	-4.025	.584	-5.177	-2.873

a. Experimental Group or Control Group = Experimental Group

Table 1 reveals that in the pre-test the mean score of the learners whose first language is not Assamese (M=14.85, SD=4.34) is greater than the Assamese as first language learners (M=10.83, SD=4.33). The t-test in Table 2 reveals that the F value (F=.019; p=.891, p>.05) is not significant. Therefore, there is not much variability between the groups. The t value (t=-6.893; p=.000, p<.05) obtained is significant. This indicates that there was significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups of learners. In other words, the mean score of the Assamese as L1 learners was significantly less than the learners whose L1 is not Assamese.

Alternately, learners whose L1 is not Assamese did significantly better than Assamese as L1 learners in the proficiency test.

After the LLSs instruction, the mean score of the learners of Assamese as L1 (M=30.91, SD=2.11) was slightly higher than the group whose first language is not Assamese (M=30.19, SD=1.55) as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Mean Scores of the Learners in Proficiency Test as per L1 in Post-test

First language		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading and Writing	Assamese	129	30.91	2.108	.186
	Other	96	30.19	1.545	.158

a. Experimental Group or Control Group = Experimental Group

Table 3: T-test of Learners' Score in Proficiency Test as per L1 in Post-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Reading and Writing	28.724	.000	2.826	223	.005	.719	.255	.218	1.221
			2.954	222.956	.003	.719	.244	.240	1.199

Table 4 states that the F value ($F=28.724$; $p=.000$, $p<.05$) is significant. The t value obtained ($t=2.954$; $p=.003$, $p<.05$) is significant. It implies that there is a significant difference in the mean score of the two groups after the LLSs instruction. Thus, it can be seen that the Assamese as L1 learners did significantly better in the post-test than their other counterparts which is completely contrary to what was noticed in the pre-test. Thus, the Assamese L1 learners received more benefit than their counterparts after receiving training in using LLSs. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and it can be concluded that the impact of LLSs instruction depends on the learners' first language.

Discussion

It can be noticed that there is an overall increase in proficiency of all the learners after the LLSs instruction. Before LLSs instruction the proficiency level of the Assamese as L1 learners were far behind their counterparts. But in the post test context, we observe an entirely opposite situation. The Assamese as L1 learners outperformed their counterparts in terms of their proficiency in reading and writing. The t-test revealed that there is a significant difference in the scores of the two groups of learners after the LLSs instruction. The Assamese as L1 learners received more benefit of the strategy instruction than their other L1 counterparts. It can be concluded that Assamese as L1 learners come from vernacular medium schools where they are rarely exposed to strategies based instruction in comparison to their counterparts. Therefore, they had more scope for improvement and as a result they received more benefit of LLSs instruction.

Implication

Theoretical Implications

Numerous studies have been conducted worldwide to investigate the type of LLSs used by learners of diverse cultural and ethnic origin and the impact of LLSs instruction on them including Asian countries. They contributed towards the enrichment of knowledge regarding how learners learn a language and how effective LLSs instruction can be. It not only informs us how effective the LLSs instruction can be for a particular set of students but also how LLSs instruction could be designed to make it effective.

The findings of the present study support a number of theoretical characteristics of LLSs research. LLSs theory postulates that LLSs are teachable and LLSs instruction can increase learner autonomy by enabling learners to control their own learning. The findings of the present study support the characteristics of the LLSs theory in the context of Assamese ESL learners. The result is in line with the findings of several other researchers such as El-Dinary, Brown, & Van Meter (1995); Gagné, Yekovitch, & Yekovitch (1993); Harris & Graham (1992); Wood, Woloshyn, & Willoughby (1995) etc. It proved that LLSs are teachable and after the LLSs instruction the learners exhibited improvement in proficiency level. In addition to that, the Assamese as L1 learners received more benefit of the LLSs instruction because they exhibited significant difference in their proficiency level compared to their counterparts after receiving LLSs instruction. Whereas, before strategy instruction the proficiency level of the Assamese as L1 learners were below their counterparts.

This study further supports another theoretical claim that the impact of LLSs instruction is determined by a number of factors which include learners' age, culture, ethnicity, gender,

learning environment, motivation etc. The findings have proved that learner's first language plays important role in determining the effectiveness of LLSs instruction. The result of the present study is also in line with the findings of other researchers such as Philip & Hua (2000); MacArthur & Lembo (2009); Karbalaei & Rajyashree (2010), etc. This finding has importance from the theoretical point of view because this has the potential to update the present status of the LLSs theory. The status of the LLSs theory has been constantly updated through incorporation of new outcomes gathered from increasing number of investigations carried out in the field.

Pedagogical Implications

The finding of the present study has some important pedagogical implications. The existing ESL pedagogy in Assam is teacher-centric. It does not focus on learners' learning process. This research aimed at shifting the attention from teacher-centeredness to learnercenteredness in the ESL classrooms of the state. The current ESL teaching learning situation in Assam bestows greater responsibility both on the teacher and the learners in the present globalised world. The teachers are expected to prepare learners to face the challenges of the world today where knowledge and proficiency in English is an unavoidable requirement. In this modern world of information explosion, it is practically not possible to provide the learners complete knowledge of everything they learn. It is rather necessary to equip learners with the abilities which can help them acquire the required knowledge independently without a teacher's assistance. This autonomy in learning can be attained only if learners are aware of learning strategies and apply them properly in learning. Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) are one of the most important learning tools that help learners equip with the knowledge of the process of learning. The result of the present investigation showed that there is a positive impact of LLSs instruction on Assamese ESL learners in increasing language proficiency through raising awareness of LLSs and providing practice opportunities of LLSs for language learning. This study supports Chamot and O'Malley's (1987:240) remark that students who are taught to use strategies and are provided with sufficient practice will learn more effectively than students who have had no experience with learning strategies. Moreover, the study showed that LLSs instruction should be carried out keeping in mind learners' first language. LLSs instruction should be customized according to learners' first language.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recent pedagogical developments lay greater emphasis on learner and learning than teacher and teaching. Learners are required to be autonomous and capable of taking control of their own learning because learning is unending and teaching everything is not possible. The present study was undertaken under such an atmosphere. This study is perhaps the first of its kind in Assamese ESL learners' context, especially investigating the impact of language learning strategies on reading and writing abilities of the learners according to their first language. This kind of study can be further explored with different variables which may include:

1. Learners of various age-groups, socio-economic and cultural contexts belonging to different academic levels.
2. Learners of various academic courses and proficiency levels.
3. Listening, Speaking Proficiency and other language skills as well and 4. Instruction of other LLSs besides the ones included in the present study.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of LLSs instruction on Assamese ESL learners based on their first language. The result of the investigation reported positive impact of the LLSs instruction on awareness raising and language skill development. This was a new endeavour in the Assamese ESL context. A humble effort was made to inquire some unknown facts. However, many areas still remain untouched. Further studies of similar kind are expected so that more knowledge can be attained to improve the ESL pedagogy of Assam.

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