

ELLs in Higher Education: Learning Strategy Use and Goal Orientation

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Abstract

This study examined language learning strategy and goal orientation of college-level English Language Learners (ELLs) by using a questionnaire survey. It analyzed the relationship between goal orientation and demographic characteristics and further explored the correlation between learning strategy use and goal orientation. The results of the study show that non-Asian ELLs had a greater performance goal orientation tendency than Asian ELLs. ELLs who had bachelor's degree had a higher level of mastery goal orientation, as well as performance-approach goals than those who had master's and doctoral degree. Female ELLs had a higher level of mastery goal orientation than male ELLs. Mastery goal orientation is positively related to all types of strategy, and it possessed the beneficial role in strategy use. Effective instructional methods for ELLs were provided to promote their adopting of mastery goals.

Keywords: English language learner, language learning strategy, goal orientation, college level

1. Introduction

The number of ELLs at U.S. colleges has exceeded one million and nine (Institute of International Education, 2020). However, limited English language proficiency and strategy use impact these students' participation in academic life and their adaptation in the new culture, and they lack confidence when communicating with others (Newman & Hartman, 2012). Increasing students' strategy use is vital for ELLs to achieve success (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008).

Goals provide learners momentum to complete their learning tasks, and goal-directed actions reflect how language learners approach and engage in the language learning tasks. Promoting ELLs' strategy use and goal orientation in university settings is essential to provide effective instruction. However, most of related previous studies explored learning strategy and goal orientation in secondary level (e.g., Lipstein & Renninger, 2007; Chen, 2008; Gerlach, 2008; Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008; Shirdel, Mirzaian, & Hasanzadeh, 2013; Zubkovic & Kolic-Vehovec, 2014), and few of them focus on post-secondary level. This study aims to examine ELLs' learning strategy and goal orientation in a university setting and analyzes the relationship between strategy use and goal orientation. An investigation of ELLs' strategy use and goal orientation and how they relate with each other and the influence of language learning behaviors could make significant contributions to both the teaching and learning processes as they relate to indicators of success. The current study can offer suggestions on language learning for instructors and researchers. Furthermore, it will list appropriate instructional resources and methods that match students' current proficiency level. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the relationship between goal orientation and demographic characteristics for university ELLs?
2. What is the relationship between language learning strategy and goal orientation for these university ELLs?

2. Theoretical Framework

Dörnyei (1994) stated that strategies were techniques to promote ELLs' motivation. Based on goal-orientation theory, motivation can be the general goals that students pursue in achievement-related learning environments (Ames 1992). Pintrich and Schunk (2002) pointed out that goals could give learners momentum for doing tasks. Different types of goals are associated with different cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses. Goal orientation represents an integrated pattern of beliefs that leads to different ways of involving in achievement situations (Ames, 1992). Goal-directed behaviors are important for language learners since what they think will influence how they participate in the learning tasks (Midgley et al., 2000). In previous studies (i.e., Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Midgley et al., 2000), the most often used goals are mastery goals, performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals. According to Midgley (2000), 'When oriented to mastery goals, students' purpose or goal in an achievement setting is to develop their competence and extend their mastery and understanding' (p. 7). It means that ELLs with mastery goals aim to improve their language ability. Students with performance-approach goals aim to 'demonstrate their competence' (Midgley et al., 2000, p. 9). When oriented to performance-avoidance goals, students aim to 'avoid the demonstration of incompetence' (Midgley et al., 2000, p. 10).

3. Literature Review

Students' engagement in achievement activities is motivated by a set of goals. Motivational goal orientations and perceptions of learning environment were gender-dependent and domain-specific (Koul, Roy, & Lerdpornkulrat, 2012). In her study, Fasczewski (2012) demonstrated that females had a greater task orientation and intrinsic motivation tendency than males, whereas Yang and Barth (2015) argued that gender accounted for very little variance in terms of goal affordance. Kane et al. (2016) investigated goal orientation of students with different cultural backgrounds in New Zealand and found motivation level differences. Furthermore, significant differences were found across grade levels and gender in relation to students' goal orientation, engagement, and perception of teaching practices (Dickenson, 2009). Gonida, Kiosseoglou, and Voulala (2007) stated that higher level of graders had lower scores than lower level of graders on all goal orientation scales.

Self-directed strategies offered students an opportunity in a low-anxious and motivating environment (Coomber, 2019). Students feel successful when they reach goals and this feeling of success increases the students' interest in learning, and then students tend to continue goal setting and use effective strategies (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007). Motivated learners try to use more strategies than less motivated learners and the reasons or goals for studying the language contribute to the choice of learning strategies. Individuals with negative beliefs or goals often use less self-regulated strategies (Lee & Turner, 2016). Shirdel, Mirzaian, and Hasanzadeh (2013) conducted a research study where they examined the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and achievement motivation of Sari high school students. The study demonstrated that there was a significant difference between self-regulation learning strategies and achievement motivation in students.

Mastery goal orientation was found positively related to learning strategies, while performance goal orientation was found negatively correlated with learning strategies (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008). Barzegar (2012) identified positive effects of mastery and performance-approach goals on the use of metacognitive and deep cognitive strategy. Chea and Schumow (2015) examined the mediation effects of writing goal orientation and learning strategies on the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing achievement, and no mediation was found. Bernacki, Byrnes, and Cromley (2012) investigated 160 undergraduates' achievement goals, strategy use, and comprehension scores. It was found that achievement goals predicted cognitive strategy use. Mastery goals positively predicted information-seeking and note-taking. Higher performance avoidance goals predicted less note-taking and information-seeking. Performance approach goals did not predict these behaviors. Su, McBride, and Xiang (2015) found higher mastery-approach goals predicted more intrinsic regulation and identified regulation. Performance-approach goal was a stronger predictor of external regulation among female students than among male students. Mastery-approach goals were motivationally beneficial, especially among college female students.

There is no consensus in studies about the relations between strategy use and goal orientation of students. Moreover, many studied focused on secondary school setting and the non-English subjects and there is not enough evidence about how ELLs' goal orientation affects their behaviors in the university setting. The relationship between learning strategies and goal orientation has not been widely examined in L2 learning context.

4. Methods

The participants of this study were students who were taking English academic courses at a southeastern university in the United States of America. An English Language Learning survey was used in the study to collect data. The survey includes three measures: Demographic Information, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS). It was designed to collect students' demographic information including gender, age, years of English learning, country, and previous educational level.

The SILL was used to measure students' language learning strategy use. The questionnaire is a 5-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha, which indicates the internal consistency reliability of the survey items, was .936 for the sample of 198 participants in this study. The adapted PALS was used to measure students' goal orientations which had three dimensions--mastery goal orientation, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientation (Midgley, et al., 1996, 2000). The PALS is also a 5-point Likert scale. Median splits were created for each of the three subscales to determine whether students are high or low on each goal orientation.

Independent sample t-test, and one-way ANOVA were used to explore ELLs' goal orientation in relation to demographic characteristics. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between language learning strategy and goal orientation.

5. Results and Discussion

There were 198 students whose responses were valid for this research. The male participants were 55.6% and the female participants were 44.4%. The participants with high school diplomas consisted of 47.0%; bachelor's degree was 33.8%; master's and doctoral degree was 19.2%. The participants who were younger than 25 years old (between the age of 18-24) was 58.1% and who were more than 25 years old consisted of 41.9%, specifically, between the age of 18-29 consisted of 81.3%; 30-39 was 8.6%; 40-49 was 8.1%; and 50-59 was 2.0%.

The participants who came from Asian countries (China, Japan, South Korea, India, Bangladesh) were 70.2%. Non-Asian students were 29.8% (The Arab/Middle Eastern consisted of 15.2%, African consisted of 2.0%, European was 1.5%, and participants from Brazil, Mexico and Colombia was 11.1%).

The participants who study English less than 5 years consisted of 30.8%, between 5 to 10 years was 41.4%, and more than 10 years was 27.8%.

The independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to examine the differences of goal orientation based on the demographic factors, which include age, years of English learning, country, gender and previous educational level. In terms of differences of goal orientation based on gender, the independent sample t-tests showed female students ($M=4.01$) were significantly more mastery goal orientated than male students ($M=3.80$), $t(198)=2.087$, $p=.038<.05$. The value of Cohen's d effect was 0.30 indicating a moderate effect size. The findings confirmed the previous studies (e.g., Faszewski, 2012; Koul, Roy, & Lerdpornkulrat, 2012) that motivational goal orientations were gender-dependent and females had greater intrinsic motivation tendency than males. It may be the case that female students anticipated a greater probability of success when focused on acquiring new skills or mastery of knowledge. Probably, female students most likely emphasize on acquiring new skills and had better achievements in language learning; however, male students had a lower level of motivation, engagement and achievements, and were more likely to seek extrinsic interest or practical goals such as entrance exams and jobs in language learning (King, 2016).

Concerning the differences of goal orientation between Asian students and non-Asian students, the independent sample t-tests showed non-Asian students ($M=3.56$) had a significant higher level of performance-approach goal orientation than Asian students ($M=2.54$), $t(198)=5.25$, $p=.00<.01$, and the effect size (Cohen's d effect=1) was large. There was also a significant difference of performance-avoidance goal orientation between non-Asian students ($M=3.09$) and Asian students ($M=2.53$), $t(198)=2.8$, $p=.006<.01$, and the effect size (Cohen's d effect=0.57) was moderate. The findings were consistent with those of the study of Davies & Meissel (2016), which found there were goal orientation differences among students of different cultural backgrounds. A possible explanation for this finding is that the external summative assessment method is often used in the traditional Asian education context. Asian students were used to pay attention to demonstrate their competence or avoid the demonstration of incompetence.

A series of t test for independent means was used to examine the difference of goal orientations in relation to age. The results of the t-test analyses illustrated that there was no significant difference of goal orientation produced based on age.

A one-way ANOVA is based on the assumptions of having independent random samples, homogeneity of variance, and a normal distribution of variables. The results of the homogeneity of variance showed that no statistically significant difference existed at the .05 level. Regarding the differences of goal orientation in relation to the previous educational level, the results of one-way ANOVA displayed a mean score of 3.89, 4.04, 3.62 for mastery goal orientation of the participants with high school diplomas, bachelor's degree, and master's and doctoral degree respectively. The differences of mastery goal orientation among them were significant, $F_{(2, 195)} = 4.65, p = 0.011 < .05$, the effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.05$), which was moderate. The Boferroni post-hoc test showed that the participants with bachelor's degree had a significantly greater mastery goal orientation tendency than participants who had master's and doctoral degree ($p = .008 < .01$). The differences of performance-approach goal orientation among participants with high school diplomas ($M = 3.45$), bachelor's degree ($M = 3.65$), and master's and doctoral degree ($M = 3.02$) were also statistically significant, $F_{(2, 195)} = 5.41, p = 0.005 < .01$, and the effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.05$) was moderate. The Boferroni post-hoc test showed that the participants with bachelor's degree had a significantly higher level of performance-approach goal orientation than participants with master's and doctoral degree ($p = .004 < .01$). The findings provided evidence for the previous studies (e.g., Dickenson, 2009; Gonida, Kiosseoglou, & Voulala, 2007) that found differences across grade levels based on students' goal orientation, and higher level of graders had lower scores than lower level of graders on student all goal orientation scales. Besides, this finding may be due to the different program requirements for these students. Most participants with bachelor's degree needed to pass the English course exams to apply for teacher assistant or research assistant; however, those who had master's and doctoral degree mostly did not have to work as teacher assistant or research assistant to cover their tuition in the US university setting. Additionally, participants who had bachelor's degree enrolled in the ESL program had great eagerness or motivation to master the English language skills to pursue further education. But the present study found there was no significant difference of performance-avoidance goal orientation based on the previous educational level. Regarding years of English learning, there was no significant difference of each type of goal orientation.

A Pearson product-moment correlational analysis was used to examine if there was any significant relationship among overall learning strategy, affective strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, memory strategy, metacognitive strategy, social strategy, mastery goals, performance-approach goals, and performance avoidance goals.

Overall strategy was positively correlated with mastery goal orientation, performance-approach goal orientation and performance-avoidance goal orientation ($r = .56, .31, .21$). And overall strategy and mastery goals were strongly correlated. The correlations between affective strategy and mastery goals, performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals were positive ($r = .37, .35, .38$). Cognitive strategy was positively correlated with mastery goals and performance-approach goals ($r = .45, .19$), but cognitive strategy was not significantly correlated with performance-avoidance goals. Compensation strategy was positively correlated with mastery goals ($r = .23$), but there was no significant correlation between compensation strategy and performance goals. The correlations between memory strategy and mastery goals, performance-approach goals, and performance-avoidance goals were positive ($r = .46, .33, .23$). Metacognitive strategy was positively correlated with mastery goals, performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals ($r = .55, .31, .15$), and it can be seen that the correlation between metacognitive strategy and mastery goals was strong. Social strategy was positively correlated with mastery goals ($r = .51$), but social strategy was not significantly correlated with performance goal orientations.

These findings were consistent with the study of Barzegar (2012), identifying positive effects of mastery and performance-approach goals on the use of metacognitive and deep cognitive strategy. But the present study also found positive relations between mastery goals and affective, compensation, memory and social strategies. Students with higher mastery goals tend to report higher strategy use (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). The correlations between affective strategy and performance-approach goals, performance-avoidance goals were also positive. It provided evidence for the study of Su, McBride, and Xiang (2015), which found performance-approach goal was a stronger predictor of external regulation.

Generally speaking, positive relationships were found between mastery goals and all strategy use, and performance-approach goals were found positively correlated with some strategy (include affective, cognitive, memory and metacognitive strategy), whereas, performance-avoidance goals were positively associated with only affective, memory, and metacognitive strategy, among which the positive relationship between mastery goals and use of learning strategies is stronger.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The study found that Non-Asian students had a significant greater performance goal orientation (include performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientation) tendency than Asian students. Female students had a higher mastery goal orientation than male students. ELLs who had bachelor's degree had a significantly higher level of mastery goal orientation as well as performance-approach goal orientation than those who had master's and doctoral degree.

Mastery goals positively correlated with all types of strategies, and among three types of goal orientations it had stronger correlations with strategies. Mastery goal orientation was more likely promote language strategy use.

Strategies help to promote students' cognitive and motivational performance. Teachers are suggested to teach learning strategies for students to promote their mastery goal orientation. Teachers should apply independent learning strategies to improve students' skill (Naibaho, 2019) and motivation to achieve the learning outcome and the curriculum target (Sahril & Weda, 2018). Modeling strategies, guidance for setting goals, criteria for evaluations, and peer revision can be used by teachers. Finally, students could be given autonomy to choose the most suitable strategies (Hashim, Yunus, & Hashim, 2018).

In order to help ELLs to adopt mastery goals, teachers can create class settings and curriculum that emphasize promoting learners' ability and interest, to develop learners' self-awareness of learning goals. Teachers can design class tasks to involve learners in the activities and promote the mastery of the English academic courses content. Assignments and evaluation method can also be associated with learners' goals and mastery of content and knowledge instead of external judgments. Collaborative learning can help learners maximize their achievement (Sembiring, et al., 2018), and considering learners' goal orientation group work instead of individual work can be carried out frequently.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study just focused on one university. A larger number of participants can be investigated to explore factors that influence ELLs' strategy use and goal orientation. Relations between goal orientation and other variables could be examined in future studies. Teachers did not participate in this study. Teacher's perceptions would have brought further understanding of ELLs' strategy use and goal orientation in their English language learning process.

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