

3 Enhancing independent learning competence and grammar language learning strategies

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Abstract

In an ever-evolving competitive world, learning a Foreign Language (FL) has become essential. To enhance learners' learning proficiency, learners should be encouraged to build the necessary competence for learning an FL, and this could be done by enhancing the employment of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs), as LLSs constitute an essential aspect of boosting and promoting the learning process (Chamot, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975). They have a persuasive and advocate role as an aid for learners to boost and improve their language learning proficiency, and have been explored by researchers since the 1970's. Despite the crucial developments on LLSs since the 1970's, Grammar Learning Strategies (GLSs) are in their infant stage in the field. LLSs researchers have not given as much attention to GLSs as to the other language skills; therefore, GLSs have largely been ignored (Anderson, 2005; Cohen, 2011; Cohen, Pinilla-Herrera, Thompson, & Witzig, 2001; Oxford, Lee, & Park, 2007; Pawlak, 2009a; Pawlak, 2012). For example, Oxford et al. (2007, p. 117) called GLSs the "Second Cinderella" of LLSs research. This paper will report a study that aimed at enhancing independent learning competence through employing GLSs by investigating how FL learners develop their GLSs and how they solve their grammar learning problems using such strategies. Research participants were male and female university students studying different European and non-European languages.

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The results show the high rate of using cognitive GLSs especially in explicit inductive and explicit deductive learning to promote their independent language learning competence to face their grammar learning difficulties.

Keywords: grammar learning strategies, promoting learning proficiency, independent language learning competence.

1. Introduction

Since the seventies, there has been a great recognition that LLSs are “an extremely powerful learning tool” (O’Malley et al., 1985, p. 43). LLSs enhance learners’ learning proficiency and help to build the necessary independent learning competence as they constitute an essential aspect of enhancing and promoting the learning process (Chamot, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975). Despite of all the useful work in the LLSs field, GLSs are in their developing stage. The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature and to enhance independent learning competence through GLSs by investigating how FL learners develop their GLSs and how they solve their grammar learning problems using such strategies.

2. Literature review

Literature ascertains that LLSs offer benefits to learners, especially the benefits of making learning an FL easy, proficient, and effective. Rubin (1975) defines LLSs as “techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (p. 43). Skehan (1989) views them as “an explosion of activity” (p. 285). O’Malley et al. (1985) define them as “an extremely powerful learning tool” (p. 43). Oxford (1990) defines LLSs as “specific actions and steps taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). Griffiths (2008)

proposes an operational definition of LLSs as “[a]ctivities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (p. 87). Oxford’s (2017) definition summarises all previous definitions. She defines LLSs as complex dynamic thoughts and actions selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves to (1) accomplish language tasks, (2) enhance language performance, and use, and/or (3) improve long-term proficiency. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively to meet their learning needs.

Nevertheless, grammar plays a very important role in language learning, like the other aspects of the language, as learning grammar efficiently equips learners with a basis which aids them to construct their knowledge and empowers them to use the FL effectively (Ellis, 2006). Learners use certain strategies when learning grammar to enhance their grammar learning proficiency and to make language learning and language use easier, more effective, and more efficient as these strategies control and facilitate the learning process (Griffiths, 2008; Oxford et al., 2007).

In order to fill the existing gap in GLSs, this study investigated how FL learners solve their language grammar learning problems using GLSs and how they have developed them. Oxford et al. (2007) proposed a GLSs taxonomy by distinguishing three categories. They allied the categories into the grammar teaching instructions: first, GLSs are reflective of implicit language learning that focusses on form; second, GLSs based on explicit inductive language learning when learners participate in rule-discovery; and third, GLSs applicable to explicit deductive learning and learners apply the rules in different activities. However, this classification was criticised; for instance, Pawlak (2009b) argues that Oxford et al.’s (2007) classification links grammar learning strategies to grammar teaching methods and it neglects the existing LLSs classifications: cognitive, memory, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (see Table 1). Pawlak (2013) offered a GLSs classification which combines LLSs classification in addition to grammar learning methods. Therefore, this study will employ Pawlak’s (2013) classification (see Table 2) to analyse the data.

Table 1. Oxford’s (1990, p. 17) taxonomy of LLSs

Direct Strategies	Memory Strategies	Creating mental links
		Applying images and sounds
		Reviewing well
		Employing action
	Cognitive Strategies	Practising
		Receiving and sending messages strategies
		Analysing and reasoning
		Creating structure for input and output
	Compensation Strategies	Guessing intelligently
Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing		
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Creating your learning
		Arranging and planning your learning
		Evaluating your learning
	Affective Strategies	Lowering your anxiety
		Encouraging yourself
		Taking your emotional temperature
	Social Strategies	Asking questions
		Cooperating with others
		Empathising with others

Table 2. Based on Pawlak’s (2013) classification

Cognitive Strategies	GLSs for the grammar in communication
	GLSs for developing explicit knowledge of grammar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GLSs used for deductive learning • GLSs used for inductive learning
	GLSs employed to develop implicit knowledge of grammar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GLSs for comprehending grammar and understanding form-meaning • GLSs for producing grammar in controlled and in communicative practice
	GLSs employed to deal with corrective feedback on grammar errors in a produced piece of work
Metacognitive Strategies	Manage and supervise the process of FL learning grammar through the procedures of organising, planning, monitoring, and evaluating

Affective Strategies	Self-regulating motivations and emotions when learning grammar
Social Strategies	Interaction with the FL proficient users or other peers to enhance the process of grammar learning

3. Methodology

Since this study focusses on the process of developing GLSs and on how learners overcome learning grammar problems they might face when learning grammar of an FL, qualitative methods were used. Therefore, semi structured interviews were conducted on 34 participants. Interviews gave a degree of freedom to obtain deep data and ask more questions (Bryman, 2012; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The questions were designed in a way that helped interviewees think about how they develop their GLSs and how they solve their grammar learning problems using these strategies. The general questions used to investigate how learners solve their language grammar learning problems and how they have developed their GLSs were: (1) ‘What are the problems you face when learning grammar?’, (2) ‘How do you overcome these problems?’, and (3) ‘How did you come to use these GLSs?’. In some situations, the interview questions were followed up with some additional inquiries to prod the participants to provide more details. Interviews were audio-recorded and the recordings were transcribed and subjected to qualitative analysis. Data obtained from the interview was rich and varied.

3.1. Participants

Research participants were male and female university students studying different European and non-European languages. Their age ranged from 21 to 50 and their proficiency level varied from beginners to intermediate level. They come from a variety of educational backgrounds. They attend two hours per week of class contact time over one full academic year. The aim of the research was communicated with them, which resulted in their enthusiastic voluntary participation in the interviews. They signed a consent form.

3.2. Data analysis

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis recommended by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). All GLSs that the informants referred to were identified, coded and categorised. The process was completed in several iterations. The categorisation highlighted similarities in the participants' responses. The responses were categorised according to number of themes to help adding all the responses, even the unexpected ones. Links between the research questions and the themes were carefully and thoroughly examined.

4. Results and discussion

Learners' development of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies varies. It was surprising to find that most of the participants exhibited resourceful knowledge about GLSs and how they were developed and used effectively to face learning grammar problems. The findings of the study showed that most GLSs categories were developed and used by all participants. The results also confirmed that there was a high use of GLSs especially among those language learners who have been learning more than one FL. Certain GLSs were consistently considered to have a substantial effect on overcoming learning grammar problems that learners face. For instance, most participants agreed on the effectiveness of the cognitive strategies, especially in explicit learning which was detected in the case of "revising regularly", "practising over and over", and "memorizing rules". They predominantly mentioned engaging in practice to understand and control sentence structure by 'doing exercises' that have highly controlled activities, such as multiple choice and/or gap filling. On the other hand, the affective strategies were deemed not significant by most participants. Social strategies were given much less importance overall as there was little evidence for their application in the interviews.

In terms of developing their GLSs, it was found that with time, learners developed their GLSs and became familiar with the intricacies of developing

their own GLSs. They appreciated the significance and effectiveness of GLSs in facing their learning grammar of the FL and making learning more effective and enjoyable. Some reported that they came to know some GLSs from past tutors and fellow students. However, over the years, they adopted their own strategies from a variety of different sources, such as other language learners, websites, and books. However, most participants developed their GLSs through ‘self-discovery’ and ‘trial and error’. They tried numerous techniques until they found the most effective and convenient ones when they faced a new grammar point. Some participants adopted these helpful and convenient strategies and adapted them according to the situation. They mentioned that they tried to investigate more about the techniques by employing them in different situations, while others used different steps and techniques each time according to the situation. They mentioned that they found that these techniques support their grammar learning and use in different situations; therefore, they were adopted. Participants found that the development of the GLSs went through modification stages according to the situation and the nature of the grammar item.

Based on these findings, an effort is made to offer answers to this study’s questions. Regarding the use of all GLSs, there are bases for optimism as learners are aware of GLSs and aware of their effectiveness in solving grammar-learning problems. One possible interpretation is that since the process of FL learning is a complex process, it needs various learning strategies, and literature shows that most language learners use learning strategies to aid their learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford et al., 2007). Therefore, it is logical to find that learners in this study use GLSs as these GLSs support overcoming impediments.

With respect to the predominant use of cognitive strategies, this might be due to the type of the grammar tasks which require practice, and it might be because learners have their preferred method of facing grammar problems which is more convenient to their cognitive experiences and styles. Another reason might be due to participants’ FL proficiency level, as less proficient learners use more cognitive strategies and are mainly keen to seek practice

opportunities. This is in line with O'Malley et al.'s (1985) study, as they found that beginner level Russian and Spanish English as a FL learners use cognitive strategies the most and more than the intermediate level learners. In addition, this is in line with the findings of Pawlak (2012), as in his study he found that about 74% of students refer to the use of 'doing exercises' for learning grammar.

Concerning the social strategies, a potential explanation for reporting social strategies as less important is that FL learners prefer to learn grammar explicitly rather than implicitly, as practising with native speakers might not give them the opportunity to learn grammar rules explicitly. This finding is consistent with that of second language acquisition researchers, such as DeKeyser (2003). They believe that cognitive and linguistic developmental stages of the adult FL learners need explicit learning; therefore, their GLSs are concerned with paying attention to forms and grammar rules as this aids learners edit their errors. Another possible explanation for social strategies to be less used is that explicit information contributes to the improvement of implicit knowledge, and after mastering the grammar item, they feel more comfortable and confident making friends with native speakers to practise what they have learnt. Ellis (2006) observes that explicit knowledge could contribute to the improvement and development of implicit knowledge when learners can process input and intake.

5. Conclusion

When combining the findings, I come to the conclusions that learners employ various GLSs to promote their independent language learning competence to overcome their grammar learning difficulties and to enhance their grammar learning proficiency. Cognitive strategies were the most used strategies among less proficient FL learners. Social strategies were given much less importance by the participants. However, affective strategies were deemed not significant. The findings of this study were in line with some relevant studies. In terms of developing GLSs, most GLSs were developed by trial and error and self-discovery.

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