

What Language-Learning Strategies L2 English Learners Use at a U.S. University Library: An Observational Study

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Abstract

Recently, more and more researchers are aware of the need to use qualitative methods for a richer description of the employment of language learning strategies (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). However, merely a dearth of studies investigated L2 English learners' strategy use through the qualitative mode—observation. Filling this niche, this study aimed to examine the process of L2 English learners' strategy use based on an observation. The setting of this study was at the main library of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), which was not only a place for the L2 English learners to study, but also a site where social flows were active. In this productive setting for observation, I took the role of an unobtrusive observer. In order to observe and identify the learners' strategies, I utilized the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, R. L., 1990) as the observation scheme. Eight emergent themes were coded to describe the learners' behaviors. Five of them could be categorized with SILL taxonomies, while the other three couldn't. The integration of the themes led to the argument that the L2 English learners at the library are not just regular patrons, but also active language learning strategy users.

INTRODUCTION

It cannot be imagined that a language learner could live without language learning strategies. Without them, language learning would be a tedious and excruciating experience. Language strategies are deliberate and conscious actions taken by language learners (Cohen, 1998). Language learners are either conscious of or potentially conscious of the strategies they employ. Besides, they are “specific

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actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford 1990, p. 8).

A great deal of the previous studies have utilized a quantitative approach to examine L2 English learners’ strategy use, especially using the SILL survey (Oxford, R. L., 1990). While self-report questionnaires have become the most important part of the LLS research methodology, researchers cannot be certain that learners actually employ the strategies they claim to use (Poole, 2005). As indicated by Chamot (2004), learners might not remember what language learning strategies they actually used, but claim to use them. In addition, they might check a survey item whose written description is not comprehensible to them. Similarly, Lee (2000) pointed out that the method of questionnaires creates an attitude for participants to adopt because they tend to make an impression on researchers. That causes them to collect biased data.

Recently, more and more researchers are aware of the need to use qualitative methods for a richer description of the employment of language learning strategies (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). These qualitative methods might include interviews, think-aloud protocols, diaries, observation, and so on. Nevertheless, among the qualitative methods is observation the most difficult to implement because “learning strategies are for the most part unobservable” (Chamot, 2004, p. 15). Therefore, observational studies on LLS are scarce and urgently needed for the process of observing and identifying language learning strategies to be transparent.

As one of the earliest researchers who elicited LLS by observation, Rubin (1981) indicated that although observing and identifying strategies may be complicated and difficult, it is not an impossible task. This possibility of observation as a LLS research method is realized by Rubin’s (1975) seminal study in which a preliminary list of basic cognitive strategies was identified based on a number of observations by her and other researchers. During my doctoral study at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), I found the IUP main library was not only a place for the L2 English learners to study, but also a site where they could socialize with their own social groups and negotiate meanings of academic texts with their native speaker classmates. Thus, it was found to be a productive setting to observe how other English learners used their strategies during my doctoral study there, since I took an interest in probing into how the other L2 English learners employed their language strategies.

This study aimed to delineate the process of L2 English learners’ strategy use based on an observation at the library of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It is structured as follows. The second section presents a review of literature which covers classification of language learning strategies and observation as a research

method. The third section offers the means by which the strategies are elicited and analyzed. The fourth section presents eight emergent themes and seven observational notes. Finally, the last section concludes the study.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Various language learning strategy classification schemes have been developed over time for researchers (Chamot, 2004). In the 1990s, at least a dozen of classification systems co-existed in the LLS arena (Oxford, 1994a). Nevertheless, the co-existence of these classification schemes causes a major problem for LIS studies because of “a lack of coherent, well accepted system for describing these strategies” (Oxford, 1994, p.4). In fact, strategy classification is still one of the most controversial issues in the field of language learning strategies (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). The phenomenon of incoherence among the various LIS classification systems can be exemplified by the differences between Rubin’s (1975) and Tarone’s (1983) schemes.

Rubin's study (1975) is one of the earliest attempts to classify language learning strategies. Based on the observation of good language learners, she identified a preliminary list of strategies which included guessing, learning from a communication, and so on. In 1981, elaborating on her earlier strategies, Rubin enlisted eight cognitive ones: clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive, inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practicing. In addition, she provided specific examples for the strategies and created an observation schedule for the study. More importantly, she claimed that the cognitive strategies would directly contribute to the learning process.

Unlike Rubin’s system which is based on successful language learners, Tarone’s system is linguistically based, dealing with communication strategies such as paraphrasing and borrowing (Oxford, 1994a) . As indicated by Tarone (1983), communication and learning strategies are different. Learning strategies are a strategy user’s endeavor to increase linguistic competence in the target language, but communication strategies are employed to resolve a communication problem when the desired linguistic structures are not available to the interlocutors. Communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, borrowing, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance, are produced either to avoid communicating with an interlocutor, or to create an alternate way of communicating desired meanings. To sum up, Rubin’s and

Tarone's systems are not commensurable because the former contributes to the learning process and the latter facilitates the communicating process.

Despite of the incoherence of strategy taxonomies, Madhumathi, Ramani, and Prema (2014) stated that Oxford's (1990) Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is "recognized as comprehensive and is a widely used instrument to assess the strategy use of second language learners" (p. 456). Currently, many researchers world-wide regard the SILL as the most comprehensive and widely-used tool to elicit language learning strategies (Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Tseng, 2011). Besides, a large number of studies adopted the SILL as an instrument to diagnose language learners' strengths and weaknesses (Nakatani, 2006).

Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) provided an excellent review of the SILL. As indicated by Oxford and Burry-Stock, the original version of the SILL was designed by Oxford to examine the learning strategies used by the learners at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. Later on, the two revised versions of the SILL produced by Oxford (1990) were: one for foreign language learners whose first language was English and the other for learners whose English was their second or foreign language. The SILL is the only language learning strategy instrument being widely checked for its reliability and validity in various ways. For instance, Bedell and Oxford (1996) pointed out that "[the] SILL...has internal consistency reliability in the .90s, strong predictive validity with relation to language performance, and concurrent validity as evidenced through correlations with language performance, learning style, and setting characteristics" (p. 49).

Observation as a Method

If language learning strategies are specific actions taken by L2 learners (Oxford, 1990), it is likely through the observation to gain insight into how language learners employ them. In an observational study, researchers collect data by watching the participants and focus on keeping their environment intact (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). As indicated by (Schwandt, 2001), the qualitative method of observation has five accompanying attributes. First, occasions, activities, implications, standards, et cetera are seen from the viewpoint of individuals being studied. Second, attention to detail is prioritized. Third, only when events and actions are placed within a chosen social and historical context can they be comprehended. Fourth, social events are not considered discrete because they are in process and dynamic. Finally, although certain theoretical framework might influence researchers' interpretation of the data, they strive not to superimpose the framework upon participants' perspectives.

Bernard (2011) viewed observations as being of two types: direct observation and indirect observation. Direct observation refers to watching participants' activities and record their behaviors on the site. Indirect observation can be interpreted as the archeology of human behaviors, including trace study and archival research. For example, in trace study, instead of directly observing participants, researchers may examine bathroom graffiti at men's public toilets for attitudes toward sexuality in different cultures. In archival research, archival data which may consist of government records, medical reports, or tax rolls are to be studied, rather than observational field notes.

Participant and nonparticipant observation are two common types of direct observation (Gay et al., 2011). In participant observation, the researcher participates in the community activities besides observation. It is an interactive process in which the researcher aims to establish a rapport with the observed people and get an emic perspective on them (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). However, in nonparticipant observation, the researcher does not take part in the observed activities (Whitehead, 2005). As a data collection instrument, he/she tries to raise all the senses, taking in the stimuli from the environment in order to formulate the answers and the questions regarding the study.

Two main strategies could be employed for direct observation: reactive observation and unobtrusive observation (Bernard, 2011). When reactive observation is conducted, people know they are being observed and might behave in a way to receive an approval from the researcher, causing the Hawthorne Effect (Lee, 2000). Nevertheless, in unobtrusive observation, people are not aware of their being observed because the researcher secretly records the data. Disguised field observation is its ultimate form in which the disguised researcher plays the role of a participant observer.

METHODS

Research Question

The specific research question designed for this study was in the following:
What themes could be coded from the observations at the IUP Library?

The Setting

During my study at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), I found that

the IUP main library was not only a place for the L2 English learners to study, but also a site where they could socialize with their own social groups and negotiate meanings of academic texts with their classmates. As a doctoral student at IUP, I knew that the IUP students, especially the graduate students, had to spend a lot of time studying and writing papers due to their course work. Sometimes, they stayed in their study carrels working on their theses, or might need to discuss group projects with their classmates at the library lounge. In agreement with my experiences, after observing 730 college students in the libraries of two universities, Paretta and Catalano (2013) reported that around 60% of the observed behaviors are related to study. Thus, the library was full of learning activities, so it was a productive site for me to observe how the L2 English learners at the IUP utilized their language learning strategies.

The Observation Strategies and Sampling

In this particular setting, I took the role of a participant observer since I was a regular patron at the library. The strategy of unobtrusive observation was taken during the process of observation lasting for a week. Pretending I was studying as usual, I secretly made a note of L2 English learners' behaviors. I did not divulge my intention until the observations were over. With ethical issues in mind, I informed them of their being observed and asked their permission to use the data. In addition, spot sampling was utilized in the study because I recorded what L2 English learners were doing whenever I encountered them.

The Observation Scheme

A priori approach was adopted to identify the themes of the study. As pointed out by Ryan and Bernard (2003), priori themes could be formulated "from already agreed on professional definitions found in literature reviews; from local, commonsense constructs" (p. 88). In order to produce the themes regarding the learners' strategies, I utilized the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, R. L., 1990) as the scheme in the coding of the observation at the IUP main library because "there's no point in reinventing the wheel" (Bernard, 2011, p. 420). As mentioned, the SILL is a widely-recognized and well-tested system for identifying learners' learning strategies. Therefore, it would be unpractical for me to develop a coding scheme without using any system that already exists.

It was Oxford's (1990) revised version of the SILL that was used as a major reference for the decoding the data collected from my observation at the main library

of the IUP (See Table 1). This version of the SILL containing fifty items included six major categories of learning strategies: memory, cognitive, comprehension, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Furthermore, the six major strategies can be grouped into two classes: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies refer to the behaviors related to direct use of the target language, while indirect strategies support language learning without using the language (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Nevertheless, if additional strategies were identified in my observation, but were not accounted for by Oxford’s coding system, they were categorized and added to the list of strategies.

Table 1
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, R. L., 1990)

Strategies	Class	Examples
Memory	Direct Strategies	Grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing
Cognitive	Direct Strategies	Reasoning, summarizing, analyzing, and general practicing
Compensation	Direct Strategies	Guessing meaning from the context, and using synonyms and gestures
Metacognitive	Indirect Strategies	Paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, playing for language tasks, self-evaluation, and monitoring
Affective	Indirect Strategies	Anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward
Social	Indirect Strategies	Asking questions, cooperating with native speakers, and becoming culturally aware

FINDINGS

Eight Emergent Themes

Eight themes emerged in the analyses of the field notes taken at the IUP library. Five of them could be labeled with SILL taxonomies, while the other three could not. The five themes, identified as SILL strategies, are two direct and three indirect strategies. The two direct strategies are “trying to talk like a native speaker,” a cognitive strategy, and “using gestures to enhance communication” which is a comprehension strategy. The three indirect strategies include two social strategies,

“asking help from English speakers” and “asking questions in English,” and one affective strategy, “talking to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.” The following table illustrates the themes produced by the researcher.

Table 2

The Eight Emergent Themes Coded in the IUP Main Library

SILL Strategies	Non-SILL Strategies
I try to talk like native English speakers.	Reading aloud when text becomes difficult.
I ask for help from English speakers.	Using the mother tongue to negotiate academic content.
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	Using reference books in the L2 reading and writing.
When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	
I ask questions in English.	

Due to the constraints of the physical environments and the limitation of the research method, not all the subscales of the SILL were identified in my observations.

Table 3 indicates the categories of the themes formulated with SILL taxonomies.

Table 3

The Categories of the Themes Coded with SILL Taxonomies

Memory Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Compensation Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Affective Strategies	Social Strategies
—	+	+	—	+	+

As shown by this table, the researcher could not detect any strategies from the two SILL subscales: memory and metacognitive strategies. Since memory and metacognitive strategies were mental activities engaged by the learners, they were difficult to detect in the observations.

Seven Observational Notes

This section demonstrates seven observations in which the eight themes emerge.

Besides, it delineates the process of the L2 learners' using the language learning strategies. Each observation is given a topic which properly reflects who was being observed. For instance, the first observation is named "Three ESL learners and two native English speakers" because there were literally three ESL learners and two native English speakers involved in the observation. The first four observations could be coded with the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, R. L., 1990), but the last three could not.

Observation one: Three ESL learners and two native English speakers

I spotted three ESL learners near the coffee shop on the first floor of the library, and took note of their behaviors. Based on the field notes, I formulated this theme, trying to talk like a native speaker, to explain the three IUP ESL learners' behaviors. "I try to talk like native English speakers" is one of the items belonging to the subscale of cognitive strategies at the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning and applied to code the observation. Cognitive strategies allow learners to handle language information in a direct way, such as practicing the target language in a natural setting and is highly related to English proficiency (Rebecca & Oxford, 2003). The following observation comments illustrate how they employed this cognitive strategy.

O.C: The three ESL learners I assumed were IUP graduate students who included one Arabic male and two Korean female students. They were talking to two native speakers who were one female IUP graduate student in her fifties and one male student probably in his early forties. From my seat, I only could see the back of the male Arabic ESL student and the side of the female native speaker who was seated in a chair with her partner. The other two ESL female learners and the male native speaker were standing talking to one another.

O.C: Based on the way they talked to one another, I think they were classmates who were doing the class projects together. In addition, the Arabic ESL learner and the female native speaker belonged to the same group. Apparently, they had talked about their project for a while before meeting the other three classmates.

O.C: Based on what I overheard, they mentioned a trip to Pittsburgh which was probably one they all had to take in the class they were taking. Then, one of the female Korean students wearing a blue sweater talked about something related to identity which I believe was something she planned to do for her project or presentation in class.

O.C: Another Korean ESL learner wearing a pink blouse asked her American classmates if they could cross the picket line when the strike became a reality. The

male native speaker responded to her that back in his hometown in Kansas they did not have anything like that. Most of the time, the Korean female student wearing a pink blouse did most of the talking to which occasionally the female native speaker responded.

O.C: Then, their topic switched to the coming holiday, Independence Day. They felt excited about the event and laughed a lot. At this moment, they were more like close friends than regular classmates. After a few minutes of chatting, the female native speaker in her fifties mentioned an academic term cognition which I think was her topic of her group presentation. At this point, their conversational topic was switched back to their course work. When the two female Korean graduate students and the male native speaker took their leave, the Arabic male learner and the native female learners remained seated, showing that they still had some business to finish.

As shown by the field notes taken at my first observation, the three ESL learners were good at their social skills and tried to talk like native speakers, so that they could develop good relationships with their classmates. They might use this cognitive strategy to increase their academic success such as completion of a class project, fostered their cross-cultural understanding such as their knowledge about an American holiday, and reduced anxiety such as the concern about a possible faculty union strike on campus.

Observation Two: An Arabic ESL learner and his native speaker partner

I saw an Arabic ESL learner talking to a native English speaker in the library, and recorded their behaviors. In this second observation, two different themes, “I ask questions in English” and “When I can’t think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gesture” were coded. When multiple themes emerge in an observation, a good rule of thumb is to record all the behaviors in the order of preeminence (Bernard, 2011). The theme, “I ask questions in English”, is considered the primary because it recurs more often than the other in this observation. “I ask questions in English” and “When I can’t think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures” are two items of the SILL, one in the subscale of social strategies and the other in the category of compensation strategies. The following observation comments shows how the Arabic ESL learners utilized the two SILL strategies.

O.C: Based on the document spreading in front of them, the male ESL learner asked the female native speaker some questions which she explained carefully back to him. Their words were much softer and lower at this moment. Once in a while, the male learner asked his classmate, “What does that mean?” As usual, the female native speaker answered back patiently. However, the Arabic learner was not a

passive participant in their conversation because he sometimes used some gestures to express his perspectives strongly. At this moment, the atmosphere was serious but still friendly. Then, somewhere in their on-going dialogues, the female native speaker said, "I don't think so." Apparently, she did not agree with some of the international student's opinions, but after hearing the explanation from her partner, she gave in, saying that "All right, if you insist." Then, they seemed to reach an agreement and wrapped up their discussion.

I found that the male Arabic learner was able to use gestures when he spoke English and could not think of the right expressions. In addition, he took responsibility to practice his second language, English. When he did not understand what his partner talked about, he asked her to clarify what was said. As explained by Rebecca and Oxford (2003), social strategies help learners cooperate with native speakers and comprehend their cultures. Furthermore, compensation strategies could be employed to bridge the gap in verbal communication. Under my observation, he utilized the two SILL strategies to enhance his academic learning during his interaction with his native speaker partner.

Observation three: a Japanese female ESL learner

Observation Three took place at the lounge of the library where a Japanese female ESL learner interacted with a librarian, a native English speaker. The emergent theme in this observation, "I ask for help from English speakers", is a social strategy included in the SILL. Social strategies can be understood as "actions which learners choose to take in order to interact with other learners and with native speakers" (Cohen, 1996, p. 5). Following are the observation notes showing how this social strategy was utilized by the learner to enhance academic learning.

O.C: Under my observation, she rested her head on one of her palms and wrote something down. When her writing stopped, she rested her head on both of her palms and seemed to bury herself in some serious thoughts. Then, she turned her look back at her document.

O.C: Her writing seemed to come to an end since she spent most of her time reading. At about 4:05, a librarian came to her and sat next to her. By the way they sat together, they seemed to be well-acquainted.

O.C: Then, the Japanese student went away for a while, but the librarian did not walk away. This male American librarian stood by the window for a long minute, looking out of it. When she came back, she seemed to ask him some questions. I could not know the details of their conversation because of my distance from them. However, when the librarian left, he brought away the document the ESL learner kept

reading.

The observation indicated that the ESL learner might have some difficulties with her learning and the librarian was willing to help her out. The ESL learner's action was coded as a social strategy because it involved learning with interacting with others (Griffiths, 2003).

Observation four: An ESL Korean graduate student

In Observation Four, an ESL Korean graduate student was found reading a book at the study area of the library. The primary theme in the observation is related to the learner's emotions and can be identified with the SILL taxonomy. In the subscale of the SILL, affective strategies, is the item "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English." Affective strategies refer to lowering anxiety, self-encouragement, and measuring emotional temperature, including relaxation activities and so on (Rossiter, 2003). Oxford (1994) indicated that "the powerful social and affective strategies are found less often in L2 research" (p. 2). It is hypothesized that the learner in the observation might use this strategy.

O.C: The ESL learner was a middle-aged male who put his leg on the table in front of him and read a book on his lap. Based on his facial expressions I could tell that he had an easy time reading his book. He was so involved in his reading that he almost made no sounds except for when he flipped the pages of his book.

O.C: After about five minutes, another male Korean student went to the reading ESL learner, greeting him and bringing him some fruit to eat. He stopped reading and started to have a chat with his fellow countryman. Apparently, they were amused in their conversation because I could hear their constant laughing. Then, the male Korean student who just passed by this reading area to greet his friend left after a few minutes. The Korean learner who had been reading earlier finished eating the fruit his friend brought to him and started his reading a couple of minutes later. Staying in the same reading posture, he had a good time with his reading for the rest of time when I observed him.

In our reading, it is a good idea to make ourselves comfortable physically and mentally. By having some jolly chat with his fellow countryman and taking a relaxing posture to read, the Korean graduate student made his L2 reading as enjoyable as possible.

Observation five: Two Korean female ESL learners

Two Korean female ESL learners were discussing with each other in their

mother tongue in Observation Five. The primary theme, reading aloud when text becomes difficult, is a reading strategy which is not included in the fifty items of the SILL. Although reading aloud is not a SILL strategy, it has been considered as an important strategy for both L1 and L2 English learners. It is a strategy which helps learners “incorporate variations in pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery” (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009, p.111). Children can enhance their literacy competence by reading aloud (Lane & Wright, 2007). It is also beneficial to learners’ vocabulary reading comprehension (Oueini, Bahous, & Nabhani, 2008). Furthermore, Block (1986) considered it as a local strategy which could give L2 English learners more time to reflect on the text with which they have difficulty. As indicated by my field notes, this non-SILL strategy could be used by the two L2 English learners.

O.C: Judging from their utterances, I was positive that the two learners came from Korea. They were speaking Korean most of the time and laughed a lot at the beginning of my observation. One of them wore a blue outer garment and the other was dressed in a pink blouse. They spoke English only when they read some passages from the documents on their table. They were probably classmates, working on their upcoming presentation. The woman in a blue outer garment read a passage to her classmate and discussed it with her in Korean. Then the female student in a blue garment code switched in English, “There is no absolute objectivity; everything is subjectivity.”

According to their dialogues overheard during the observation of the two Korean ESL learners, they were probably from the English department at the IUP. The content of their documents could be so academic and abstract that using their native language Korean was necessary for effective communication. The two Korean students might read the texts aloud in English to give themselves more time to reflect on them. Then, they discussed them in Korean.

In their dialogues, they seldom code switched from English to Korean or vice versa since they spoke Korean most of the time. Scotton (1988) stated that “all linguistic code choices are indexical of a set of rights and obligations holding between participants in the conversational exchange” (p. 130). While both of them were very fluent in English, their native language was their unmarked realization of rights and obligations in the community of the IUP Korean students. At the end of the observation, one Korean ESL learner made a momentary marked switching from Korean to English, reminding her interlocutor of their rights and obligations as an L2 English learner.

Observation six: Three Japanese ESL learners as a social group

The theme of Observation Six, using the mother tongue to negotiate academic content, was another non-SILL strategy the learners might use in the IUP main library. In this observation, three Japanese ESL learners were observed talking to one another in their mother tongue. Pon, Goldstein and Schecter (2003) pointed out that while the use of language other than English forfeits the ESL learners' opportunities to practice English, they will have opportunities to negotiate academic content and are better prepared for their interaction, debate and conflict with the native speakers. Below are the observation comments regarding the IUP ESL learners' use of this non-SILL studying strategy.

O.C.: The ESL learners I observed were two Japanese graduate students who were seated at two separated tables and using their laptops. Both of them put their stuff on their tables and read something on their computer screens. Soon, one of them left her seat to do something else, but she left her personal belongs on her table. While leaving her table, she spoke Japanese to her fellow countryman. The other Japanese graduate student sitting at another separated table responded to her in Japanese. Then, she left her seat for someplace else.

O.C.: Then, I saw another male Japanese graduate student approaching her and stop right in front of her table. He chatted with her in Japanese for a few minutes. I heard them laughing heartily. And then I watched the male student leaving with a piece of paper fetched from her table. The female Japanese student's facial expressions were back to her usual solemnness.

O.C.: At around 2:30 p.m., the other Japanese female student who left her table earlier was back. She and the other female ESL student started to have some small talk and were apparently in high spirits. Before long, they were joined by the male Japanese student who earlier had fetched some document from one of them. I heard more laughing and chatting. Then, they discussed something, packed their stuff and laptops on the tables, and left together.

Due to the same cultural background, these ESL learners could communicate with one another more easily than with native English speakers. Using their first language to negotiate academic content could empower their learning because the L1 is an effective tool of "quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in L2" (Nation, 2003, p.5). In addition, sticking to their social group and being its members, they offered care and provided information with one another, increasing their chance of surviving in a foreign country. Lessening the impacts of cultural shocks they might experience otherwise may be another reason for them to stick together as a social group.

Observation seven: An ESL female learner in her carol

In Observation Seven, a lone female graduate student was found studying in a carol, normally assigned to doctoral students at the IUP. The theme, using reference books in the L2 reading and writing, was coded to describe her behaviors. Using reference books such as dictionaries is a common strategy an ESL reader will employ in reading. However, this commonly-used strategy is not listed in the SILL. The following field notes described how she employed this learning strategy.

O.C: Because of my vantage point, I could only see the back of the female ESL learner. According to her appearance, she was an Asian student who was possibly at the doctoral level. She was of medium height and in a black sweater. On the back of her chair was her jacket. She put her laptop, an opened dictionary and a stack of books on the big table in her carol. At first, I thought that she was reading a PDF file from her laptop. Then, I had my second thought because I could hear a soft finger-typing sound she made while she tapped on the keyboard of her laptop. I determined that she was typing a research paper.

O.C: From her movement, I guessed she scrolled down her file to examine the content of her writing. In addition, she occasionally read a document on her table and typed some words after reading. Her writing seemed not to be flowing freely. It took her a long while before she added some words in her files. As I observed, she seemed to think a lot. When she was thinking, I found that she liked to put her hand on her cheek. She occasionally typed some words on her computer, but most of the time she held her hand on her cheek, deep in thought.

As an ESL learner, reading English and writing in English is difficult. Under such a circumstance, we need help from others. As shown by the observation, because of the learner's restricted physical environment, her resources were limited to her dictionary and the Internet within her reach. Based on her opened dictionary on the table, she must have made reference to it. As noted by Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus (1996), looking up new words in a dictionary contributes positively to incidental vocabulary learning. In addition, as a form of deliberate noticing, the use of a dictionary enhances vocabulary learning opportunities, amplifying the positive effects of extensive reading upon L2 learners (Nation, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study described the process of L2 English learners' strategy use based on an observation at the library of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It attempted to answer the question: what themes could be coded from the observations at the IUP Library? Eight themes surfaced in the analyses of the field notes recorded at the IUP library. Five of them could be labeled with SILL taxonomies, but the other three could not. In integrating the themes, I formulated the argument that the L2 English learners at the library are not just regular patrons, but also active language-strategy users. They were engaged in employing language learning strategies in seemingly mundane activities, such as talking to friends, and asking help from librarians.

The five SILL strategies included a cognitive strategy, "I try to talk like native English speakers," two social strategies, "I ask questions in English," and "I ask for help from English speakers," a compensation strategy, "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures," and an affective strategy, "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English." The three non-SILL strategies referred to were "reading aloud when text becomes difficult," "using the mother tongue to negotiate academic content," and "using reference books in the L2 reading and writing." The results indicated that while the Learning and Study Strategy Inventory (SILL) is the only learning strategy instrument that has been checked for its validity and reliability in various ways (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995), its list of learning strategies is not exhaustive as illustrated by the emergent themes.

Griffiths and Oxford (2014) suggested that more qualitative studies need to be conducted as a supplement to the mainstream survey research. In line with their suggestion, this study realized the possibility of eliciting L2 learners' strategies by the complementary method of observation. Language learners might not be willing to tell us their strategy use in a survey or at an interview. Thus, an observational study like this might enable us to understand how they employ language learning strategies in a real-life situation. For example, although social and affective strategies were the least reported ones in L2 research (Oxford, 1994), the use of the two types of strategies was observed and recorded in this study.

It needs to be noted that relying on a singular source of data might take a toll on the results of the study because using the method observation cannot fully detect the learners' inner behaviors such as their memory and metacognitive strategies. This outcome might not be unexpected, as suggested by the general wisdom of a qualitative researcher that researchers are not supposed to rely only on any singular source of data (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). Therefore, mixed studies which utilize a variety of techniques over an extended period of time to check against observational

data should be included in the endeavors of investigating the ESL learners' language learning strategies. Furthermore, although numerous LLS coding schemes have been rendered to researchers (Chamot, 2004), coding examples offered in narratives are in demand for the task of observing and identifying language learning strategies to be more efficient in the future.

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