English Language Learner's Learning in a U.S. University Setting

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine English Language Learners' (ELLs) self-efficacy belief, language learning strategies and goal orientations in university settings. It also explored the relationships among self-efficacy, learning strategies and goal orientation of ELLs. A survey was used to collect data. The participants were 77 ELLs in a southeastern university in America. It was found that ELLs in this study had positive self-efficacy beliefs. ELLs often use language learning strategies in their learning process. There were significant positive relationships between self-efficacy and language learning strategies, between language learning strategies and mastery goal orientations. Mastery goals mostly predicted strategy use for ELLs. Implications were provided for language educators to assess ELLs' self-efficacy and goal orientations. This study identified instructional suggestions for language educators as well as provided useful information for related discussions from an ELL perspective in university classrooms.

Keywords: English language learner, self-efficacy, learning strategy, goal orientation

1. Introduction

Mastering a foreign language requires learners to overcome several major difficulties such as an appropriate use of phonological and semantic codes (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). This process usually takes a considerable period of time, and as Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) pointed out that the development of expertise in a specific domain requires approximately ten years of deliberate effort, but concerning language learning even some students had learned language more than ten years they may be still not able to achieve native-like language proficiency. From observing ESL students who have exposure to English both in and outside of school, Cummins (1981) argued that it generally takes three to five years for these learners to develop basic communication skills and five to seven years to obtain a proficiency level required for academic learning.

When English Language Learners (ELLs) arrive at a foreign country, they have to adjust to a new social and academic environment as soon as possible. The adjustment issues of ELLs have been investigated in many studies (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Among these issues, English language ability and its impact on ELLs' adjustment process is an important concern for these students (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Bandura (1997) argued that learners with stronger efficacy beliefs would have higher performance attainments regardless of actual ability or past achievement, thus, ELLs' self-efficacy about their language learning could influence their performance, and the research on self-efficacy mainly focuses on three main themes in the field of second language learning: the relationship between self-efficacy and language performance; sources of learners' self-efficacy beliefs; and the relationship between self-efficacy and self-regulated learning strategies. But, research on learners' self-efficacy, learning strategy, and goal orientation has not yet been integratively investigated in previous studies (Dörnyei, 1994).

2. Purpose of the Study

The following research questions guided the investigation:

1). What are the self-efficacy belief scores of English Language Learners based on self-perceived proficiencies?

2). What are the language learning strategies identified by English Language Learners?

3). What is the relationship among English Language Learners' self-efficacy, language learning strategy and goal orientation?

4). What factor from among self-efficacy, mastery goal orientation, performance-approach orientation, performance-avoidance orientation will most accurately predict strategy use of ELLs?

3. Literature Review

Students enter class to learn English with different beliefs about their ability to accomplish class tasks. These beliefs predetermine the level of their cognitive, affective, and behavioral involvement in different learning situations (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy is grounded in the belief that self-efficacy is situation specific regarding self-confidence, a belief that one is competent to handle the task at hand (Alias & Hafir, 2009). Past research concluded that an individual's self-efficacy is a strong determinant of success or failure in completing tasks (Bandura, 1977). Studies concluded that students with high levels of self-efficacy outperformed those with low levels of self-efficacy even if those with high levels were less prepared academically (Schunk, 1989; Bouffard-Bouchard, Parent, & Larivee, 1991). According to Bandura (1997), individuals' level of motivation, affective states, and actions are strongly influenced by what they believe.

ELLs have been reported used different language learning strategies in their learning processes. Learning strategies are "tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence", and appropriate language learning strategies result in "improved proficiency and greater self-confidence" (Oxford, 1990, p. 7). Schunk (1995) claimed that strategy instruction increased self-efficacy because strategies helped learners to process different academic material successfully.

Goal orientations refer to a learner's reasons for engaging in learning tasks with goal-directed and cognition-based behaviors (Midgley et al. 2000). The three goals most commonly used by theorists and empiricists (e.g. Midgley et al. 2000) comprise: (1) mastery goals (2) performance-approach goals (3) performance-avoidance goals. Goal-directed actions are important for language learners because what they have in mind will influence how they approach and engage in the language learning tasks. The goals behind students' learning actions are closely linked with their motivation to learn, which influences their choices of actions, effort, and degree of persistence (Clark & Estes, 2002). Performance goals and other cognitive and achievement outcomes were assumed to be moderated by efficacy beliefs (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). However, researchers did not found an interaction between approach performance goals and efficacy on cognitive outcomes such as strategy use (e.g. Kaplan & Midgley, 1997; Miller et al., 1993). There is little in the L2 motivation literature and no agreement about how L2 learners' goals affect their learning behaviors.

4. Methods

4.1 Study Participants

The participants were 77 ELLs in a southeastern university in America. Six students didn't finish the survey, so valid number of participants is 71. 29 (41%) were males and 42 (59%) were females. Most of the total group (51 or 72%) were undergraduate students, while 14 or 20% were graduate students and only 8% (6) just finished high school. Participants were from different countries speaking language other than English. Thirty percent (21) were from Brazil, while another 24% (17) were from Saudi Arabia. Approximately 18% (13) were from South Korea and 14% (10) were from China, and the rest (14%) were students from Japan, Turkey, Bangladash, Mali and Iran.

4.2 Study Instruments

An English learning survey is used to collect data (see Appendix A). The English Learning Survey was adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991), the version 7.0 of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS) (Midgley et al., 1996). All collected data are analyzed by using SPSS-PC 14.0. Both descriptive and inferential statistics are used to analyze the collected data. The descriptive analyses are used to examine demographic variables and students' self-efficacy beliefs, strategy use and goal orientations. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is used in order to investigate relationships among self-efficacy, language learning strategy use and goal orientation. The multiple regressions are used to investigate the predictors for learning strategy use.

5. Results

Table 1 in Appendix B showed results of the self-efficacy scores based on self-perceived proficiencies. Participants rated their proficiencies from "excellent" to "fair". As shown in Table 1, the mean for the overall self-efficacy belief was 5.61which indicates that students had a positive self-efficacy belief. Students with the "excellent" self-perceived

proficiency had a little bit lower score in self-efficacy than students with the "good" self-perceived proficiency. Both "excellent" and "good" proficiency group students had a higher score in self-efficacy than "fair" proficiency group students. In order to investigate whether students have different self-efficacy beliefs based on their self-perceived proficiency, one-way ANOVA was used. There was no significant mean difference among the "excellent", "good" and "fair" groups concerning self-efficacy scores as shown in Table 2 in Appendix B.

Table 3 in Appendix B presented the results of the SILL survey, which measured participants' learning strategy use. As shown in Table 1, the mean for the overall strategy use was 3.60. It indicates that participants often use language learning strategies in their learning process. Among the different strategies, the compensation strategies had the highest mean (3.81), followed by metacognitive strategies (3.79), social strategies (3.78), cognitive strategies (3.64), memory strategies (3.31) and affective strategies (3.24). It shows that compensation strategies (i.e. guessing meanings, using gestures), metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress, and monitoring error) and social strategies (i.e. asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware) are the most often used strategies, and affective strategy is the least often used strategy.

A Pearson product-moment correlational analysis was conducted to examine if there are statistically significant relationships between self-efficacy, strategy use and goal orientation. As shown in Table 4 in Appendix B, there was a positive correlation between self-efficacy and strategy use (r=.24, p<.05). Strategy use had a strong positive correlation with mastery goal orientation (r=.50, p<.01). Strategy use also had a positive correlation with performance-approach goal orientation. No significant correlation was found between self-efficacy and goal orientations. Performance-approach goal orientation was positively correlated with both mastery goal orientation and performance-avoidance goal orientation.

In order to answer the fourth research question, strategy use was regressed on the self-efficacy, mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goal orientations, yielding significant effect for mastery goals as shown in Table 5 in Appendix B, $F_{(4,66)}$=7.28, p<.01 (β=.43). The results showed that mastery goals predicted nearly 18% of the variances in strategy use, indicating the facilitating role of mastery goal orientation for strategy use for ELLs. Self-efficacy, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals all were not predictors of strategy use.

6. Discussions

The research found that ELLs in this study had positive self-efficacy beliefs. Students with the "excellent" self-perceived proficiency didn't have the highest positive self-efficacy beliefs. The reason may be that the number of students perceived themselves as "excellent" in overall English proficiency is too small. It is reasonable that students with the "excellent" and "good" self-perceived proficiency had a higher score in self-efficacy beliefs than students with the "fair" self-perceived proficiency. It indicates that students who have a positive belief in their overall proficiency maybe also have a positive belief in their specific language tasks and learner feels positively about his or her ability to learn or improve proficiency in a second language.

ELLs in this study often used language learning strategies in their learning process and the most often used strategies were compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies and social strategies. There were significant positive relationships between self-efficacy and language learning strategies, between language learning strategies and mastery goal orientations. Students with higher self-efficacy were more likely to use learning strategies. Mastery goals mostly predicted strategy use, indicating the facilitating role of mastery goal orientation for strategy use for ELLs.

7. Implications

7.1 Strategy Training/Teaching

Strategy training can enhance self-efficacy (Schunk & Rice, 1987, as cited in Bouffard-Bouchard, T., Parent, S., & Larivee, S., 1991) and enable learners to become autonomous and take responsibility for their own learning (Ellis, 1997). The use of strategies facilitates learners in control of developing language skills and increasing confidence (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Successful learners may use different strategies at different stages of their development (Ellis, 1997). Teaching students about different strategies may be more important for improving actual performance on classroom academic tasks, and improving students' self-efficacy beliefs may lead to more use of these strategies (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). It is suggested teachers provide students with various strategies so that students can find strategies that best work for their learning styles and consequently promote their learning autonomy and actual performance.

7.2 Cooperative Learning

Group activities encourage classroom involvement and cooperation. Cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical strategy used in classroom especially in language classroom. Cooperative learning provides language learners practice opportunities and comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways and in a supportive and motivating environment (Ellis, 1994). It encourages students to speak out and fosters cooperation. It may facilitate the strategy use and mastery goals development since group activities encourage cooperation, progress, and ability improvement rather than competition and comparison.

7.3 Formative Assessment

Various kinds of assessment may help to promote students' self-efficacy and mastery goals. Self-assessment and peer-assessment could enhance students' learning ability and autonomy while the traditional assessment engages student in the final evaluation of class work (Biggs, 1995). Self-assessment and peer-assessment are usually used together. Students are more likely to accept feedback and suggestions from peers than that from teachers. In the process of self-assessment and peer-assessment, teachers' guidance is important and teachers should plan assessment activities well and students should be informed the purpose and criteria of assessment. Teachers are suggested to provide timely feedback in order to make best of the advantages of formative assessment.

8. Conclusions

The ultimate goal of this research was to learn more about ELLs' postsecondary level language learning experiences from the perspective of students. Understanding the needs of ELLs and increasing their self-efficacy and strategy use in university settings is significant to providing appropriate instruction. It was found that students' self-efficacy and strategy use had a positive relationship, which indicated that self-efficacy might be increased by teaching learning strategies to students, particularly the strategies that were most often mentioned by students (compensation, metacognitive and social strategies in this study). The facilitating role of mastery goal orientation for strategy use was also found in this study, thus developing students' mastery goal orientation may enhance learners strategy use and cultivate students autonomous learning. It is suggested that cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical practice used in classrooms. Teaching learning strategies could aid independent study and learning of language outside the classroom. ELLs' goals for achievement or mastery not only contribute to learning behaviors but also facilitate learners' continuing language learning after completing program requirements.

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Appendix A

English Language Learning Survey

The following questions ask about your self-efficacy, language learning strategy use and goal orientation about English language learning. Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. This usually takes about 10 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, let the researcher know immediately.

Demographic Information

Please first answer the following questions about yourself. Your answers will be treated in a confidential manner and only identified to the researcher for this study.

1. Gender:
   o Male
   o Female

2. Age: _____

3. Country of origin:_____

4. First (Native) Language: _____

5. Highest education level: _____

6. How many years have you been studying English in your life? ____

7. Please indicate the program or course you are now enrolled:

   Intensive English Program

   ☐Level 1 ☐Level 2

   ☐Level 3 ☐Level 4 ☐Level 5

   INTL 1820

   INTL 1830

8. How do you rate your overall English proficiency?
   o Excellent
   o Good
   o Fair
   o Poor

9. How do you rate your overall English proficiency as compared with the proficiency of other students in your class?
   o Excellent
   o Good
   o Fair
   o Poor

10. Why do you want to learn English? (Check all that apply)
   o I have an interest in learning English
   o I am interested in English speaking countries
   o I have friends who speak English
   o The need for future jobs
   o The need for future education
   o Need it for traveling
   o Required to take English courses to graduate
   o English is a tool of communication
   o Other(list):_____

11. Besides the U.S., have you ever lived in an English-speaking country?
   o Yes
   Indicate country_____
   Length of stay_____
   o No

12. How long have you been in the U.S.? _____

Part A—Self-Efficacy

Please read each statement and check the box that best describes how you feel:

1= Not at all true of me to 7= Very true of me

	Not at all true of me						Very true of me
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I believe I will receive an excellent grade in this English class.							
2. I'm certain I can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for this English class.							
3. I'm confident I can understand the basic concepts taught in this English course.							
4. I'm confident I can understand the most complex material presented by the instructor in this English course.							
5. I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this English course.							
6. I expect to do well in this English class.							
7. I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in this English class.							
8. Considering the difficulty of this English course, the teacher, and my skills, I think I will do well in this class.							

Part B—Language Learning Strategy and Goal Orientation

Please read each statement and check the box that best describes how you feel:

1= Never or almost never true of me to 5= Always or almost always true of me

	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me	Some-what true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me
	1	2	3	4	5
9. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.					
10. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.					
11. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word.					
12. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.					
13. I use rhymes to remember new English words.					
14. I use flashcards to remember new					

	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me	Some-what true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me
	1	2	3	4	5
English words.					
15. I physically act out new English words.					
16. I review English lesson often.					
17. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.					
18. I say or write new English words several times.					
19. I try to talk like native English speakers.					
20. I practice the sounds of English.					
21. I use the English words I know in different ways.					
22. I start conversations in English.					
23. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.					
24. I read for pleasure in English.					
25. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.					
26. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.					
27. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.					
28. I try to find patterns in English.					
29. I find the meaning of English words by dividing it into parts that I understand.					
30. I try not to translate word for word.					
31. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.					
32. To understand an unfamiliar English word, I make guesses.					
33. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.					
34. I make up new words if I do not know the rights ones in English.					
35. I read English without looking up every new word.					
36. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.					

	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me	Some-what true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me
			3		5
	1	2		4	
37. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.					
38. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.					
39. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.					
40. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.					
41. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.					
42. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.					
43. I look for people I can talk to in English.					
44. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.					
45. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.					
46. I think about my progress in learning English.					
47. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.					
48. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.					
49. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.					
50. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.					
51. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.					
52. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.					
53. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.					
54. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.					
55. I practice English with other students.					
56. I ask for help from English speakers.					
57. I ask questions in English.					
58. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.					
59. I like class work that I'll learn from					

	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me	Some-what true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me
			3		5
	1	2		4	
even if I make a lot of mistakes.					
60. An important reason why I do my class work in this English class is because I like to learn new things.					
61. I like class work in this English class best when it really makes me think.					
62. An important reason why I do my work in this English class is because I want to get better at it.					
63. An important reason I do my class work is because I enjoy it.					
64. I do my class work in this English class because I'm interested in it.					
65. I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher's questions in class.					
66. I want to do better than other students in my English class.					
67. I would feel successful in class if I did better than most of the other students in this English class.					
68. I'd like to show my teacher that I'm smarter than the other students in this English class.					
69. Doing better than other students in English class is important to me.					
70. It's very important to me that I don't look stupid in my English class.					
71. An important reason I do my class work is so that I don't embarrass myself.					
72. The reason I do my class work is so my teacher doesn't think I know less than others in this English class.					
73. The reason I do my work is so others won't think I'm dumb.					
74. One of my main goals in this English class is to avoid looking like I can't do my work.					
75. One reason I would not participate in this English class is to avoid looking stupid.					

Survey adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993), the version 7.0 of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Strategies (PALS) survey (Midgley et al., 2000).

Appendix B

Table 1

Self-perceived overall proficiency	Self-efficacy scores
Excellent	5.66
Good	5.68
Fair	5.47
Total	5.61

Table 2

Self-efficacy

	df	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2	.466	.629
Within Groups	68		
Total	70		

$P < .05$

Table 3

Scores on SILL

Strategy	M	SD
Memory	3.31	0.77
Cognitive	3.64	0.53
Compensation	3.81	0.66
Metacognitive	3.79	0.67
Affective	3.24	0.71
Social	3.78	0.80
Overall	3.60	0.54

Table 4

Pearson Product Correlations of Measured Variables for ELLs

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1.Self-efficacy	--	.24*	.22	-.01	-.07
2. Strategy use		--	.50**	.20	.26*
3. Mastery goal			--	.27*	.17
4. Performance approach				--	.49**
5. Performance avoid					--

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 5

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.553[a]	.306	.264	.46684

a. Predictors: (Constant), performance-avoid, self-efficacy, mastery, performance-approach

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6.350	4	1.587	7.284	.000[b]
	Residual	14.384	66	.218		
	Total	20.734	70			

Coefficients

Model		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)		2.952	.004
	Self-efficacy	.161	1.522	.133
	mastery	.433	3.949	.000
	Performance-approach	-.023	-.188	.852
	Performance-avoid	.212	1.789	.078

a. Dependent Variable: strategy