

# A Review on Learning Experience of English Learning

Quanwen Shen

Sichuan university of Arts and science, Dazhou 635000,China

## Abstract

**This review, which consists of five parts including a brief introduction, a short review of three important notions, first-period learning experience, second-period learning experience and a conclusion, mainly looks back at my experiences of learning English. In the beginning of this review, I will make a brief introduction on what learning strategies, motivation and learning opportunities are, and later focus on two periods of my English learning and then elaborate on how I learn English from these three aspects, i.e. learning strategy, motivation and learning opportunities in each period. The first period is the time when I started learning English as a 13-year-old middle school boy and the second is the tertiary study where I studied English as my major when I was an undergraduate. Both periods are rather meaningful to me in that the former period had laid a foundation for my future English learning and the latter had enhanced my understanding of learning and the ability to learn English.**

## Keywords

learning strategies; motivation; learning opportunities.

## 1. Introduction

During the process of learning a foreign language or second language, many aspects such as learning contexts, learning strategies, the motivation of learning, learning styles and so on are involved and none of them come alone. They constitute an interwoven complexity in a learner's learning activity, making the learning process feasible and more effective. Among all the aspects of language learning, the learning strategies, motivation and learning opportunities are often discussed and paid more attention to than other aspects because of the significant roles they play in a successful learning process.

This review, which consists of five parts including a brief introduction, a short review of three important notions, first-period learning experience, second-period learning experience and a conclusion, mainly looks back at my experiences of learning English. In the beginning of this review, I will make a brief introduction on what learning strategies, motivation and learning opportunities are, and later focus on two periods of my English learning and then elaborate on how I learn English from these three aspects, i.e. learning strategy, motivation and learning opportunities in each period. The first period is the time when I started learning English as a 13-year-old middle school boy and the second is the tertiary study where I studied English as my major when I was an undergraduate. Both periods are rather meaningful to me in that the former period had laid a foundation for my future English learning and the latter had enhanced my understanding of learning and the ability to learn English.

## 2. Review of the Three Notions

### 2.1. Learning Strategies

Definitions of learning strategies vary with time, but the essence of it differs little. Griffiths (2008)[1] generalized many previous concepts from several linguists of learning strategies which she defined as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating

their own language learning” (Griffiths, C. 2008, p.87). Later she suggested an updated definition (which I think is better than previous one): “Language learning strategies are actions chosen (either deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language” (Griffiths, C. & Cansiz, G. 2015, p. 475-476)[2]. I would rather, however, suggest that learning strategies are both physical and mental processes deployed (deliberately or unconsciously) by learners to enhance their learning. Proper use of learning strategies can help make language learning more effective and smooth.

The classification of learning strategies varies too, but Dornyei’s (2005) [3] four categories of learning strategies based on his analysis of previous studies on the taxonomy of language learning strategies are generally accepted and adopted in modern research: metacognitive strategies (strategies for supervising and regulating the overall process of language learning), cognitive strategies (strategies for actually working with linguistic material to be learnt), social strategies (strategies which involve learning with or from other people) and affective strategies (strategies for dealing with feelings that may help or hinder learning) (Dornyei Z. 2005, p. 169).

## 2.2. Motivation

Motivation helps explain why people think and behave as they do. There is to date no any single concept that is comprehensive enough to cover the complex idea of motivation because motivation itself covers a wide range of potentials that causes difficulty for scholars in capturing the whole picture. But it is commonly agreed that motivation mainly accounts for why we set out to do something, how persistent we are in maintaining what we do and how much effort we are willing to invest in it (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2011, p4)[4].

There are many types of motivation in the field of language learning, some of them come from inside the learner, like integrative motivation which relates to the cultural preference towards the community of target language, intrinsic motivation which refers to obtain satisfaction from learning and achievement motivation which stands for the desire to achieve at certain level; some come from outside the learner, such as instrumental motivation which means learning is a tool to an end, extrinsic motivation which refers to learn in order to get rewards or avoid punishment and resultative motivation which aiming at success only in a learning process.

## 2.3. Learning Opportunities

Spolsky, B. (1989)[5] discussed the social context and its relationship with learning opportunities clearly. According to him, learning opportunities can be grouped roughly into formal and informal situations. Formal learning opportunities are the various systematic and organized educational opportunities provided by a society whereas informal situations refer to the potential opportunities where learners can interact with speakers of the target language. The learners’ learning outcomes are mainly dependent on what learning opportunities they embrace and how they make use of these opportunities. (Spolsky, 1989, p. 26-27).

Learning opportunities to a large extent decide (not absolutely but for most of the time) what kinds of learning activities are available for learners in the course of language learning. Generally speaking, there are two main types of learning activities: analytical learning refers to the specific study of each aspect of a language learning, e.g. study grammar, writing and experiential learning which always take place through interaction with the world around learners. Analytical learning and experiential learning are often achieved through analytical activities and experiential activities respectively.

### 3. English Learning in Middle School

#### 3.1. Experience of Learning English in Middle School

The word novel occurs to me when I go back to the days I started learning English at the age of 13 when I embarked on studying English with a strong sense of excitement. As soon as I had learned alphabet at the beginning and how to pronounce words several months later, I was absorbed in memorizing vocabulary listed in the book and passages in the textbook, not only because I had to keep the top record of fast and big amount of memorization but also because I was kind of enjoying the process of reciting short articles in front of teachers and the whole class. I gradually developed my own method of remembering new words by segmenting their sound units for vocabulary dictation before each English class, whereas most of my classmates remained the method taught by the teacher of spelling every letter of a word and repeat over and over again. That gave me a confidence of proud of myself and a bonus of being appointed by the English teacher to be the English representative of the class. Once my English teacher stewed a particular soup for helping me recover from a bad cold, I, again, tasted the advantage of rote-learning, which in turn strengthened my devotion to English memorization.

However, one year later, with a growing awareness of dumb English, I felt tedious about the routinely learning process with the teacher using Chinese as an instruction to teach us English. I didn't have much time to speak English, nor did I have time to listen others speaking English, even the breaks of 10 minutes between classes were given to memorizing words and passages. But I cannot cease the process since I had to keep the top ranking in almost all subjects, especially English, so I continued. After another one year, I transferred to another middle school that was believed to be a better one by most people including me. Not surprisingly, the situation kept the same, with a difference in more input of knowledge of grammar from the new teacher.

Learning English was part of our duty that time due to the state policy and the educational provision that English is a major course and shares a big part of the entrance exam of high school. The whole journey of learning English in my middle school was formal but rather simple: rote-learning and memorization, with occasional analysis of sentences and passages and grammar input.

#### 3.2. Analysis of the English Learning in Middle School

Apparently, the initial stage of my English learning is quite simple and straight. To begin with, only a limited number of cognitive strategies were adopted in my English learning at the middle school, namely text memorization, personal revised techniques for memorizing vocabulary and basic grammar analysis taught by the English teacher. There is one sign of metacognitive strategy shown by the evaluation of the learning methods which could not change the plight of dumb English, but I didn't react correspondently.

The motivation for the learning in this stage of learning English is not easy to define. First, the excitement arose in face of a new language can be seen as an intrinsic motivation for the satisfaction I obtained from learning a new language. Secondly, I was motivated not only by the praise of or bonus from teachers but also the desire to maintain my top ranking record. The former can be seen as extrinsic motivation for getting praise and rewards whereas the latter is more of what Bergstrom called task motivation. I always wanted to accomplish every challenging task assigned by teachers.

The learning opportunities for this period is rather simple: formal learning opportunities with analytic activities all the time. Learning new words, reciting passages and analysing grammar were all done in the classroom.

## 4. English Learning in Tertiary Study

### 4.1. Experience of Learning English in Tertiary Study

Learning English in my tertiary study was different from that of middle school study where English was treated as a subject. During the four years of studying English as my major, I had taken a lot of English courses and lectures such as English literature, speech art, translation and interpretation, linguistics etc., covering all the four fundamental aspects of learning a language: listening, reading, speaking and writing. What was less satisfactory is that most of these courses were taught (except for the courses taught by a foreign instructor who always had us discuss and express our thoughts) in the way the high school teachers do, namely impart knowledge of language to students, with little chances of oral communication except for question and answer part. I always put up my hands fast or just blurt out my answers as soon as questions raised. Apart from grasping a few chances to speak English from answering questions and participating in the weekly English corner, there were a few other activities that would involve communication in the English language.

Reading and translation shared the main part of my English study in this period. I really enjoyed the moment of tackling down complex sentence structures or successful transmitting complex ideas from one language to another. Besides, the desire to become a fluent English speaker and lack of oral English exposure helped me make the decision to practice oral English with my roommates and try to keep using English in our daily conversations even though they would soon give up and turn to Chinese.

It was at the beginning of my junior life that I started making study plans which mainly consists of a group of objectives for my English learning not only because of the shocking conclusion of terrible outcomes (e.g. I felt nothing had been accomplished) I had achieved drawn from a self-inspection on my learning journey but also due to a growing worry of future career. I intended to be an English teacher and make a difference in the field of English teaching in the place where I grow up, or at least make a contribution to the area as possible as I can.

### 4.2. Analysis of English Learning in Tertiary Study

It is clear that learning strategies were enriched at this stage of studying English as a major. Apart from normal cognitive strategies as the different themed courses demonstrated, metacognitive strategies like initiating plans for English learning, retrospection of learning outcomes and evaluation of learning process were developed. One thing for sure is that these enriched cognitive strategies and newly developed metacognitive strategies did not come in a natural way, but rather resulted from the combination of many aspects of my study.

The most easily detected motivation of this period is the predictable instrumental motivation, which was shown by my growing worry of getting a job after graduation. In addition, intrinsic motivation of enjoying dealing with tough grammar features and situational motivation of lacking exposure to oral English also played a significant role in this period.

Learning opportunities could be the most salient point of this period differs from previous one. In the tertiary study, both formal and informal learning opportunities (especially the latter) were much more accessible for me than in the first period. Experiential activities were enjoyed in English corner and other student activities. In addition to the classes of a foreign teacher who required us speaking and communicating in English, I managed to build an English context within my dormitory life, an experiential activity initiated and attained by myself.

## 5. Conclusion

As is shown above, my English learning experience of the two critical periods is somewhat simple and straight, and probably would not differ sharply from many students in mainland China. Given the educational status quo in mainland China, most students and English learners would receive the similar learning opportunities that are determined by the same social context.

One important thing we can tell from analysing English learning experience is that, with the growing maturity of intelligence and the ability of retrospection, we will be able to examine our own learning outcomes and identify weak parts of the learning process. This is an inherent skill that needs to be polished through frequent use. For example, strengthen an identified efficient strategy and inspiring motivation, or organize an optimized combination of different learning strategies.

What's more important is that, in the process of language learning, many aspects such as learning strategies, motivation and social context would be tightly connected together to constitute a sophisticated learning situation. None of these factors should be neglected. As language learners, we should be fully aware of this and pay sufficient attention to them holistically. Only in this way, can we capture the whole picture of the language learning processes and cope with any potential difficulties that may crop up out of them.

## References

- [1] Griffiths, C. 2008, Strategies and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners* (p. 83-98). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Griffiths, C. & Cansiz, G. 2015, Language learning strategies: An holistic view *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* Department of English Studies, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts, Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz SSLLT 5 (3). 2015. 473-493 doi: 10.14746 / sslt. 2015. 5. 3. 7.
- [3] Dornyei Z. 2005, *The Psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers Mahwah, New Jersey, p. 169.
- [4] Dornyei Z. & Ushioda E. 2011, *Teaching and researching motivation* Second Edition, *Applied Linguistics in Action Series* Edited by Christopher N. Candlin & David R. Hall, p. 4.
- [5] Spolsky, B. 1989, *Conditions for second language learning: Introduction to a general theory*. Oxford University Press, p. 26-27.