An Exploration of L1-Based Learning Strategies in Second Language Grammar Learning by Interviewing an EFL Learner

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Abstract: English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) is necessary for learners as it is essential for effective and efficient communication. In this sense, it is significant for EFL/ESL learners to adopt effective language learning strategies (LLS) to develop their grammatical knowledge and facilitate their grammar learning. This study aims to investigate the use of L1 as LLS in English grammar learning by a Chinese EFL learner. This study first focuses on the theoretical framework of LLS. Then, important findings will be discussed with literature support. Similarities and differences between the interviewee and the writer will be then provided. Finally, implications for EFL teachers and learners will be discussed. And limitations of this study and further research directions will also be illustrated and explained.

Key words: L1-based learning strategies; English as a foreign language (EFL); English grammar learning

1. Summary of Relevant Theories

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), metacognitive strategies are actions that learners take to plan, monitor, and evaluate the learning process. On the other hand, cognitive strategies refer to strategies used by learners to understand the language and gain knowledge, involving manipulating and interacting with learning materials. The last one, socio-affective strategies, are strategies used by learners to interact with others to reduce or eliminate their anxiety.

The present research was guided by O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy. The reasons are listed as follows: O'Malley and Chamot's classification is succinct, direct, and easy to distinguish compared to Oxford's. Oxford strove to construct a detailed classification for all known strategies. This detailed taxonomy may not be efficient for coding interview data as the writer may need to constantly refer back and locate specific items for confirmation. Also, the current research focuses on L1-based LLS used by an EFL learner, which are in line with O'Malley and Chamot's classification context. Therefore, the current study will refer to O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy to analyze an interview with an EFL learner regarding the use of L1-based LLS in grammar learning.

2. Aims of Research

This study has three purposes. First, the current study aims to examine the patterns and frequency of L1-based LLS used by an EFL learner during the grammar learning process. Second, the study intends to identify the influential factors that may affect the choice of L1-based LLS used in this learner's grammar learning experience. Third, the study attempts to

provide some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers in the end. With these aims, two research questions will be addressed by interviewing an EFL learner.

3. Research Questions

The current research intends to answer the following two research questions:

RQ 1: What L1-based LLS does this EFL learner use in grammar learning ?

RQ 2: What factors influence this EFL learner's L1-based LLS choice in grammar learning ?

4. The Participant Information

The interviewee's name is Crystal, who is 27 years old. She was raised and educated in Wuhan, China, and Chinese is her first language (L1). She started learning English as a second language (L2) in middle school and got a bachelor's degree in English studies and a master's degree in applied linguistics. She has been learning English for nearly 13 years. Now, she works in a language institution with colleagues from China and English-speaking countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. English is her working language.

5. Interview Analysis

Seven interview questions were designed to collect data. The interview was conducted on a video platform--Zoom, and took about 20 minutes. The interviewee checked interview questions before participating in the interview. By doing so, the interviewee would have a sense of security and relaxation, thereby providing detailed and thoughtful answers. Some following-up questions were administered to the interviewee to gather more information during the interview. The interview was recorded by the researcher.

First, all recorded data were transcribed by Microsoft Word. After transcribing, the scripts were reconfirmed without any missing information. Then, based on O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomy, data were primarily coded for measuring three LLS, including cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies. Different colours were used for coding data. Specifically, green refers to the learner's different types of LLS. Blue stands for negative information. Red represents other important information. Finally, coded data were summarized in theme.

In general, the data revealed that this learner used diverse L1-based LLS to assist English grammar learning, which could be measured into cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. Also, this learner preferred certain types of L1-based strategies used in grammar learning, such as note-taking, cooperation, questions for clarification, and self-evaluation. Moreover, the choice of LLS is not constant throughout the grammar learning process. It is affected by three main factors: language proficiency level, living/working context, and language teaching methods.

6. Findings

6.1 Key findings to research question 1

What L1-based LLS does this EFL learner use in grammar learning ?

The learner used a variety of L1-based cognitive strategies to help comprehend different tenses and memorize the sentence patterns in English, including note-taking, translation in mind, and memorizing rhymed pithy formulas. McMillan and Rivers (2011) indicated that using a variety of L1-based cognitive strategies would help learners understand L2 and L3 structures better. Wach also discovered that translation could provide students with the opportunity to examine the syntactic structure of the target language in detail, and mental translation is an automatic mental activity used by ESL students.

In addition, L1-based metacognitive strategies were used by this learner, in particular, self-evaluation and self-monitoring strategies. This learner applied these strategies to evaluate her English grammar understanding and monitor her

grammar learning process. The following quotes could exemplify this, "…I just quickly reviewed these notes and asked myself if I really understand it or not... I can use Chinese to see whether I really understand the English grammar or not".

Moreover, L1-based socio-affective strategies were used by this learner frequently in her grammar learning process. She mentioned that she would talk with her classmates or go to teachers' offices to ask for help if she had some grammar problems. These L1-based socio-affective strategies made her feel secure and relaxed and gave her confidence to keep learning grammar.

6.2 Key findings to research question 2

What factors influence this EFL learner's L1-based LLS choice in grammar learning?

The data revealed that the choice of L1-based LLS is changeable and affected by three main factors: language proficiency level, living/working context, and language teaching methods.

Language proficiency level has an effect on the types of L1-based LLS selected by this learner. This learner used different patterns of L1-based LLS in learning L2 grammar at different learning stages. In her early stages of grammar learning, there was a tendency to choose more cognitive L1-based strategies to support grammar learning, such as summarizing, translation, and repetition. The learner also said those Chinese-based strategies were quite helpful in grammar learning when she started to learn English. By contrast, more L1-based metacognitive strategies were used when she was at a higher level of English proficiency.

In addition, different contexts could cause differences in L1-based LLS choice and use. In a mother tongue focused context, the learner employed more L1-based LLS in English grammar learning to promote comprehension of grammatical knowledge, whereas, in a target language focused context, the learner utilized less L1-based LLS as she could apply grammar in a meaning-focused interaction. "I tended to use English to learn grammar instead," she said. The learner mentioned that her colleagues, who are native English speakers, would also point out her mistakes immediately and display the correct usage to her. She admitted, "I could quickly learn from my grammar mistakes and remember the correct way to use it".

Furthermore, the use of LLS was influenced by instructional approaches. Due to the teacher's influence, this learner had a strong preference for using one type of L1-based cognitive LLS--note-taking, and this strategy became a habit. She would write down the definition and the usage of a grammar point in Chinese with some English examples. The way she took notes also highlighted the importance of this L1-based cognitive LLS in grammar learning.

7. Similarities and Differences between the Interviewee and the Writer

7.1 Similarities

Crystal and I acknowledged that English grammar plays a vital role in effective communication, yet if we put too much emphasis on grammar, it may affect the fluency of the language. We had similar English grammar learning experiences before we entered the university. We learned most of the English grammar in Chinese public schools, and it was taught by Chinese EFL teachers. Teachers used their L1 as teaching language in the classroom, which means they explained grammatical knowledge in Chinese with explicit grammar instruction, and teachers paid more attention to grammar structures and tenses in the class. As a result, grammatical knowledge is absorbed and retained in our minds in the form of Chinese. Thus, we tended to use L1-based LLS, when we struggled to understand and apply English grammatical knowledge in production at a low English proficiency level, which would provide us with psychological comfort and motivate us to learn English grammar.

7.2 Differences

However, we have several differences regarding age, working environment, and the selection of L1-based LLS. I have been learning English grammar since primary school, while Crystal started to learn English grammar in secondary schools. Compared with Crystal, I was not physically and cognitively mature enough then, which leads to insufficient awareness of the use of strategies, such as note-taking in L1, and less effective regulation of my learning process.

Different working contexts lead to differences in the choice of L1-based LLS. Crystal immersed herself in an English environment and tended to use English as long as she worked, thereby less employing L1-based LLS. In contrast, I used to work in a public school in China, and English is my teaching language. I would only use it in the classroom. Outside the classroom, there were limited opportunities for me to use English. I would adopt different L1-based strategies to ensure producing correct language. For instance, I would translate Chinese into English in my mind before producing the language.

8. Insights

The language contexts for ESL and EFL learners are different. For ESL learners, the target language context is available beyond the classroom. In contrast, EFL learners do not have this ready-made context for interaction and communication outside the classroom (Brown, 2007). In other words, EFL learners rarely have opportunities to internalize and use grammatical knowledge in a meaningful context outside the classroom. There could be a considerable variation in L1-based LLS used by learners despite a similar language learning environment. Crystal's grammar learning experience demonstrated that L1-based LLS have a positive impact on English grammar learning. It seems natural that the native language can be used as a type of strategy for learning another language. Thus, EFL teachers should be aware of this social context and have a positive attitude toward L1-based LLS used by EFL learners.

This interview is limited to one participant. One learner's grammar learning experience with L1-based LLS cannot apply to all EFL learners. Also, the employment of different types of LLS in language learning is influenced by various individual differences (ID) factors (Pawlak, 2021). Thus, further empirical research for LLS needs to take more ID factors into consideration. Also, Crystal mentioned that she preferred to search for unfamiliar grammar points online, which means she drew upon Internet-based materials and resources.

Thus, more attention needs to be paid to how learners deploy LLS in a technology-based context. Meanwhile, the links between the use of LLS in a technology-based context and language learning achievement need to be investigated in further research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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