Learning to Learn: One Student's Self-help Approach to Tertiary Study

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Abstract

Investigations into ways students learn to learn have been carried out for decades, with the results of interest to teachers and students as well as to researchers. The present case study aims to add to what we know about learner strategies by reporting the efforts of one student who had, at the time of her studies, no theoretical knowledge of the topic of learner strategies. In this article we bring together the theoretical base, as reported in the literature review, with student initiated examples that emerged when her co-author took an interest in what she had been doing intuitively. In our opinion, there are messages there for other students (and their teachers) who are willing to go beyond the activities set in class.

Key words: *academic writing, learner strategies, learning to learn*

1. Introduction

International students face many challenges in academic studies in English, especially when they leave their own countries for the first time. Many of these problems are addressed in their EAP courses, whether their focus is on reading, listening, speaking or, as in this case, academic writing. Such courses acknowledge barriers such as the influence of the native language's thinking patterns, as well as the sometimes limited help offered by bilingual dictionaries. More specifically, when students attend academic writing classes, their teachers present the conventions of essay writing in English and give feedback on students' work. A further element now included in many such courses is 'learning to learn' or 'learning strategies'. The following case study presents the learning strategies of one Chinese student who studied in an English-speaking country for one semester. We see her perspective develop during the course and later in ongoing discussions about learner autonomy.

2. Language learning strategies

Learner autonomy through the use of language learning strategies (LLS), described by Benson (2013) as "learners' capacity to take charge of their own learning" (p. 2), has been the focus of research since the 1970s and 1980s. Most recently, in Everhard and Murphy (2015), Benson expands on its benefits, saying that "autonomous learning involves thought, conversations and decisions about learning processes" (p. viii). Little (2000) believes that autonomy "depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for … independent action" (p. 69). One attempt to measure learner autonomy is reported by Murase (2015). She offers a 113 point checklist for students' self-reporting of their LLS and their beliefs about them, starting with "I set long-term goals in learning English" (p. 56) and ending with "Japanese students feel comfortable with following their teachers' directions" (p. 59). Following a summary of research-based claims and of critiques relating to LLS, Glenfell and Macaro (2007) predicted that "future research will need to … [map] scientifically specific strategies to specific tasks" (pp. 27-8).

One question that has been raised is whether LLS are for everyone. Little (2000) refers to the "frequently voiced criticism …. that [their use]… derives from liberal traditions in Western education and thus may be inappropriate in non-Western educational cultures (p. 71). This view is countered by such non-Western writers as Murase (2015), who questions what she sees as outsiders' portrayal of Asian students as passive. She aims to counter this view with an insider's view of 'learner autonomy in the Asian context'.

3. Academic writing

As noted, one area where students can show autonomy is in their mastery of academic writing, which is said to involve "a highly complex set of skills and competencies, which even 'expert' writers … can continue to improve on" (de Chazal, 2014, p. 179). No wonder, then, that so many books have appeared giving advice to students and their teachers. In speaking specifically of the language of assignments, Day (2013) lists four features which he believes are valued by assessors: demonstrating and understanding the topic, originality, following the knowledge conventions of a particular discipline, and using what he calls "a scholarly method" (p. 5) such as accuracy, citation conventions and critical analysis. In a user-friendly book for students, Godwin (2009) summarises advice on essay planning under the headings of parts of an essay and stages in the planning process. For her, the most common errors are failing to address the question, a lack of structure, non-academic style, lack of critical skills, mistakes in referencing and a failure to make the writer's position clear. She mentions using feedback as part of the learning process, advice that underpins the present study.

One additional reason for the interest in academic writing goes beyond university studies. The English language is becoming, in many fields, the preferred medium for

exchanging information internationally, although this trend is questioned by some. Citing critical comments made by journal reviewers in rejecting articles written by non-native speakers of English, Lillis and Curry (2010, p.154) recommend "some initiatives which seek to better support non-Anglophone-centre scholars' access to publishing in high status journals". Courses in English for Academic Purposes, offering this support to students, are only part of the answer.

4. Our study: The theoretical base

The following study takes up the challenge from Glenfell and Macaro (2007) referred to above to show links between "specific strategies … [and] specific tasks" (pp. 27-8). It also addresses Benson's (2015, p. viii) comment about "thought, conversations and decisions". We chose the case study approach, believing with Paltridge and Phakiti (2010, p. 66) that is demonstrates "the researcher's interest in the particular, rather than the general". Our interest is very particular, with one student the centre of our enquiry.

The student's (Li's) thinking and decision making happened during her course and the conversations happened after the course finished, starting during face-to-face meetings between Li and the second author (Lewis), a former teacher of Writing for Academic Purposes. The conversations continued via email after Li returned to her university in China. It seemed that her LLS (although she had never heard that term) were worth sharing with a wider audience. Our main source of data is her reflections on these strategies, as discussed during email exchanges later. However, the strategies are also illustrated by two other sources, one being the notes she took as the teacher gave feedback when handing back assignments during her course in Academic Writing. Her notes amounted to approximately 1,500 words. In addition she had permission from 10 other students in the class to examine their corrected essays.

5. Results

5.1 The student's reflections on learning to learn

We start with an email she sent after being told about the range of LLS used by different people. This conversation happened after she had already been practicing LLS without knowing them by that name.

> *Yes, learning socially means two aspects to me. I love learning good methods with a keen eye; therefore, I always ask how to handle things if I am not sure. Talking with others is usually a quick way to fix a problem. I once had difficulty in learning French when I started, so I asked Sherry who is one of my best friends to work with me. We studied together and she helped me organize what we had*

learned in class. It will be a good process to learn with others, especially for those just begin to study a new language. Learning socially means cooperation to me.

The other aspect of learning socially is trying to find good websites. As an English major, I find Internet so important because it could provide us with abundant resources and we can get professional advice from the network. I always search the internet when I need resources to practice my English. I use some English-learning websites to improve my listening. I always listen to BBC news online, which helps me so much in my learning English. Apart from cooperating with others, we can also learn from online resources which are offered socially.

I always have my schedules in learning - I guess it is learning organisationally. To me, it is not a wise idea to work on one program for a long time, so I always divide my time into several parts - I change the subjects I am learning, and this method helps me concentrate and not feel bored. So organisation about my study time and the subjects is vital to me.

I suppose cognitive ones are those that influence me unconsciously. I find myself love thinking of best ways to learn different subjects. Take English as an example - I love English and I heard from others that reading English literature was essential in learning English. I tried but I quitted because I was not very interested in reading literature. I chose what I like and put my interest and effort into it - that is listening, watching videos and talking with people who speak English. I love this way and it helps me to build my enthusiasm in learning English; therefore, choosing the best way to learn is very important because we need to find the one that suits us - not others.

From that email we take several themes. On the affective side Li speaks of her love of learning: clearly study is not a burden to her. Her personality, and this love of learning, led her to ask questions about uncertainties during the course. She also drew on her social network through talking with friends and involving them in the study process. Going beyond her own circle the student also explored websites. The individuality of learners' approaches to study comes through clearly as she mentions not staying on one programme too long but helping herself avoid boredom by changing study topics. Others might recommend spending large chunks of time on one topic before moving on, but in her words, "Choosing the best way to learn is very important because we need to find the one that suits us - not others."

5.2 Class notes: organizational strategies

Returning now to the course time, when the student took notes during feedback time as assignments were returned. Here is a sample from several sessions. The points were grouped under five headings as determined by herself from what the lecturer was saying.

The following list illustrates her use of organizational strategies.

Basic ingredients of academic English
Cohesive devices
Referencing (APA)
Academic vocabulary and colloquial words
Academic style

For instance, she noted word pairs under the heading "academic vocabulary and colloquial words"

Think	-	*claim, argue*
Numbers	-	*data, conclusion*
Get	-	*become*
Big	-	*significant, considerable*
Bad	-	*negative Etc.*

5.3 Written feedback: social and cognitive strategies

The next set of data illustrates Li's social strategies in involving her fellow students. It is a record of errors marked in the essays of ten of her Chinese classmates who were willing for her to learn from the teacher's written feedback. Using cognitive strategies, she grouped these under the following headings:

Colloquial words
Sentence structure
Academic style
Vocabulary misuse

For instance under mistakes relating to academic style she noted:

Using many questions, using contractions, using personal pronouns, using abbreviations, using absolute statements, etc.

The following comments are perhaps the most original part of the study, because the student has summarised errors of vocabulary and sentence form under two headings as the following comments show. Only the parts between […] have been altered.

Because of the [false] *translation between English and their native languages, students have difficulties in writing English sentence in a correct way. To be specific, if a Chinese student writes an English sentence, he/she is likely to form an idea in his/her mind in Chinese first before translating it into English. During that process, two difficulties occur. Firstly, they understand the English word incorrectly because most Chinese students use bilingual dictionaries while there are errors in translating two languages and sometimes they do not express*

> *meanings directly. Secondly, they sometimes write English sentences in Chinese sentence patterns.*

Interesting and lengthy examples and explanations follow.

5.4 Further reading: organizational and cognitive strategies

One more strategy used by the student was to access books about academic style and to note advice from these. For example, reading Bailey's (2003) study led her to see that academic writing attempts to be precise, semi-formal, impersonal and objective. This does not mean that pronouns like I and we are never used, but in general the more lively idioms and phrases are favoured. (p.10). She then wrote that *"few international students know the elements of academic writing, and they have limited understanding of academic styles. Students need to clarify their understandings towards academic styles"*.

6. Discussion

Collectively, the strategies seem to illustrate well one student's "capacity to take charge of [her] own learning" (Benson, 2013, p.2). As the quoted notes show (and the much lengthier original version illustrates further), she used a number of strategies to improve her academic writing. She noted and then categorized the teacher's spoken feedback in class. Then she took the initiative of asking classmates if she could note mistakes in their marked assignments. Her next step was to search for reasons for the mistakes, concluding that two of these were planning sentences first in their own language before translating them, and using faulty bilingual dictionaries. Her notes illustrate de Chazal's (2014) words about academic writing involving "a highly complex set of skills and competencies, which even 'expert' writers … can continue to improve on".

In a word, the thinking involved in planning LLS, the conversations between the two writers of this article, and the decisions the student made on how to note relevant points all illustrate the thinking, talking and actions that are part of autonomous learning (Benson, 2015). Furthermore the fact that the student is from China supports Murase's (2015) case that students from that part of the world are by no means passive in their learning. It would be interesting to compare Li's notes on common mistakes with studies that have been done on error analysis in academic writing. Perhaps they could also be compared with errors in the academic writing of students with different first languages.

7. Applications

It seems that Li's experience of studying for a semester in an English speaking country has much to offer to other learners and their teachers. Since it is teachers who will be reading this article, what might they take from it to pass on to their students? In the present case the learner was highly motivated and original in her thinking. There are

many students in language classes who might benefit from being introduced explicitly to the idea of learning strategies. These can be presented under the traditional headings, but as the study shows, there is overlap between these categories. Perhaps one student's experiences could be 'translated' into suggestions for a much wider group. Although our study was based on an academic writing class, that is simply an illustration of one application of learner strategies. We hope one student's experiences might encourage teachers, and in turn their students, to build 'learning to learn' into their learning process.

Acknowledgement

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