



Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal
<http://sisaljournal.org>

The Impact of Online Training on Saudi Medical Students' Attitudes, Awareness, and Use of Language Learning Strategies in Relation to their Developing Autonomy

Sahar Alzahrani, University of Southampton, UK
Julie Watson, University of Southampton, UK

Corresponding author: saharmatar2@gmail.com

Publication date: March, 2016.

To cite this article

Alzahrani, S., & Watson, J. (2016). The impact of online training on Saudi medical students' attitudes, awareness, and use of language learning strategies in relation to their developing autonomy. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 7(1), 4-15.

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/mar16/alzahrani_watson

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Please contact the authors for permission to re-print elsewhere.

The Impact of Online Training on Saudi Medical Students' Attitudes, Awareness, and Use of Language Learning Strategies in Relation to their Developing Autonomy

Sahar Alzahrani, University of Southampton, UK

Julie Watson, University of Southampton, UK

Abstract

In the context of ongoing debate about the relationship between strategy training and autonomous learning, this study set out in the belief that they are inextricably linked and sought to explore three important aspects of learner strategy development more deeply. An experiment was designed to investigate the effectiveness of learner training with three groups of Saudi students taking a course in English for Medical Purposes: control (no treatment), offline (treatment delivered on paper), and online (online treatment). The treatments used supplementary learning material focused on language learning strategies (LLS). The design and the delivery of the treatments was informed by Rubin, Chamot, Harris, and Anderson (2007), Cohen (1998), Murphy and Hurd (2011), and Murphy (2008a). This paper sought to answer three research questions related to the impact of learner training on students' attitudes, awareness, and use of LLS in relation to their autonomous abilities after exposure to the treatment. Qualitative data from students' reflective writings, interviews and focus group discussion was used to answer these questions. For the two treatment groups, the treatment impact was found to be positive in relation to the research questions and negative in the control. The online group outperformed the offline one in all the three investigated aspects.

Keywords: language learning strategies, learner autonomy, Saudi medical students, strategy awareness, learner training, strategy use, attitudes to strategies, English language

Background

Teachers have often and are still trying to make their students successful learners. One way to achieve this end can be through the provision of learner training to the students. The link between learner strategies and learner autonomy has not received agreement among the researchers in the field of learner strategies. Oxford (1999) was among those who believed that being a strategic student would lead to the achievement of successful learning and to the enhancement of learner autonomy. Similarly, Cohen (1998), White (2008), Everhard (2012), and Ranalli (2012) see a connection between learner autonomy and learning strategies.

However, other scholars perceive this connection between learner strategies and autonomous learning as a complex one. Benson (2011) is one of the opponents of the relationship between the provision of strategy training and the attainment of better language proficiency and better learning. McDonough (1999) was skeptical about the reliability and robustness of the studies that looked at the effectiveness of LLA training on having successful learners.

Some researchers believe that it is not necessary that autonomous students apply lots of learning strategies. Murphy (2008b) says that we should not assume teaching strategies to be effective in improving language learning outcomes and learner autonomy. She believes that this goal can be obtained only when the teachers use the learning material to keep the students engaged in reflections, collaborative learning, and self-assessment during class time. In other words. These researchers assert that it is not enough to describe good learners based on the number or frequency of strategies they are using because strategy use is not the same even among successful learners (Chamot & Rubin, 1994). Cohen and Weaver (2013) point out that not all students use the same set of strategies given to them, but they pick the ones that apply to them. Therefore, the focus should be on whether or not they understand LLS and on whether they adopt a collection of preferred strategies (Chamot & Rubin, 1994).

With relevance to the current study, according to Dörnyei (2005) and Murphy (2008a), the integration of strategy tasks with language learning tasks in the design of the strategy training material is one of the significant recent shifts in strategy training research. Cohen and Weaver (2013) recommend that the course developer integrate strategies into the material content and to consider contextualizing strategy training by inserting the language tasks explicitly and implicitly into strategy training.

Our interest in this topic was as a result of our belief in the importance of learning strategies for the enhancement of learning and of language proficiency. Little (2016) argues that greater awareness of learner strategies will result in students' enhanced learner autonomy. Strategy training is assumed to be helping students to become successful and accordingly more autonomous learners (Cohen, 1998). Rubin, Chamot, Harris, and Anderson (2007) illustrate that effective strategy training will result in greater ability to manage cognitive and affective strategies, higher motivation, better performance, and more skills in independent

learning. According to them, strategic learners can identify their weaknesses and strengths and are able to make plans for their language learning, monitor and evaluate the progress in their language learning.

This paper is part of PhD research which investigated the effectiveness of an intervention to enhance learners' language learner autonomy. It is focused on examining the level of students' awareness of language learning strategies as well as their use of strategies in their language learning, particularly the autonomous strand, after being exposed to strategy-based instruction. Students' attitude to language learner strategies is also investigated after being exposed to strategy training. This paper will address the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of learners towards LLS after taking part in learner training?
2. What is the level of learners' awareness of LLS after taking part in learner training?
3. What is the level of their strategy use after taking part in learner training focused on LLS?

Methods

Background

The participants in this study were taken from a higher education population. This population comprises students in the Medical and Medical Sciences disciplines, studying in their preparatory year at a university in Saudi Arabia. These students take a condensed English course in the preparatory year before they specialize in their subject areas. In the preparatory year, they study General English in the first semester and English for Medical Purposes in the second semester. They take these courses of English in face-to-face classes using their assigned textbooks or using the CDs accompanying the textbooks.

In a pre-study questionnaire and interview, most of the students in this population felt that the language learning they receive in formal educational contexts is not sufficient and that they need more opportunities for learning and using English. Therefore, many of them have developed their own strategies for learning English generally and medical English in particular. They claimed that these strategies made them aware of the features of spoken discourse such as pronunciation variations as well as expressions and vocabulary specific to the

spoken language. The oral skills in English of some of those students are much better than their academic skills as observed by one of the researchers and noted by the students themselves. They lacked developed general strategies that could be helpful to their language learning. They also need to be trained in the use of language learning strategies in order to be better language learners and to gain greater language proficiency.

Participants

The participants selected for the intervention were three groups of students who have the same language proficiency level- intermediate level- according to the placement test administered by the university at the beginning of the semester.

The experiment design

It was decided to conduct the study with three groups of students. The rationale for this design was to investigate whether there is a causal relationship between technology use and language learner autonomy. This was the focus of the wider PhD research. An experimental design is deemed to be the best to detect the causality between students' use of technology and the development of their language learner autonomy (Thomas, 2013). Two of the groups received strategy training through two different teaching modes (online and offline) and the third group (control) received no learner training. As part of the experiment, the two treatment groups were provided with supplementary material for learning medical English. The supplementary material adopted the task-based learning approach in its design and focused on teaching language learning strategies (LLS). The provided treatment aimed to develop the awareness of the two treatment groups about LLS and to provide them with the opportunity to find helpful LLS in order to develop their language learner autonomy.

The offline group were given the material on printed papers and the tasks were done in face-to-face sessions whether inside or outside the classroom. There was no intention to use technology in the delivery of the material to the offline group. However, the online group were taught in a blended way with the material uploaded to a Learning Management System (LMS) and the students did the individual as well as the collaborative tasks online whilst sitting together in the same physical classroom. Some tasks were assigned for homework- in case the

students wanted to have more practice in language learning and language use. Those homework tasks were done online at distance amongst the online group when students were outside the classroom and they were submitted via the LMS; whereas the offline group had arranged for face-to-face meetings or synchronized virtual meetings to discuss the homework tasks and submitted them to the teacher (the first author) on paper next time they met. The control group were not exposed to the supplementary material that was given to the two treatment groups and it was supposed they would show negligible change in terms of their attitude to learner strategies, strategy awareness, or strategy use.

Design and teaching of the supplementary material

Strategy tasks were integrated with language learning tasks when the strategy training was designed for the two treatment groups only (Dörnyei, 2005; Murphy, 2008b; Cohen & Weaver, 2013). The design of material considered contextualizing the strategies in a relevant context (here, language learning) and linking them with problems directly related to the students' needs to ensure the effectiveness of strategy training (Rubin et al., 2007). The core of the supplementary material provided to students in this study centered on LLS embedded in a task-based format and presented explicitly (both in English and Arabic) in the introductions to the tasks. Because learners' use of strategies varies according to individuals, tasks, and goals, each task in the supplementary material introduced students to a strategy selected on the basis of its usefulness to the students' context (see the appendix for a sample task). This was included in the design of the material in order to encourage students to use more of the provided strategies with the aim of improving their language proficiency. Some of the strategies selected for the strategy training were repeated in the design of different types of tasks with the aim of training students to use the strategies in different contexts and to avoid potential confusion between a strategy and a task. We take the view that there is a relationship between strategy training and the promotion of learner performance and the enhancement of their autonomy-related abilities as Cohen (1998) stresses. Therefore, we adopted the explicit strategy instruction approach in the design and the delivery of the material.

At the beginning of the experiment, the teacher explained how the provided learner training could be helpful for the students' coursework, language

learning and lifelong learning skills in order to ensure that students' do not perceive the treatment as extra work and do not feel overloaded as recommended by Murphy (2008a). To encourage learners to respond to the provided material, strategy instruction was integrated with language instruction with the focus of attention on raising learners' awareness of strategies. While teaching the treatment material, the teacher clarified the individual strategies and gave time for students to read and understand the strategy presented first in each task in English and Arabic. It was ensured that students share the teacher's intention and that the strategies embedded in each task are explained while working through tasks as this was emphasized by Murayama (1996). The teacher highlighted the learning objectives along with the strategy to be taught in each task. Briefing students with the implied learning outcomes and strategies in each task they do is believed to be helpful to increase the effectiveness of learner training and hence this was done in every task during the course as suggested by Murphy and Hurd (2011).

Data Collection

Qualitative tools, identified as informal by (Cohen & Weaver, 2013), were felt to be more useful for post intervention analysis in order to obtain a rich insight into language learning strategies. Therefore, three qualitative instruments were used after the intervention to address the research questions in this paper. Eight one-to-one interviews were carried out with students randomly selected from both of the treatment groups, students' reflective writing after each session about the strategies learned in the session, and a focus group discussion was conducted with six students from the three groups (online, offline, and control). The data taken from these three sources was used. The current paper focuses on finding answers to the three research questions, i.e. what are the students' attitudes to learner strategies, what was the level of students' awareness of the strategy, and the level of students' strategy use after the intervention? Evidence for the potential impact of the learner training, focused on learner strategies, was sought from the students' qualitative data and the results are discussed in the following section.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study come from qualitative data from students' reflective writing, a focus group interview, and one-to-one interviews. Answers to the three research questions – i.e. the impact of learner training on students' attitude to learner strategies, level of students' awareness, and level of strategy use in the context of their developing autonomy– were found in this qualitative data.

Attitudes of the learners towards learner strategies after the intervention (coded and brought together with QSR NVivo software) were revealed in the responses of the students in the two treatment groups particularly from the data of the interviews and the focus group discussion. Key indicator words were identified such as 'helpful' (7 instances), 'practice to speak English' (5), 'useful' (2), 'makes English easier' (2), 'important' (2), 'saves time' (2), 'effective' (2), 'will try to use these strategies' (2), and 'like them' (2). In addition, there were single references to 'interesting', 'easy to apply', 'easy to understand', 'fun', and 'beneficial', 'no one at the bottom of the list', and 'we can change our thinking'. In contrast, the results for the control group suggested a negative attitude to learning and to the use of learner strategies with only two key indicators present: "it depends on the body. Somebody doesn't like to follow something. I will learn as I want" and "No, I don't have to follow these strategies". Interestingly, the positive responses of the online group were also more varied than the positive responses of the offline group (14 types of responses and 5 respectively).

Most and least autonomous students were identified in both treatment groups based on the framework proposed in the PhD research for the measurement of language learner autonomy (LLA). The framework was turned into a measuring scale to measure the LLA of each of the students and then to compare these levels across the three participating groups (Alzahrani, forthcoming). Based on this ranking of autonomous students, it was found that those students recognized as the most autonomous ones in the online group were selective in their use of learner strategies, evidenced by, "I can use a variety of the skills now and it really helped me" and they expressed enjoyment in taking part in the provided learner training; "it was fun to do". On the other hand, none of the responses of the offline group, though none were negative, suggested that students were selective in their strategy use or particularly enjoyed the learner training as

much as the online group, e.g., “it is important to know about strategies” and “I think we have to know but not from a book”.

In addressing the research question about strategy awareness, data was drawn from the students’ interviews and the focus group discussion. The amount of responses taken from the online group were found to be much greater (6) than those from the offline group (1). Members of the control group did not talk about strategy awareness which suggests no evident change in their strategy awareness. It makes sense that the control group made no change in their awareness about learner strategies as they were not exposed to the treatment. The responses of the online group which are related to improved student awareness about strategies came from students with different capabilities associated with learner autonomy, while only one of the most autonomous students in the offline group talked about it, e.g., “I did some of them in the past but I did not know they are strategies. Then when I knew, I felt proud of myself that I am using learning strategies”.

Students’ strategy use was also one of the aspects of strategy training that was investigated. The sources of students’ responses in this theme were students’ reflective writing, interviews, and focus group. More responses came from the online group as compared to the offline group. This theme did not appear in the data from the control group which would indicate that they are not aware of what the strategies are and that their strategy use might be minimal compared to that of the two treatment groups. When the quality of the responses between the online and the offline groups is compared, different levels of use are expressed by students with different levels of learner autonomy only in the online group.

- The most autonomous student (i.e. based on the measurement using the measuring scale created) talked about the strategies she uses in her language learning e.g., “my strategy for learning vocabulary, I should have a picture, a word, and I have to write it” and the ones she started to use after participating in the course, e.g., “I started using the strategy of keeping notebook for new words”;
- The medium autonomous student talked about the strategies she uses but they are not very helpful strategies, e.g., “I use in my English learning just the old fashioned strategies” and about the potentiality of using many of the strategies they have learned from

the supplementary material, e.g., “I think I can use lots of these strategies”;

- The least autonomous student in the online group talked only about her plans in terms of strategy use, e.g., “I am going to try to use these strategies which I like very much” and about how much of the strategies given in the treatment can be applied in her learning, e.g., “I think I can use 50% of the strategies we learned in this course”.

However, this distinction between the individuals with different levels of learner autonomy and strategy use cannot be seen in the offline group as only two of the most autonomous students talked about their strategy use. One of them reported the percentage of change in her strategy use since she joined the higher education, e.g., “I was using like 50% of them before I enter the college and now I use 70%” and about how much use of the strategies in the learner training can be made, e.g., “I can use 80 or 90 % of what I have learned from these strategies”. The other gave the percentage of her strategy use in learning English, e.g., “I use maybe 70% strategies in my learning of English” and what strategies she uses frequently, e.g., “a lot of medical terminology is difficult to understand and to memorize. So I connect what I know about prefixes to this new word to find out the meaning of the new words”.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper aimed to shed light on the relationship between learner training and the development of better learning and better language proficiency. This paper explored aspects more deeply and investigated the effectiveness of the provided learner training in terms of its impact on students’ attitude to LLS, students’ strategy awareness, and students’ strategy use in relation to their level of language learner autonomy. Positive results were found in the students’ attitudes, awareness of strategies, and strategy use among the two treatment groups as opposed to the control group, where they were absent in relation to awareness and use. Other results distinguished the online group from the offline group in these different aspects of learner strategies. We recommend that the impact of strategy

training is further researched in relation to the changes in students' language proficiency, as suggested by McDonough (1999), and to the changes in learner autonomy. We also recognize the need for students' perceived strategy use to be measured quantitatively in order to add to the validity of the study when the two types of data utilized inform one another.

Notes on the contributors

Sahar Alzahrani is a PhD candidate at the University of Southampton. She is a lecturer at Umm AlQura University, Saudi Arabia, teaching English for Specific Purposes (mainly medical English) since 2006. Her research interests are learning technologies, learner autonomy, innovations in teaching, blended learning, Elearning, and development of instructional materials.

Julie Watson is head of Elearning in Modern Languages at the University of Southampton. She is involved in postgraduate teaching and creating online distance courses and online resources. Her main research interest is in learning design and the use of new technologies in blended learning.

References

- Alzahrani, S. M. (forthcoming). Exploring learner autonomization in language learning through a blended course at university level [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Southampton, UK.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy*. Harlow, UK: Pearson.
- Chamot, A. U., & Rubin, J. (1994). Comments on Janie Rees-Miller's "A critical appraisal of learner training: Theoretical bases and teaching implications": Two readers react. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(4), 771-776.
doi:10.2307/3587559
- Cohen, A.D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. London, UK: Longman.
- Cohen, A. D., & Weaver, S. J. (2013). *Styles- and strategies-based instruction: A teachers' guide*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, the Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Everhard, C. J. (2012). Re-placing the jewel in the crown of autonomy: A revisiting of the 'self' or 'selves' in self-access. *Studies in Self-Access*

- Learning Journal*, 3(4), 377-391. Retrieved from <http://sisaljournal.org/archives/dec12/everhard/>
- Hurd, S., & Lewis, T. (Eds.). (2008). *Language learning strategies in independent settings*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Little, D. (2016) Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning. *LLAS Center for Languages, Linguistics, and Area Studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1409>
- McDonough, S. H. (1999). Learner strategies: State of the art article. *Language Teaching*, 32(1), 1-18. doi:10.1017/s0261444800013574
- Murayama, I. (1996). The status of strategies in learning: A brief history of changes in researchers' views. *Learning Learning: JALT Learner Development N-SIG Forum*, 2(3), 7-12.
- Murphy, L. (2008a). Integrating strategy instruction into learning materials. In S. Hurd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Language learning strategies in independent settings* (pp. 199-217). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Murphy, L. (2008b). Supporting learner autonomy: Developing practice through the production of courses for distance learners of French, German and Spanish. *Language Teaching Research*, 12(1), 83-102. doi:10.1177/1362168807084495
- Murphy, L., & Hurd, S. (2011). Fostering learner autonomy and motivation in blended teaching. In M. Nicolson, L. Murphy, & M. Southgate (Eds.), *Language teaching in blended contexts* (pp. 43-56). Edinburgh, UK: Dunedin Academic Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1999). Relationships between second language learning strategies and language proficiency in the context of learner autonomy and self-regulation. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 38, 109-126. Retrieved from [http://publica.webs.ull.es/upload/REV%20RECEI/38%20-%201999/08%20\(Rebecca%20L.%20Oxford\).pdf](http://publica.webs.ull.es/upload/REV%20RECEI/38%20-%201999/08%20(Rebecca%20L.%20Oxford).pdf)
- Ranalli, J. (2012). Alternative models of self-regulation and implications for L2 strategy research. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 3(4), 357-376. Retrieved from <http://sisaljournal.org/archives/dec12/ranalli/>
- Rubin, J., Chamot, A. U., Harris, V., & Anderson, N. J. (2007). Intervening in the use of strategies. In A. D. Cohen & E. Macaro (Eds.) *Language learner strategies* (pp. 141-60). Oxford, UK: Oxford Applied Linguistics.
- Thomas, G. (2013). *How to do your research project: A guide for students in education and applied social sciences*. London, UK: Sage.
- White, C. (2008). Language learning strategies in independent language learning: An overview. In S. Hurd & T. Lewis (Eds.) *Language learning strategies in independent settings* (pp. 3-24). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Appendix

A Sample Task with the Embedded Language Strategy

Task 4: Application on the use of the dictionary

: في هذا التمرين، سوف نمارس استراتيجيات جديدة استخدام القاموس الأحادي اللغة الاستراتيجيات
في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. سوف يطلب منك في هذا التمرين الاجابة على بعض الاسئلة
ة. عن طريق استخدام القاموس الأحادي اللغة

The strategy: Effective use of monolingual Medical dictionaries as an important classroom and personal resource.

Objectives of the task:

1. To develop the ability to use dictionaries to look up the meaning of words relevant to a particular context.

Think about the following points:

- 1) In small groups, look at the sentence provided below. It has the word 'take' two times. Look up the word 'take' in Oxford Wordpower Dictionary:
'Take painkillers for as long as it takes to ease the pain.'
- 2) Which of the meanings offered in the dictionary for the word 'take' fits with the first 'take' in the sentence and which one fits with the second 'take'.
- 3) In the dictionary, the word 'Take' has a number of meanings. Provide a sentence for the following meanings of it.
 - a. To use a form of transport; to go by a particular road.
 - b. To put your hand round sth and hold it (and move it towards you).
 - c. To swallow sth.