

Exploring Factors for English Language Learners' Language Competence

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the relationships among self-efficacy, strategies, and goal orientations of college-level English Language Learners (ELLs). Participants who were more than 25 years old had a lower level of strategy use than those who were less than 25 years old. Greater strategy use could result in higher level of self-efficacy and goal orientations. When mastery goals increased, use of overall strategy, compensation, cognitive, metacognitive strategy and social strategy increased. Teachers are suggested to use scaffolding, set goals and adopt assessment methods to promote ELLs' ability and mastery of class content instead of external evaluation to improve learners' self-efficacy and confidence.

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

1. Introduction

English language ability and its influence in ELLs' adjustment process is a vital concern for English Language Learners (ELLs). With the increasing number of ELLs enrolled in postsecondary levels in the U.S., many programs in universities provide regular English courses for ELLs. There are over 400 educational institutions in the different regions of the United States that offer English language programs (Institute of International Education, 2019). These programs provide language learners various courses, including academic English for university students, language and culture courses for scholars and travelers. The English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are designed to develop functional, academic and basic interpersonal communication skills of the language. These programs could prepare students for admission into a U.S. college or university by providing pre-academic preparatory courses ("English Language Program", 2015). However, these programs have difficulties in developing ELLs' language competency for their academic success (Baik & Greig, 2009; Foote, Holtby, Derwing, 2012; Grafals, 2013). Most previous studies focused on ESL programs in K-12 level and fewer of them discussed ELLs from ESL programs in post-secondary level (Bifuh-Ambe, 2011). The present study examined the essential factors for learners' language competence—self-efficacy, learning strategy, and goal orientation. It aimed to analyze the relationships among self-efficacy, learning strategy, and goal orientation of ELLs from ESL program in university setting. To help language educators sustain ELLs' motivation and improve their strategy use, self-efficacy and performance, the relationships among variables including self-efficacy, strategy use and goal orientation should be clarified. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What are the language learning strategies used by ELLs from college ESL program in relation to age and gender?
2. What is the relationship among self-efficacy, language learning strategy and goal orientation for ELLs from college ESL program?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1997), Oxford's learning strategy theory (1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2003) and Midgley's goal orientation theory (1996, 2000).

Learning is knowledge acquisition through cognitive processing of information based on Bandura's social cognitive theory (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). The theory focuses on the role of cognitive, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes in human development and change (Bandura, 1986). Learners with higher efficacy beliefs tend to have better achievement and performance and to be more interested in the learning tasks (Bandura, 1977, 1997). According to Bandura (1989a) "much human behavior is regulated by forethought embodying cognized goals, and personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities" (p.1175).

Oxford (1990) pointed out that strategies were especially important for developing language competence, and they facilitated active and self-directed involvement. Use of strategies enables learners to control learning process and increase efficacy, confidence and motivation. Oxford (2003) further argued that strategies were effective when they related well to L2 tasks, fitted student's different learning style, and effectively employed by students. Oxford (1990) divided language learning strategies into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Different goals stimulate different responses and behaviors (Midgley et al., 2000). Midgley's goal orientation theory explains cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. The three goals used by Midgley (2000) are mastery goals, performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals. These three types of goal orientation were related with different cognitive and motivational behaviors including self-efficacy and learning strategy, which would be discussed in Literature Review section. According to the three theories mentioned above, self-efficacy, learning strategy and goal orientation may interrelate with each other to influence learners' behaviors.

3. Literature Review

A great number of studies have found that self-efficacy and learning strategies were positively associated (Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010; Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012; Wong, 2005). Students could be trained and explicitly taught in strategy use, and it was reported that type of strategy use and successful language learning were related with each other, but it was mediated by self-efficacy. Self-efficacy and overall strategy use of students across all proficiency levels are positively related, but this positive relationship was not strong (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007).

Students who have positive self-perceptions in their ability are more likely to adopt mastery goals and have positive affect, whereas students who had negative perceptions tend to be performance goal oriented and avoid tasks (Jahedizadeh, Ghanizadeh & Ghonsooly, 2016; Baygi, Ghonsooly & Ghanizadeh, 2017). Mastery goals were found predicted positive feelings (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002). Su, McBride, and Xiang (2015) also found mastery goals were motivationally beneficial, especially among female students, in college class settings. It has been reported that students who were mastery goal oriented used more deep information processing strategies and self-regulated strategies (Bandalos, Finney, & Geske 2003; Cleary & Chen 2009; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Wolters 2004).

A number of studies found that students who were mastery goal oriented used more effective learning strategies, but students who were performance goal oriented used less learning strategies or ineffective learning strategies (Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008; Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006). Mastery goals have been reported associated with adaptive help-seeking (Karabenick 2004), whereas students with performance goals tend to use more ineffective or the superficial strategy use (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). In college settings it was also found students with mastery goal-orientation used more intrinsic regulation strategies to maintain interest, whereas those with performance goal-orientation were more likely to use extrinsic regulation strategies to sustain their motivations (Wolters, 1998).

A positive relationship between performance-approach goals and perceived academic efficacy has been found in some studies (Greene et al., 2004; Liem et al., 2008). But, Anderman and Young (1994) argued that there was a negative correlation between performance-approach goals and perceived academic efficacy. They also identified that there was a negative correlation between performance-approach orientation and the use of deep cognitive strategies, but there was a positive correlation between performance-approach orientation and surface level strategies. There has been no agreement about the relationship between performance goals and educational behaviors and outcomes. It was expected that mastery orientation would have the highest positive relation with self-efficacy, followed by performance-approach orientation. Conversely, it was expected that the performance-avoidance orientation would be

negatively correlated with self-efficacy. It is essential that teachers understand the significance of different types of goal orientations. There is not enough evidence about their predictability and how L2 learners' goals influence their behaviors and performance in college level. The present study explores the relationships among each type of goal orientation (mastery goals, performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals), self-efficacy and learning strategies for college ELLs.

4. Methods

The participants of this study were students from ESL program at a southeastern university in the U.S. Most of them had been studying English for more than five years in their home countries and had been in the U.S. for 1-2 years. During the period of time of this study they had attended at least one semester ESL class in the U.S. The English Language Learning survey was used in the study. The survey was 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), and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS) (Midgley et al., 1996, 2000) to measure ELLs' self-efficacy beliefs, strategy use and goal orientation. The researchers first contacted the head director and two major instructors and coordinators of the ESL program to receive permission to conduct this study with students in the ESL program. After obtaining permission from them, the researcher asked the English instructors' permission to distribute the surveys and assistance in collecting responses from their students. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the IRB office of the university. There were 207 students participated in answering the English Language Learning Survey. Since nine of the students didn't complete the survey, the total number of valid responses from students is 198.

5. Results and Discussion

With the Cronbach Coefficient Alpha test, the results of the tests for self-efficacy, each type of strategy and each goal orientation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability of the English Language Learning Survey

	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Self-efficacy	8	.903
Strategies		
Memory	9	.814
Cognitive	14	.815
Compensation	6	.705
Metacognitive	9	.835
Affective	6	.704
Social	6	.799
Goal Orientations		
Mastery	6	.833
Performance-approach	5	.883
Performance-avoidance	6	.880

The number of students who were over age 25 including the age 25 is 83, and the number of those who were less than 25 years old is 115. There were 88 female students (44% were over age 25) and 110 male students (58% were over age 25). The independent sample t-test was used to investigate the differences of strategy use between students less than 25 years old and over 25 years old, between male and female students. The results of the t-test analyses are showed in Table 2. From Table 2 it can be seen that, overall, students over 25 years old ($M=3.50$) significantly had a higher level of strategy use than students less than 25 years ($M=3.67$), $t(198)=2.519$, $p=.013<.05$. The effect size (Cohen's d effect=0.35) was moderate. However, overall, there was no significant difference of strategy use between females and males ($p=.29>.05$). And there was no significant difference between females and males for their use of six strategy categories.

Table 2. Summary of Variation in Language Learning Strategy by Age

Strategies	<25 (N=115)		≥25 (N=83)		t	p
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Memory	3.38	.688	3.35	.692	.303	.762
Cognitive	3.74	.515	3.58	.535	2.162	.032*
Compensation	3.80	.543	3.62	.660	2.089	.038*
Metacognitive	3.86	.608	3.74	.623	1.343	.181
Affective	3.40	.648	3.11	.649	3.113	.002**
Social	3.87	.609	3.60	.842	2.621	.009**
Overall	3.67	.466	3.50	.505	2.519	.013*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

To investigate relationships among self-efficacy, overall learning strategy, affective strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, memory strategy, metacognitive strategy, social strategy, mastery goals, performance-approach goals, and performance avoidance goals, a Pearson product-moment correlational analysis was used. The results are displayed in Table 3. Self-efficacy was positively correlated with overall strategy use, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, memory strategy, metacognitive strategy, social strategy, and mastery goals ($r = .28, .29, .24, .16, .32, .29, .34$). Whereas self-efficacy was found negatively correlated with performance-avoidance goals ($r = -.19, p < .01$), there was no significant relationship between self-efficacy and affective strategy, self-efficacy and performance-approach goals.

Table 3. Pearson Product Correlations of Measured Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Self-efficacy	--	.28**	.15	.29*	.24*	.16*	.32**	.29**	.34**	-.02	-.19**
2. Overall Strategy		--	.77**	.86**	.65**	.73**	.79**	.82**	.56**	.31**	.21**
3. Affective			--	.55**	.35**	.54**	.53**	.57**	.37**	.35**	.38**
4. Cognitive				--	.62**	.57**	.64**	.66**	.45**	.19**	.12
5. Compensation					--	.31**	.37**	.43**	.23**	.12	.02
6. Memory						--	.49**	.42**	.46**	.33**	.23**
7. Metacognitive							--	.65**	.55**	.31**	.15*
8. Social								--	.51**	.11	.06
9. Mastery Goals									--	.23**	.08
10. Performance-approach										--	.51**
11. Performance-avoidance											--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Overall strategy also positively correlated with mastery goals ($r = .56, p < .01$), performance-approach goals ($r = .31, p < .01$) and performance-avoidance goals ($r = .21, p < .01$), among which the correlation between overall strategy and mastery goals was strong since $r = .56 > .50$. A strong positive correlation was determined when the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) between two variables was greater than .50 (Green & Salkind, 2011).

Specifically, affective, cognitive, compensation, memory, metacognitive, and social strategy were positively correlated with mastery goals ($r = .37, .45, .23, .46, .55, .51$). However, no significant relationship was found between social strategy and any other goal orientations as well as compensation strategy and other goals.

There were positive correlations between self-efficacy and overall strategy use, between self-efficacy and mastery goal orientation. It affirmed the previous findings that self-efficacy and learning strategies were positively correlated (Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010; Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012; Wong, 2005; Yusuf, 2011) and self-efficacy or perceptions and mastery goal orientation were positive related (Jahedizadeh, Ghanizadeh & Ghonsooly, 2016). Overall strategy was also found positively correlated with mastery, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. It indicated that more strategy use could lead to higher level of self-efficacy, mastery goals, performance approach

goals and performance avoidance goals, and among these relations overall strategy use and mastery goals is strongly associated.

As mastery goals increase, all types of strategy increase; mastery goal had strong correlations with overall strategy. It was inferred that among three types of goal orientations mastery goal orientation was the most facilitative and adaptive in language strategy use and enhancing learners' self-efficacy. The findings of this study were consistent with the literature and positive relationships between mastery goals and strategy use, between performance goals and use of learning strategies have been found, among which the positive relationship between mastery goals and use of learning strategies is stronger (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Wolters 2004; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988). These findings indicated that teachers could encourage students to develop mastery goal orientation and provide scaffolding to facilitate mastery goals. Scaffolding can be support or assistances offered by teachers that "enable learners to accomplish tasks and develop understandings that they would not be able to manage on their own" (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 9).

6. Implications

Important educational implications for English language educators and administrators were suggested as a result of this study to improve English language curriculum, instruction, and teaching methods. Doing so will promote higher education level ELLs' independence, motivation and language ability.

6.1 English Language Educators

The results of this study showed that mastery goal orientation is the most adaptive and beneficial for language strategy use and enhancing learners' self-efficacy. Based on students' prior experiences, meaning was constructed by applying prior knowledge to the new content. To help learners to acquire the English language, teachers should design class activities engage learners and facilitate the mastery of the English academic courses content in the second language learning setting.

It is suggested that teachers comprehensively learn students' needs, background, and language level. Teachers could develop learners' awareness of learning goals and options to help learners to adapt to the new content. Teachers are encouraged to provide scaffolding and set goals to promote ELLs' abilities and skills of the language instead of external evaluation to develop learners' mastery goal orientation and self-efficacy. In order to allow learners to exercise increasing responsibility, teachers need to familiarize students with learning strategies so that they can accept and use these strategies inside and outside of classrooms. Teachers could provide learners with methodological resources, and guide students through presenting explicit expectations and providing explanations about learning strategies. Teachers can create different class tasks and use various teaching materials. Interactive and cooperative assessment methods instead of competitive and product-oriented methods could be used to involve learners in their language learning process to encourage mastery goals and positive self-efficacy. A supportive learning environment need to be established to reduce negative affect and increase positive feelings, and assignments could also be relevant to learners' goals.

6.2 English Language Administrators

English language administrators need to establish a close relationship with the international organization within the school or community to help ELLs socialize with English native speakers. Engaging ELLs in a less anxious and more supportive social settings can enhance ELLs' self-efficacy and motivation in language learning as well as integrating into the local community. English language administrators can cooperate with these organizations to expand ELLs social network and provide mentoring or tutoring services for ELLs.

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