

# **The Fine Art of Second Language Teaching: An Example of English Teaching in Private Universities**

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**Abstract:**

The fine art of L2 (second language) teaching can be extended to how to balance simply teaching language and teaching learner strategies. While based on the quality of learners in private universities, this question is quite simple. For those private university learners who have several certain second language learning characteristics, the two factors are both important. Teachers should focus on language teaching to “print” knowledge into students, meanwhile, teachers need to introduce learner strategies which includes language learning and using strategies to students to help them internalize what they have learned. By doing this in a teaching process, the class teaching can reach success.

**Key words:** Second language teaching; learner strategies; private university learners

## **1. Introduction**

Second language learner strategies include the strategies for learning and strategies for using of the second language (Cohen, 1998). And whether simply teaching more language or teaching learner strategies has always been a controversial question for L2 teaching. One view considers that it is not a good idea to teach learner strategies, and teachers' mission is to widen students' knowledge range. Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank (2008) made research on the development of learning strategies over 6 months by using case study method. And as a result, one of the cases shows that the teacher Sue failed to teach suitable strategies which help weaker learners. "Strategy use is highly individualised" (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008, p.66). So simply teaching more language is what teachers ought to do, and as for how to internalize knowledge is students' own business. On the contrary, the other view emphasizes the importance of teaching learner strategies, which makes L2 teaching complete. On the point of view of Chamot (2005) and Macaro & Erler (2008), teaching language learning strategy is efficient. Chamot (2005) gave the conclusion that "instruction in learning strategies will assume a greater role in teacher preparation and curriculum design" (Chamot, 2005, p.126). University level students benefit a lot from the strategy of instructing learners to think about text structure (Carrell et al. (1989), Raymond (1993), and Talbot (1995), cited in Macaro, and Erler, 2008).

For the private universities, as are known to all, they are the second tier or third tier universities in China. Their students have certain characteristics: 1) they have weak L2 knowledge bases; 2) their motivation towards L2 acquisition is mainly driven by credit scores and interests in L2 learning; 3) they are generally lack of self-study ability, that is to say, they tend to limit themselves into the textbooks and are poor at summing up the knowledge they have learned systematically; 4) they are inclined to ask for help of electronic device and gain information through new media during the L2 learning process.

The present study aims to explore the fine art for teaching L2 in private universities, which is the relationship between simply teaching language and teaching learner strategies.

As for the structure of this paper, it contains 6 parts. At the beginning, the present existing controversial question towards L2 teaching and the current situation of learners in Chinese private universities is stated briefly. In the second part, previous studies are discussed. Then, after reviewing

the literature, the current second language learning situation is analyzed and in part 4, suggestions for L2 teaching in private universities are given. In the fifth part, a conclusion is drawn, in which the main points are summarized. And at the end of this paper, the references this paper cited are displayed.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 It Is a Bad Idea to Teach Learner Strategies Sometimes**

Sugita McEown and Takeuchi (2014) conducted a research, in which they used motivational strategy to teach students English as a foreign language. And those students were divided into two clusters: one cluster is a group of students who have higher English proficiency and higher motivation, while the other cluster of students have lower English proficiency and lower motivation than the former cluster. The results of this research came out as four different cases: first case is that due to the different frequency the teacher's using of the motivational strategies and different expectation of the motivational strategy between the two clusters of the students, the effects that teaching motivational strategies had on these two clusters of students presented different degrees. Second case is that there are seven strategies showing positive effect on either one cluster or the other after a semester's teaching. But the third case shows that there are five motivational strategies which had no significant effect on the two cluster throughout the whole semester. Whereas the fourth case displays a rather worse result and there were three strategies that did not have positive effect on the students after the whole semester, instead, teaching these three strategies made a negative effect on either cluster of students. Being shown by the research as well as its results as Sugita McEown and Takeuchi (2014) did, it cannot be judged that a teaching strategy is good or not, sometimes it would have a negative effect on a teaching result. In Yeldham's (2016) article, after the comparison study of the strategies group and interactive group, he gave a suggestion that "for lower-intermediate-level listeners, it is better to focus more on developing their listening strategies than to provide them with a balanced interactive approach" (Yeldham, 2016, p. 394).

### **2.2 Learner Strategies Are of Great Importance**

Brown (2000) claimed that teaching second language in classroom by using the learner strategies are of great effect for students' learning achievements. Wenden (1985) holds the same point of view

that “learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy, and that one of the most important goals of language teaching should be the facilitation of that autonomy” (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 130). A teaching guide for teacher in teaching learners strategies was designed and it made a success in teaching learners’ second language, as Brown (2000) mentioned in his book. Kirsch (2012) conducted a research on the primary school students of their learning of learner strategies. In his report, the information has been given that the strategies the children were taught have the function to cultivate their learner autonomy and stimulate them to make reflection on what they have learned, and accordingly, the learner autonomy and the ability of reflecting on the knowledge also helped them to improve their ability of using the learner strategies. So according to Kirsch (2012), the learner strategies are so important, even for young children. And teachers are encouraged to teach students second language learner strategies, and would make success during their teaching process, and young learners in primary school make no exception. Similarly, Abdorrahimzadeh (2014) also thinks highly of the language learning strategies. In his article, he stated that “Language learning strategies are the leading lights of the language learning process and play an important role in successful language performance” (Abdorrahimzadeh, 2014, p. 77). After a study on the Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) female learners, he gave a statement that “the more proficient the learners, the more they employed language learning strategies”, he also added that, “higher proficient learners also used language learning strategies to learn the language more effectively” (Abdorrahimzadeh, 2014, p. 77). Lee & Heinz (2016) claimed that “it has been documented that language learning strategies not only promote language learning but also contribute to increased learner-directed learning” (Lee & Heinz, 2016, p. 68). Huang’s (2015; 2014) research results showed that, for second language learners, compensation strategies are widely welcome and used by them to overcome their linguistic limitations, which indicated that the compensation strategies are effective for the second language learners to overcome their weakness in learning a second language. He also summarized that “advanced learners use learning strategies more frequently than less proficient learners” (Huang, 2015; 2014, p. 737). According to him, the language learning strategies are of effective function in improving learners’ language learning. His research results suggested that “using specific strategies allow learners to manage their learning and monitor their progress, whereas without these practices, learning outcomes can be compromised” (Huang, 2015; 2014, p. 741).

### **2.3 Whether Teaching Strategies or Not, It Depends**

Bueno-Alastuey and Agulló (2015) did an empirical study to verify the results of the previous research: “teaching second language (L2) learning strategies explicitly promotes an increase in strategy use” (Bueno-Alastuey and Agulló, 2015, p. 17). They made a textbook of Higher Secondary Education in Spain as their study subject. And the result of their study went to an opposite direction, which showed that “internal explicit instruction of strategies remains very limited” (Bueno-Alastuey and Agulló, 2015, p. 17), so they drew a conclusion that the second language learning strategies may not be advocated sufficiently in those textbooks, which demonstrated a failure by using the second language learning strategies instruction in this certain situation.

Butler (2011) acknowledged the importance and popularity of the communicative language teaching method and the task-based language teaching method in Asia-Pacific region. However, he also mentioned that even though the existing problems have already been solved mostly, according to Butler (2011), there are still “unsolved issues and concerns”, including “a) how best to implement tasks in an exam culture (Hamp-Lyons, 2007), b) when and how best to include grammar instruction in TBLT, c) students’ use of their L1 in TBLT, and d) the difficulty of top-down policy implementation” (Butler, 2011, p.46). That is to say, we cannot draw a conclusion that teacher must make success in teaching students a second language by the teaching strategies, applying to the communicative language teaching method and the task-based language teaching method.

But Torres (2013) explained that researchers have studied that good language learners have ability in choosing effective language learning strategies for them to learn the second language. He also holds the point of view that second language learner can use second language learning strategy to make their language learning effective. So whether to teach learner strategies and how to teach learner strategies is up to the learners themselves. They need to be aware of what they need and have the ability to seek and decide whether they need to be taught the learner strategy and what kind of strategy they need to be taught in order to enhance their language learning and language proficiency.

As a result, whether teaching learner strategies or not during a teaching process depends on the quality and demand of the L2 learners.

## **2.4 How to Teach Learner Strategies?**

Braskamp, Brandenburg and Ory (1984) raised the question: What is good teaching? According to the criteria in their theory, good teaching refers to “no single instructional strategy is always superior to any other” (Braskamp, Brandenburg and Ory, 1984, p. 18). In their opinion, good teaching not only means using teaching strategy, but teachers need to discuss with and learn from others’ teaching strategies. Arends (1998) claimed that the ultimate goal of teaching is to teach students how to learn knowledge, “to assist students to become independent and self-regulated learners” (Arends, 1994, p. 11). This viewpoint is following Cohen’s (2012) theory of teaching the use strategies of second language learning. Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank (2008) conducted a research on the development of learning strategies over 6 months by using case study method. And in their results, we can see in one of the cases, the teacher Sue failed to teach suitable strategies which help weaker learners. “Strategy use is highly individualised” (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008, p.66), in addition, even though students possess a wide range of strategies, they need to know which proper strategy is helpful and how to use strategies effectively in certain situation. On this condition, “teachers require good knowledge about the role of strategies and strategy development” (Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008, p.66) so that they can help students learn second language better. Another study, Cisco, & Padron (2012) also hold the same point of view that teaching strategies is important. In their theory, for English language learners, if lacking of teachers’ instruction of using learning strategies, they may go to a wrong direction and inappropriate strategy instruction. This statement emphasizes how important for teachers to teach learner strategies. They stated that various forms of strategy instruction have positive effect on students’ reading comprehension. And their further study of this research shows that multiple strategies are also effective for students to improve their reading comprehension. Takeuchi (2003) also showed us in his article that in the second language teaching context, especially in the English as a foreign language context, more different language learning strategies are supposed to be advocated (as cited in Lee & Heinz, 2016). However, this point of view that is empathized by Macaro, and Erlar (2008) is an opposite to Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank’s (2008). Their research lasted 14 months. And after 14 months’ programme which was instructed by reading instruction, the results indicate that teaching reading strategies is of great significance, whether in students’ learning progress or the attitude toward reading. University level

students benefit a lot from the strategy of instructing learners to think about text structure (Carrell et al. (1989), Raymond (1993), and Talbot (1995), cited in Macaro, and Erler, 2008). This programme indicates that teachers' simply using of a single dimensional teaching strategy to teach different levels of students is of success, which is totally opposite to Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank's (2008) result and Cisco, & Padron's (2012) statement, so it makes a "shift towards particular combinations of strategies" (Macaro, and Erler, 2008, p. 114). In their opinion, this way of teaching strategies helps students use their prior knowledge properly. While Cisco, & Padron (2012) explained that this simple method "oversimplified the complexities of reading comprehension" (Cisco, & Padron, 2012, p. 5). And they suggested that overlapping strategies properly is better. Macaro and Erler (2008) claimed in their conclusion that students do better by being taught how to use strategies rather than using strategies at their disposal, which means students need to be instructed to use strategies by teachers and on the condition that teachers have the ability to use the proper way to teach learner strategies. The most arguable thing is that they found the "one dimension" strategy, which means, for example, only teaching strategy that simply related to reading when students doing reading practice is not satisfying. Butler (2011) claimed that the communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching method are so important for Asian-Pacific region, and these two methods are so popular nowadays according to Butler (2011). "The function the communicative language teaching (CLT) method develops learners' communicative competence in social interactions" (Butler, 2011, p.37). And according to Kumaravadivelu (2006), the task-based language teaching (TBLT) method "can be considered as 'an offset of' CLT" (communicative language teaching) (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, as cited in Butler, 2011, p.38).

### **3. Analyses on Learners in Private Universities**

Under the condition of Chinese education policy, the private universities are on the second or third tier levels. Learners in these kind of universities have certain outstanding characteristics.

By asking them casual questions, it is informed that their motivation for choosing English major is mostly the interest on this language and through the class teaching experiences, it can be strongly felt that their interaction with teachers and raising hand during the class teaching process are mainly driven by their strong demand for high scores. Once the teacher stops to add scores for their class

participation, they would immediately keep silence and stop participating in class teaching any more.

Influenced by their English learning effect in middle schools, their language bases are poor. During the class learning process which demands highly for learners' language knowledge reserve, their reaction is poor and sometimes it costs the learners a long time to recall very basic language points.

And the private university learners are inclined to be satisfied with the knowledge they have gained from their textbooks, and they even do not want to make any quests on the background information which is involved in textbooks. What they are satisfied is filling each blanks of the class exercises no matter whether the answers are gained by themselves or not. After class teaching process, they spare no time to make reflection on what they have learned and they are poor at summarizing the main points of the language phenomena, the evidence is that when they encounter the same language point, they cannot remember it even after they have done the exercises about it before. Instead of reviewing what they have learned during the class teaching, their great interests are on extracurricular activities. On the whole, private university learners are poor at learning and using the second language they are supposed to learn.

In addition, learners in private universities are inclined to ask for help of electronical devices. This phenomenon is obvious especially in writing class exercises which highly requires a lot of language output, this is mainly because the private university learners have poor language bases. And when a question about extended knowledge are asked, the first reaction of the learners is to search on the internet through their cellphones.

In a word, learners in private universities have low proficiency in second language acquisition.

#### **4. Suggestions for L2 Teaching in Private Universities**

As Braskamp, Brandenburg and Ory (1984) claimed that "no single instructional strategy is always superior to any other" (Braskamp, Brandenburg and Ory, 1984, p. 18), for learners in private universities, the L2 teaching should balance the two factors: simply teaching more language and teaching learner strategies.

Since private university learners' main motivation is credit scores and interests and they are weak to conduct self-study, the responsibility falls on teachers. L2 teachers ought to teach more knowledge

about the language to help learners to widen the knowledge range, stimulate their interests in L2 learning, and consolidate what they have learned in textbooks in order to help them gain high scores. So teachers themselves are requested to have a large knowledge range in order to give abundant knowledge extension to students.

However, only to teach language itself is not enough, for private university learners who have low proficiency in second language acquisition, “to assist students to become independent and self-regulated learners” (Arends, 1994, p. 11) is the request in private university teaching. In addition, private university learners are poor at learning and using the second language, only focusing on teaching them the language they need to learn is not far enough and teaching learner strategies becomes important. During the language teaching process, grammar, phonetic skills, and translating skills should be introduced incidentally to enhance learners’ learning efficiency, also sometimes question-and-answer section can be designed to make good interaction between teacher and students if necessary. In addition, learners in private universities are poor at summing up what they have learned systematically, so they need to be guided to develop the language using strategies to use the language they have learned in other places. To help learners develop their language input and output abilities, a “readers’ communication activity” can be designed. In this activity, missions are given to learners to finish reading a famous novel every two weeks, then they are requested to share what they have read with class. And suitable books should be recommended for learners by their teachers.

In order to make a good learner strategies teaching, teachers also are supposed to take advantage of the phenomenon that learners in private universities are inclined to use new media to develop their second language using ability. By giving them task to find information from media, edit in group, and share with class next time in the form of a presentation, learners’ input and output ability can be developed. Apart from this method, others such as team discussion, role play, voice-over acting can also be adopted if possible.

## **5. Conclusion**

From the previous research, the conclusion can be made that, whether teaching learner strategies or not for a L2 teacher is a controversial question. Some studies found that teaching learner strategies can make bad effect sometimes, but some research’s results proved that it is important to teach learner

strategies, there are also some studies suggested that whether teach learner strategies or simply teach more language is up to the condition and demands of learners.

And based on the quality and demand of the private university learners, the fine art for teaching learners in private universities is combining teaching language and learner strategies together. By teaching language during the class teaching process, learners' language knowledge range can be enlarged. Along with the language teaching, learner strategies such as reading, writing and listening skills, phonetic skills, and translating skills, etc. need to be introduced to learners in order to develop their language learning and using abilities. In addition, some creative class teaching designs such as readers' communication activity, role-play, voice-over acting, so on and so forth can be adopted depending on the class teaching condition. In this way, the teaching activity can reach success. If there will be more creative ideas about teaching learner strategies in the later research, it is well welcomed.

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