Common Patterns of Learner Characteristics Displayed by More Proficient EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research primarily explored the common patterns of three learner characteristics (i.e., motivation, learning styles, and learning strategies) shown by more proficient Taiwanese EFL learners based on their language learning experiences. The participants of this study were ten non-English-major sophomores who attended the same English Honours programme at a private university in the northern part of Taiwan. Each of these more proficient language learners was given an in-depth interview to gain information required to answer the research questions of this study. The obtained results showed that: (1) the participants were both integratively- and instrumentally-motivated learners; (2) the major learning style preferences of the participants tended to be more visual and auditory; and (3) the main learning strategies the participants frequently used when learning English included meta-cognitive strategies, memory strategy, cognitive strategies, and social strategies. Through these findings, EFL or any other language instructors could better understand what makes a proficient language learner, followed by developing appropriate teaching approaches and materials to assist their students to attain a good level of language proficiency.

Keywords: Learning strategy, learning style, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Background

With an understanding of the fast development of globalization and prompt growth of technology, it is clear that people from all over the world have more chances to speak with each other. Therefore, obtaining a second language (L2) ability

is extremely craved especially if the L2 skill is to be very striving in the career or any opportunities. However, research has pointed out that success or failure in second/ foreign language (FL) learning may result from numerous factors such as onset age of learning, length of learning, teaching methods and so forth (Baker & Trofimovich, 2006; Bialystok, 1997; Cadierno, 1995). Since no single factor can explain any language learning process, many researchers have transferred their research focus to learners' individual characteristics such as motivation (e.g. Dembo & Seli, 2008; Dornyei, 2001; Gardner, 1985), learning strategies (Nunan, 1996; Reid, 1996), as well as learning styles (Lan & Oxford, 2003; Sy, 2003).

Motivation

Motivation is a term that describes people's driving force to complete various activities. It directs a large portion of what people want to do and how well people do it. Brown (1994) defines motivation as "the extent to which you make choices about (a) a goal to pursue and (b) the effort you will devote to the pursuit" (p. 34). Johnson (1979) explained it as the "tendency to expend effort to achieve goals" (p. 283). According to the definition of Dörnyei (2001a), it is an idea of "why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it" (p. 8). These definitions all suggest that motivation is one of the important steps toward learning success.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) classified language learning motivation into two categories: integrative orientation and instrumental orientation. From their point of view, learners with integrative orientation extremely desire to learn the culture of the community of the target language and endeavour to participate in it. In contrast, learners with instrumental orientation tend to learn a L2 for practical purposes such as career advancement or passing examinations.

Gardner and Lambert's motivation model only emphasizes the social aspects of learning rather than educational psychology. Hence, many researchers have attempted to modify it, and one revised version that has received much attention comes from Deci's (1975) account of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation activities. He described intrinsic motivation activities as the ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activities themselves. People engage in the activities just for their own sake. Extrinsic motivation activities, on the other hand, are commenced by an external reward such as money or prizes.

Another framework of motivation that is specifically dealt in the classroom was proposed by Dörnyei (2001). This model consists of three components, namely, the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level. The language level focuses on "orientations and motives related to various aspects of the L2" (p. 18). The learner level is concerned with internal and affective traits of language learners. Motivation at the learning situation level is

affected by various intrinsic and extrinsic motives.

Although so many modified versions of Gardner and Lambert's motivation theory have appeared, many language researchers still have the tendency to adopt Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) when investigating and explaining learners' learning motivation. For example, Chang (2003) explored the types of learning motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation) shown by 334 EFL (English as a foreign language) learners at various colleges of technology in southern Taiwan. The research data were collected from questionnaires adapted from Gardner's AMTB. The results of the study showed that the participants were inclined to be extrinsically-motivated in learning English. Another study conducted by Warden and Lin (2000) adopted Gardner's integrative/instrumental orientations to explore what motivational inclination EFL learners at universities of technology in Taiwan tended to display in their English learning. The study found that Taiwanese technology college students considerably lacked integrative motivation because their language learning only happened in the classroom.

Learning Style

Research has indicated that learners may enjoy learning more when they are instructed with ways that consider their learning style preferences (Dunn *et al.*, 1989). Thus, learning style, like motivation, is also a critical element in the investigation of learners' learning success. According to Cornett (1983), learning styles are "the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior" (p. 9). Davis (2001) defined them as "individuals' characteristic and preferred ways of gathering, interpreting, organizing, and thinking about information" (p. 185). In addition, Durodoye and Hildreth (1995) described them as "a consistent pattern of behavior and performance by which an individual approaches educational experiences" (p. 242). However, there is no certain learning style that can be inferred to be better than or superior to others. Learning styles are developed normally based on each person's personality and preferred approach of how they like receiving new information (Brown, 2007).

Among all the learning-style-related research, the experiential learning style model of Kolb (1984) and the learning style theory of Reid (1987) are the main frameworks that are most frequently used to define and categorize learners' learning styles. In terms of Kolb's model, there are four dimensions: Concrete Experience (CE), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), Active Experimentation (AE), and Reflective Observation (RO). The four dimensions further classify learners into four types of learning style according to whether learners receive information by concrete experience or abstract conceptualization and whether learners assimilate the information they receive by active experimentation or reflective observation. The four types of learning style include Accommodator, Diverger, Assimilator, and Converger.

Accommodators prefer doing and feeling to thinking and watching. Convergers are fond of low-risk active learning. Assimilators favour lectures with some demonstrations and like to reflect what they observe into their learning methods. Divergers prefer learning by logical instruction and diverging from one experience to multiple possibilities.

With regard to Reid's theory, she surveyed 1388 non-native speakers from nine different language backgrounds in the United States about their learning style preferences in 1987. The survey was conducted by adopting the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) designed by Reid herself. The questionnaire primarily investigated learners' four perceptual (namely, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile) and two social (i.e., individual and group) learning style preferences. Based on her explanation, visual learners learn effectively through their eyes, auditory learners through their ears, kinesthetic learners through whole body involvement, and tactile learners through hands-on experiences. Moreover, individual learners learn effectively when they are alone, and group learners when they learn with others as a team.

Reid's (1987) findings indicated that kinesthetic and tactile learning styles were the learning styles ESL learners particularly preferred, and group learning was the one both ESL and native English speakers least preferred. In addition, Reid also found that learners from different cultural backgrounds preferred different learning styles. Learners' style preferences also varied with their gender, age, proficiency level, major, length of living and learning English in the states.

Learning Strategy

After reviewing the literature on learning motivation and styles, the focus here falls on learning strategies. According to the definition of Weinstein and Mayer (1986), learning strategies are "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning and that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process" (p. 315). Oxford (1990) indicated that learning strategies are especially significant for language learning because "they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (p. 1). Furthermore, Oxford and Crookall (1989) described learning strategies as "steps taken by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information" (p. 404). However, learners have been found to use different learning strategies in their language learning (see Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; O'Malley et al., 1985). Meanwhile, learners of different genders, motivations, and learning styles adopt different learning strategies or specific actions to help them learn (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Sy & Lious, 1994).

Many categories of language learning strategies have been identified by different researchers such as indirect and direct learning strategies (Oxford, 1985; Rubin, 1981) as well as social-affective strategies (O'Malley et al., 1985). However, the most comprehensive classification system of

language learning strategies was created by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford's classification, there are two main categories, and each is further divided into three different learning strategies, namely, direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies). Oxford and Crookall (1989) explained that memory strategies are techniques that are specially tailored to help learners store new information in memory and retrieve it later. Meanwhile, cognitive strategies are skills that involve manipulation or transformation of the language in some direct way such as reasoning, note taking. Compensation strategies are the behaviours used to compensate for missing knowledge of some kind such as guessing or using synonyms or circumlocution. Meta-cognitive strategies are behaviours for centring, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning. Affective strategies are techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations related to language learning. Social strategies are actions involving other people in the language learning process.

Oxford's classification of language learning strategies is frequently utilized to investigate and define the learning strategies that different types of language learners tend to use in their learning process. For instance, Lan and Oxford (2003) pointed out that elementary school learners with a higher English proficiency level in northern Taiwan used cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies more often than those with a lower English proficiency level. Liao (2000) studied Taiwanese secondary school EFL learners' learning motivation and strategies. The results showed that the extrinsically-motivated learners used social and meta-cognitive strategies more frequently than the intrinsically-motivated ones.

From the discussion above, a great number of past studies on learning motivations, styles, and strategies collected data primarily via the use of questionnaires or surveys. Other research approaches (such as interviews, etc.) were barely utilized. In addition, most of these past studies (for instance, Reid, 1987; Warden & Lin, 2000) mainly focused on the individual differences of learners' characteristics. A few studies were conducted to examine the common features of learners' characteristics displayed by high-proficiency language learners. As a result, in order to understand whether different data-collecting methods would lead to more accurate identification and detailed description of learner characteristics and to provide insights into what usually makes a good language learner, the current research used interviews to explore the common patterns of learning motivations, styles, and strategies shown by ten Taiwanese college EFL students who were more proficient in English speaking and listening than other normal students at the same school.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In accordance with the study purpose above, the researchers expected to answer the

following questions:

1. What are the common styles of motivation displayed by the ten more proficient Taiwanese university EFL students in the process of their English learning?

2. What are the common learning styles shown by the ten more proficient Taiwanese university EFL students in the course of their English learning?

3. What are the common learning strategies employed by the ten more proficient Taiwanese university EFL students when they study English?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants of this study were all recruited from an English Honours class at a private university in northern Taiwan. This English Honours class was composed of twenty-one students, with all of them had better listening and speaking proficiencies than the students in other regular English classes. Ten out of the twenty-one students in the class were randomly selected for an in-depth interview that primarily investigated the features that made them become more proficient English learners. The ten selected participants were all females and aged around nineteen or twenty years at the time of this research. They were studying in different departments at the university such as Department of Commercial Design (Judy, Elvira, Annie, Trisha, Claire, and Cathy), Department of Information Management (Angel), Department of Biotechnology (Betty), and Applied Chinese Department (Cindy and Amy).

Data Collection

The major research method utilized to seek answers to the research questions of this study was ten individual semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted around 20 to 30 minutes and was undertaken in a quiet and comfortable classroom on the campus of the university, where the participants were studying. The in-depth interview consisted of five main open-ended questions (see Appendix) that specifically focused on the investigation of the three learners' characteristics (i.e., learning motivation, learning styles, and learning strategies) of the participants during their English learning process. Before formally asking the participants the questions, the researchers normally spent a few minutes chatting with them and this was done to create a relaxing environment and atmosphere so that they could elaborate more on their responses. While chatting with the participants, the researchers first introduced themselves and then asked for the students' agreement to audio-record the interviews. This followed the contention of Rubin and Rubin (2005) that "the researcher needs to keep a record of what was said for later analysis" (p. 110). In addition, when each interview was actually administered, the researchers would tactfully rephrase the questions if any of the interviewees had difficulties understanding them. Just as Rubin and Rubin (2005) pointed out, reassuring the conversational

partners tactfully may help increase their confidence in answering questions.

Procedure

The current study was carried out in the following steps. When this study was started, the researchers attempted to recruit ten students from a sophomore English Honours class at a private university in northern Taiwan as the participants. Then, the purpose of this study was explained to these ten randomly selected participants. They were also informed that the results of this study might provide insights and guidelines to help other English learners to improve their English proficiency. Next, the researchers made an appointment with each participant for an in-depth individual interview. The interview date and time were determined based on the participant's schedule, and all the interviews were administered on the basis of the research questions of this study. In order to extract accurate and absolute information from the participants, the individual interviews were totally conducted in the participants' native language, i.e. Mandarin Chinese. These interviews were all audio-recorded, and the recordings were later transcribed into Chinese for further categorization and analysis.

Data Analysis

After all the interviews had been completed and transcribed into Chinese, the researchers started to analyze the collected data. First, the researchers read through the transcripts thoroughly as the preparation for coding.

Second, the researchers divided each transcript into categories according to the interview questions. Next, the researchers extracted and recognized significant and relevant statements and concepts from each category. Afterwards, these statements and concepts were grouped into themes by marking with different labels. After the researchers had physically coded the interview transcripts, labels marked as ideas that described their motivation and thematic categories allowed the researchers to carry out a coherent and analytic work and to examine for the common features in the way the themes represented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learners' Characteristics

Motivation

Based on the ten individual interviews, two major purposes that motivated the participants to learn English well were found: 1) to get a decent job and 2) to be able to communicate with people from other countries. Based on the classification of Gardner and Lambert (1972), the participants were both instrumentally and integratively motivated language learners, and their consideration of getting a good job in the future and being able to speak with foreign people was the main attribute.

In terms of showing instrumental motivation, all the participants of the present study were particularly aware that learning English is very important for their future success in career. They had reached the age at which they might see the benefits

of acquiring an English ability. Unlike the compulsory English subject in high schools, English at this point plays a more serious and purposeful role in their studies. The primary goal of acquiring an English ability for them was to get a decent job after their graduation from university. Therefore, they are more motivated to acquire the language skill, and learning English has become attractive to them. The participants, Cathy, Claire, Elvira, Cindy, and Judy all pointed out in the interviews that the concern of better job opportunities in the future was the major trigger that motivated them to master English. Cathy took herself as an example and explained why she was eager to gain a certain level of English ability. She said that "as I am majoring in commercial design, English plays an important part in my future career." Cathy indicated that it would be difficult to define the border of design and further mentioned that "to well-design and promote an international item, it is necessary to understand the culture of a country and to be able to introduce the design conception and communicate with people in the international language, English." Meanwhile, Elvira stated that:

> I think that the number of people who have this specialty is limited. And I also think having an English ability also means having an advantage. If you have this tool and professional specialty, there is a positive possibility to get a better job in the future.

Claire, like Elvira, also regarded English ability as a specialty to earn a good job. She stated that "to get a better job with this specialty, you are supposed to have some certificates such as GEPT." She also mentioned that taking care of her current studies, being able to travel, and being interested in English motivated her to be a successful English learner.

During the interviews with the participants, some of them also reported that they were willing to seek for opportunities to use the English language with native speakers. They very much enjoyed having interactions with the native speakers because they could use the opportunities to practice the language. The participants realized the values of being communicative in the language such as making friends, being able to travel alone, and admiring other cultures. Therefore, they were also integratively-motivated to learn the language. For instance, Elvira described that "making friends, practicing English, and understanding foreign cultures are my purposes to learn English." Moreover, Annie said:

> I realized that I could not do anything when I was young travelling with parents. At that time, I knew English played a vital role because I wished to be able to communicate with people and be their friends.

One motive for Amy to become a successful English learner was that she

enjoyed watching English movies and wanted to be able to understand their humours and plots. She said, "My mother frequently took me for English movies when I was young. Therefore, I was deeply affected by the characters' pronunciation in the movies and could speak in the same tone." In Betty's case, she got motivated to learn English by some American born Chinese pronunciation. She said:

My motivation to learn English is simple. When I was young, I saw some American born Chinese speak English. At that moment, I thought they were cool because they spoke English very fluently. Since then, I told myself to learn English well and to speak as well as them.

In sum, nearly all the participants in this study showed that they were both instrumentally and integratively motivated English learners. However, considering getting a decent job after graduation from university seemed to be a more important motive for them to learn English well.

Learning Style

The ten more proficient EFL learners in this study continued to express in the interviews that visual and auditory were their major learning style preferences (based on the model of Reid, 1987). Betty mentioned that "visual images could help memorize information". Amy stated that "visual learning has a great impact on the learning outcome". Elvira further described that

learning based on visual input helped her think seriously, especially when reading articles or answering questions on test sheets. She said, "I learn more when reading books with pictures and reading words." She also stated that "If it is related to exams and grades, I would think about the questions and contents seriously."

In addition to visual learning style, the ten participants also talked about their preference for auditory learning style when learning English. All of them explained that their learning also involved their ears. Amy said, "Auditory has a great influence on learning. For me, there is no television at home, so I have to go to my aunt's place to watch TV. Hence, I listen to ICRT and radio more often." Elvira stated, "Reading subtitles and listening to the pronunciation while watching English movies helped me understand new information." Judy expressed that listening to the pronunciation of new words made it easier for her to remember the words.

From the statements given by the participants of the current study, it was apparent that all the participants showed two common types of learning styles (namely, visual and auditory) when learning English. Moreover, the ten interviewees expressed in the interviews that they enjoyed meeting foreign people and tried to learn from them different ways of looking at things. To them, learning from different people's personal experiences and interaction with native speakers normally eased their English learning process. This piece of evidence also suggested that the ten more efficient EFL learners tended to be extroverted learners.

Learning Strategy

Another finding of this study showed that the common learning strategies more frequently employed by the more proficient EFL participants during their English learning process were meta-cognitive strategies, memory strategies, social strategies, and cognitive strategies.

First of all, the ten participants would normally seek opportunities to practice English. Amy said, "…being brave and open-minded to speak with native speakers helped me learn English." Angel also said, "I like to seek opportunities to speak with foreign teachers." Cindy stated that "to learn English well, it requires practicing more, speaking more, and listening more." She further explained that "to be more specific, using "executive control" strategy such as making plans on calendars over the learning process is important and effective. I supervise myself to follow the studying schedules I planned and to reach the goals as planned." Furthermore, Trisha said, "going to English cram school also helps learners learn English. The sophomore English Honours Programme (EHP) is sort of like the cram school. EHP provides an English speaking environment for learners who want to practice speaking." According to the explanation of Oxford and Crookall (1989), behaviours used for centring, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning are classified as meta-cognitive strategies. That is to say, all the ten participants had applied meta-cognitive strategies (for instance, making study plans, going to cram schools, seeking practice opportunities…) in their English learning process.

All the respondents also reported that watching English movies, TV programmes, and/or videos helped improve their English learning. Cindy said that "learning through audio-visual mediums provides English learners with a more abundant and actual language learning environment." In other words, audio-visual mediums not only present real English in meaningful contexts and situations but also provide an authentic culture look behind the language. Elvira said, "I listen carefully and read subtitles when I watch English movies. Then I will link the images with the sounds to remember new words." Annie said, "the strategy I frequently use is to watch a movie without the subtitle and then listen and watch carefully once. Later, watch it again with the subtitle, so I will know where I don't understand and try to match the images with the sounds to help me learn." According to Oxford and Crookall (1989), the strategies the participants used to create mental linkages with sounds and images from movies and help themselves remember new words and sounds are called memory strategies.

Based on the results of this study, besides the aforementioned meta-cognitive and memory strategies, other common strategies the participants frequently used to learn English included cognitive strategies and social strategies. For example, Claire mentioned, "I enrolled in English cram schools to prepare for my English proficiency tests because cram schools provided me with some authentic and mock test questions." Angel and Elvira liked to take notes when they learned new English

words or sentences. Angel said, "I write down some good sentences when I read, so I can apply them to my writing." Meanwhile, Elvira stated that "I take notes of slang and aphorisms I see in the girl's restroom to improve my English."

As for the social strategies used by the participants, most of them mentioned that speaking with native speakers or friends helped them to practice English. Amy asserted that "I like to learn from talking with foreign friends or classmates." Annie said, "I like to talk to native speakers, but I would rephrase the conversation in my own words to confirm with the person I speak to when I don't understand some words." In contrast, Angel said, "I would ask directly if I don't understand some parts of the conversation in order not to misunderstand." The participants tried to seek the opportunities to use English and practice it by communicating directly in the language. Moreover, they also liked to interact with people during their learning and ask questions when they did not understand the content of any conversation.

Other than the strategies mentioned above, some participants also used compensation strategies and affective strategies. For example, Cathy, Elvira, and Amy used English synonyms to replace the words they did not know in the process of their English learning. Elvira and Trisha looked up new vocabulary in the dictionary or guessed the meaning of the words they were not familiar with while reading articles. Amy and Cindy were not afraid of making mistakes while using English with native speakers because they thought that it could help them enhance their language skills. Judy reported that receiving praises from others and being positive in learning helped her learn English better.

CONCLUSION

The participants in this study showed some similar patterns of their learning motivation, styles, and strategies in relation to English learning. The participants' learning motivation could be classified as instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. The former one was mainly represented by their strong desire to get a good job after graduation, and the latter one by their eagerness to be able to communicate with international communities. However, language learning success correlates not only with learning motivation but also with learning styles and learning strategies. The results of the present research also indicated that the ten participants shared common learning style preferences when learning English. In more specific, they preferred both visual and auditory representations of learning materials. Learning English through seeing and listening seemed to be effective for them. Moreover, to acquire good English proficiency, the participants voluntarily participated in extracurricular English programmes and adopted some learning strategies. The learning strategies they commonly and frequently used were meta-cognitive, memory, social, and cognitive strategies. These findings could help English or any other language instructors to better understand what makes

a proficient language learner, as well as to be able to use appropriate teaching approaches and materials to assist their students to achieve a good level of language proficiency.

At the end of this paper, one suggestion could be proposed for future studies. The number of the participants in this study was relatively small. In addition, the ten participants were all females and restricted to a single university's sophomores. Thus, they could not represent all the EFL learners in Taiwan or even in other countries. Thomas (2001) stated that "the folk psychology of one culture can differ from the folk psychology of another" (p. 7). Therefore, more participants of both males and females from different levels of school and cultures should be incorporated as a more representative sample. By doing so, more valid and reliable results might be gained.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What do you think of learning English in Taiwan?

2. What is/are the reason(s) that motivate(s) you to learn English well?

3. What do you think your learning style(s) is/are during your English learning process? Please describe it/them in detail.

4. What are the learning strategies that you often use when learning English?

5. What are other factors that you think are important and the key elements to your learning success? Please describe them in detail.