The congruence of perceived learner difficulties and language learning strategies in EFL students

EFL 学習者が自覚する難しさと言語学習ストラテジーの一致

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Abstract

In EFL settings, the question of which areas of English students find difficult is often determined by teacher observations. While identifying the problems learners face is an inherent part of a teacher's role, asking students what aspects of their English learning they believe to be challenging can be a powerful method to augment effective English language instruction. This study investigates what Spanish speakers learning English consider to be the most problematic facets of that learning process and what language strategies they find most beneficial. The results of these two questions are discussed in terms of whether the preferred language strategies used address or avoid the difficulties the learners felt they had.

Keywords: learner difficulties, English as a foreign language, language learning strategies

　EFL では、英語を学習する学生に対して、どの領域が難しいと感じるかという問題は、多くの場合、教師の観察に委ねられている。 これらの問題領域を特定することは教師の役割の本質的な部分であるが、英語学習のどの側面が難しいと思うかを生徒に尋ねることは、効果的な英語教育を強化するための強力な方法になる。 この研究では、英語を学ぶスペイン語話者がその学習プロセスの最も難しい部分として認識したものと、彼らが最も有益だと思った言語学習ストラテジーを調査した。 これらの 2 つの質問の結果は、好ましい言語学習ストラテジーの学習者が抱えていると感じた困難に対処していたのか、それとも回避していたのかという観点から説明されている。

The learning of a new language is inevitably a process fraught with an expansive array of obstacles that begin at the early stages of study and persist, albeit in various manifestations, even once the student has become relatively proficient. When teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) design curricula, make course material, and conduct classes, a substantial amount of time needs to be devoted to considering the possible difficulties that will be encountered by the students taking the course. Most EFL teachers believe that they have a functional and malleable understanding of the needs of their students and can conduct their language courses within the framework of whatever hindrances to language acquisition their students face. It could be argued that knowing the nature and magnitude of the constraints that learners face is intrinsic to the duties of the teacher. However, several studies on the importance of discovering the difficulties students believe they have, suggest that teachers' perceptions of these difficulties are often incorrect. A paper by Arkin (2010) assessed the results of a student questionnaire about the difficulty of skills within the four main language areas to examine how successful the English course they were taking had been at addressing their needs. The results showed a significant dissonance between the skills that the students felt were most difficult and the content that the teachers had incorporated into the course of study.

If it has been shown that language instructors are not adequately aware of the difficulties their students face, then elucidating these obstacles to competent use of English should be one of the basic responsibilities of teachers. It is commonplace for EFL instructors to give students a list of objectives at the start of a course, and some tertiary institutions also require students to do an evaluation survey at the end of a course. Neither of these activities, however, directly addresses the students' needs and desires, and the use of outlines and evaluation surveys would be far more relevant if the teacher knew the difficulties the students felt they had. The implementation of clear course objectives is a necessary part of the education process, and the scope of this activity is usually based on the teacher's past experiences. However, every class and each individual are unique, and hence a far more logical mode of course construction would be for the teacher to ascertain what aspects of English the students found problematic either at the start of the course and/or during the course. This would allow for a more flexible approach to course design and give students a sense of accomplishment if they overcome language difficulties that they had previously struggled with.

An abstract yet fundamental issue in a discussion of learner difficulties is the role that confidence plays in how barriers to progress are understood and dealt with. A study by

Wendon (1986) used student interviews to investigate attitudes towards learning, and in one interview, a student who struggled with pronunciation noted how she would make an effort to avoid using words that she felt she was not good at pronouncing and would substitute them for words which were easier for her to enunciate. Behavior like this suggests that at least in this student's case, she would rather not risk eroding her confidence further, even if pushing herself to improve the pronunciation of the words she struggled with would lead to more comprehensive language capacity and be most applicable to her English learning goals in the long run. This anecdote shows that there is a fine line between addressing problem areas that students must improve to bolster their overall confidence and not forcing students to practice components of language that cause them excessive anxiety. Horwitz (1988) highlighted the effects of failure in language learning by stating, "An unsuccessful learning experience could easily lead a student to the conclusion that special abilities are required to learn a foreign language and that s/he does not possess these necessary abilities" (p. 283).

There are two benefits of discovering what spheres of English learning students struggle with. As was outlined above, attaining this information facilitates the design of suitable material to be used in the classroom, and in addition, it can also be vital for the teacher to assist students in developing learning strategies to put into practice outside the class environment. Students will more than likely have a background awareness of the parts of English that they struggle with, but getting students to reflect on their learning difficulties and delve deeper into the nature of these barriers to proficient language use, will create a reference point for the establishment of specific learning strategies.

There is a large body of research on learning strategies, yet despite their importance, researchers and teachers alike have indicated that learners of a language are not adequately aware of what strategies they are using or what strategies might be more useful than the ones they currently utilize. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) outline this lack of learner understanding, stating: "Individuals may learn new information without consciously applying strategies or by applying inappropriate strategies that result in ineffective learning or incomplete long-term retention" (p. 18). So, a starting point for teachers should be to explain to their students the concept of learning strategies, give some examples of what these strategies are, and point out that there are various strategies that can be used for studying the same material.

In a similar way that without direct inquiry, teachers are often not aware of the difficulties that their students face, there is an even greater deficit of teacher knowledge when it comes to student learning strategies. A study by Griffiths and Parr (2000, 252) used Oxford's widely accepted Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to investigate the discrepancies between the strategies that learners of English as a second language employed and those that their teachers thought they used. The findings showed that there were glaring disparities between the teachers' imagined strategy use and the student learning strategies in reality.

Gabillon (2005) concluded that investigating learning strategies becomes more significant when it is done within the context of "learners' conceptions" of their experience with learning a second language (p. 251). Gabillon adds that learners employ strategies they consider to be most effective, so it would be of interest to discover whether there is a relationship between the beliefs students have about difficulties related to learning English and the strategies they think are most effective. The perceived impediments of learners are not the only factor of the "conceptions" mentioned, but they form a guiding principle of what learning strategies students will adopt.

Other research has shown that observation of learning strategies can lead to valuable insights into learner behavior. Ehrman (1996) postulates that learning strategies can be a crucial indicator of problems in learning a second language, "You may see overuse or underuse of certain learning strategies (learning techniques) or patterns of failure, such as inappropriate use of new vocabulary that seems to represent unthinking translation from the student's native language" (p. 12). Ehrman's suggestion of the importance of language strategies is referring to the teacher observing this misuse of learner resources, yet it could be the case that it would be more pertinent for the teacher to ask the students directly what learning strategies they are using and then to discern the suitability of these strategies as a means of addressing the obstacles they face.

The purpose of the present study is threefold: to clarify what area of English was perceived as being most difficult to the participants, to discover what the most favored learning strategies were, and to get an insight into whether students chose learning strategies that were aimed at rectifying these difficulties. The first two objectives have been covered in numerous studies, yet looking at these two results in the context of what is of optimal benefit to the student

has not received enough attention in previous research and is thus the main aim of the current study. The degree to which congruence exists between the perceived difficulties and the strategies used may illuminate whether learners are trying to adhere to the common belief that areas of inadequacy should be addressed or if they are avoiding attempts to improve the weaknesses in language learning they believe they have.

Method

Participants

All the 12 participants were third-year students majoring in translation and interpretation, which is a four-year degree at the University of Salamanca, Spain. The subjects were native Spanish speakers and were chosen because of the considerable time they had studied English and because they also had extensive experience studying another language besides English. 10 of the 12 students had learned English for at least 14 years, while the other two had learned it for 12 years. Furthermore, all the participants had been studying Japanese for between two and two and a half years when the questionnaires were administered. Japanese and English are vastly different languages, so these students had a broad array of language learning experiences from which to draw on when they commented on both the difficulties they experienced and the learning strategies they implemented when studying English.

Procedure

The participants were given a question about what aspect of English they found most difficult and were asked to answer using classifications and expressions of their own choosing. Rather than provide a list of common difficulties from which to select, a free-form answer style was used to elicit responses that best fit the students' beliefs. The other research question concerning learning strategies was paired with a list of fourteen learning strategies and the option to add any additional strategies if they were not on the list. The students were reminded that they should think about the learning strategies in reference to the things that they did to learn English outside of class and not during the time they spent with their teachers. They were asked to rank the strategies in order from 1 to 13, with 1 being the strategy that helped them

improve their English most and 13 the strategy that helped them least. It should be noted that the participants were not asked to list the strategies they felt best addressed the difficulties they felt they had, but rather the strategies they believed were most beneficial to improving their overall English ability.

Results

Figure 1

Perceived areas of difficulty when learning English. The number of responses is listed under each category (some participants selected more than one)
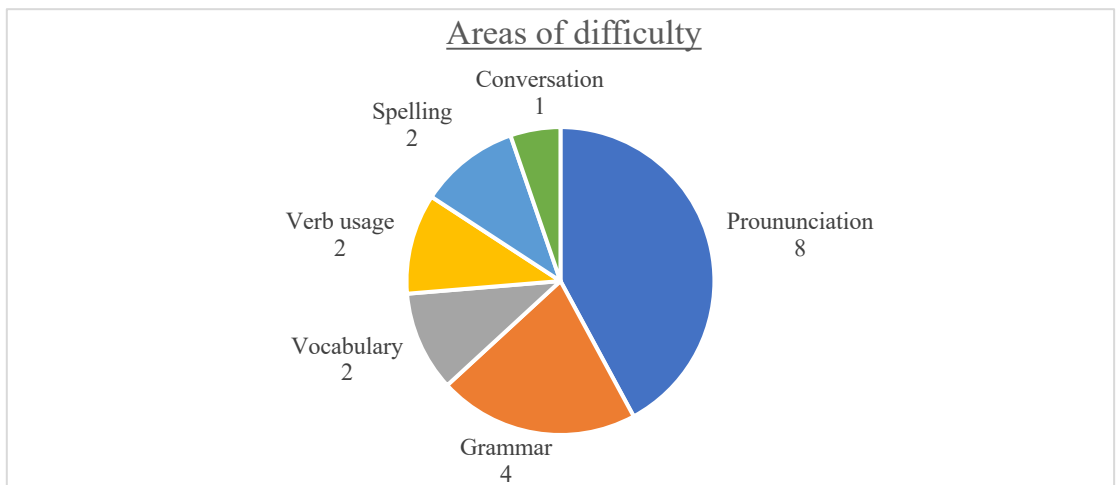

Figure 1 shows that pronunciation was viewed as by far the most significant impediment to confident use of English, being listed as the most challenging dimension of language learning twice as often as the next most frequent answer. Seeing as these students had also studied Japanese extensively for several years, their awareness of the full spectrum of obstacles to language acquisition was acute. Hence, one possible explanation of why pronunciation was considered problematic is that pronunciation in Japanese is relatively easy compared to how radically different the writing system of Japanese is to Spanish. However,

when native Spanish speakers pronounce words in English, even though the writing system for the two languages is the same, the pronunciation varies dramatically. The importance of accurate pronunciation cannot be overemphasized, and Macdonald (2018) explains how just the realization by learners that they are having trouble with correctly pronouncing words is a vital step in fostering confidence and creating a path towards language success.

Table 1

Preferred learning strategies

*This was the only strategy that was not on the list given to the subjects.

Table 1 illustrates that the majority of students viewed two modes of passive input ("watch videos with English subtitles" and "read in English") as the best ways to improve their English ability. Even though pronunciation was discovered to be the most demanding language skill for students, neither watching videos nor reading in English gives them direct opportunities to improve their pronunciation through active practice. Based on the difficulties cited by the students, it would follow that the most functional methods of improving their pronunciation

abilities include any learning strategy that either involves listening to the correct pronunciation of words or having opportunities to refine their pronunciation through speaking opportunities with native speakers (or non-native speakers with exemplary pronunciation). This suggests a substantial degree of consonance between the difficulties the learners felt were paramount and the choice of "talk to native speakers in English" as the language strategy which was most often selected as being beneficial.

Table 2

The primary difficulty of each student (some students listed two) and their most favored learning strategy

Student	Primary difficulty	Most favored learning strategy
1	Pronunciation	Reading
2	Pronunciation	Talking to myself / trying to think in English
3	Irregular verbs and pronunciation	Reading
4	Pronunciation and grammar	Watching movies or T.V. in English with English subtitles
5	Pronunciation and grammar	Talking to native speakers in English
6	Vocabulary and spelling	Talking to native speakers in English
7	Pronunciation and spelling	Writing a diary in English
8	Pronunciation	Talking to native speakers in English
9	Pronunciation	Listening to music with English lyrics
10	Grammar and vocabulary	Reading
11	Conversation	Watching movies or T.V. in English with English subtitles
12	Verb usage	Talking to native speakers in English

Table 2 shows the congruence of perceived difficulties and strategy choices for each individual student. This table only indicates the most favored strategy, and compared to table 1, which shows the three most favored strategies, table 2 suggests that there is more of a correlation between the acknowledgment that pronunciation is problematic and a desire to

directly improve pronunciation by talking to native speakers. Three participants who had trouble with pronunciation chose either reading or writing as their preferred learning strategy, neither of which comprise of a listening or speaking element to facilitate pronunciation improvement. The occasional disconnect between the strategies that learners prefer to use and the learning obstacles they have should serve to remind teachers that students are not necessarily thinking about their overall progress in language acquisition when they select strategies. Students may instead be simply devoting time to learning activities that they find appealing, which would explain the popularity of watching movies and listening to music as learning strategies.

Discussion

The results of this present study add further weight to the notion posited by Griffiths and Parr (2000) that enhancing teacher awareness of the types of strategies and the needs of their students is key to the construction of a fertile learning environment. If students are not aware of the correlation between their imagined impediments to acquiring English fluency and the types of strategies they use, then it is the teacher's responsibility to bring this relationship to the students' attention. Learners are often under the impression that English study of any kind is of benefit but giving them a better understanding of which strategies are most likely to improve language areas empowers the learner to be more autonomous and use their study time outside the classroom more efficiently.

When viewing the perceived student difficulties alongside the choice of learning strategy, it is essential to consider if it is in the student's best interests to attempt to focus on the parts of English they find demanding by implementing the learning strategies that specifically correspond with that aspect of language. The straightforward view would be that this approach of trying to improve a language element that the student struggles with through the use of a relevant strategy is the best way to progress with learning. However, the interrelated concepts of motivation and confidence with this approach must be considered. Clément (1986) argues that self-confidence gives the most unambiguous indication of a learner's capacity for English proficiency. If the learner attempts to remedy a facet of language weakness using strategies that directly target this encumbrance, then failure to improve with respect to that area could lead to a decrease in both motivation and confidence. So, for some students, it may be more pragmatic

for them to incorporate learning strategies that they simply feel are most beneficial to their studies. Wenden (1986, p.194) explains this dichotomy of strategy prioritization by using the example of a student who allocated her "strategic resources" to improve her inability to pronounce words correctly, while other students in her study were guided by their "explicit beliefs" about language learning and chose strategies based on these beliefs irrespective of whether they aligned with the language difficulties they were experiencing.

It is understandable why pronunciation was seen as the most challenging part of English for Spanish speakers because compared to the other language that the participants were studying, Japanese, the grammar and vocabulary of Spanish and English are undeniably more similar. It is also illuminating to discover that students realize the constraints of having inadequate ability in pronunciation because the participants in the study were all able to read and write English with remarkable proficiency, and yet even with the capacity to construct structurally coherent sentences in both written and spoken English, insufficient pronunciation ability was considered a hindrance. This imbalance between the combined strengths of grammar and vocabulary in contrast to a weakness of pronunciation can be seen in many English learners, particularly in those of intermediate or advanced levels. Thus, it would seem to be in the best interests of all English teachers to emphasize the importance of pronunciation even if students are not aware of their inability to pronounce words correctly. Rubin (2012) points out that in a teacher's quest to give students the most appropriate instruction about suitable learning strategies, a capacity for practical application of the strategy should be the salient guiding principle, "Unless strategy instruction is used to solve specific learning problems, learners will regard it as an additional burden and simply superfluous" (p.3).

Interestingly, the strategy "Talk to non-native English speakers" was not chosen by any of the participants as one of their top three preferred learning strategies. Mimicking the sounds of non-native English speakers to improve pronunciation is not ideal, but talking with friends, classmates, and other people residing in the country of an EFL learner can be extremely useful. Murphey (2014) explains that in situations involving conversations with non-native speakers, the pronunciation that is heard gives the learner a sense of what a realistically attainable with regards to their own pronunciation. Consequently, students who have doubts about their pronunciation ability should be encouraged to engage in conversation with both native and non-native speakers so as to maximize their prospects of increasing fluency.

Teaching implications

       The explanation of suitable learning strategies that target perceived difficulties is of great importance, but teachers should also make attempts to reduce the perceptions of difficulties that their students have. This can be done through repeated encouragement when a student makes progress in the problem area and also by creating activities related to these areas that generate a sense of accomplishment when completed. White (2008) discusses the multifaceted constructs of learner beliefs and explains how these beliefs are not immutable but are subject to adaptation and change. This observation suggests that teachers need to ascertain, either directly or indirectly, what difficulties their learners believe they have and then, depending on the student and situation, decide whether it may be appropriate to attempt to dispel these beliefs.

       In terms of future research into this topic, it would be of value to compare the improvement in the English competency of students who used learning strategies that addressed their perceived difficulties to the improvement in students who used strategies that built confidence in language areas that were not seen as difficult. Furthermore, interview-style research into why students chose specific strategies would shed light on how cognizant they were with respect to their selection of learning strategies. Knowing whether students consciously chose strategies which they believed would overcome their impediments to competence in English, or made these choices based on other criteria, would allow teachers to provide more tailored guidance to their students.

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Appendix

List of learning strategies

    (a) Watch movies or T.V. in English with Spanish subtitles

    (b) Watch movies or T.V. in English with English subtitles

    (c) Write a diary in English

    (d) Talk to native speakers in English

    (e) Read books and websites etc. in English

    (f) Use a self-study grammar or vocabulary textbook

    (g) Listen to music with English lyrics

    (h) Write out new vocabulary many times

    (i) Use a study application or website

    (j) Talk to non-native English speakers

    (k) Use flashcards to remember new words

    (l) Try to review things I write or pay attention while I am speaking and make corrections when I am wrong

    (m) Try to ask my English teachers as many questions as possible