



Mongolian students' learning strategies in mastering English receptive skills

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Abstract

A number of studies have investigated English language vocabulary learning strategies; however, fewer ones focus on receptive skills. Since the goal of language learning is communication, students need to comprehend spoken and written language first and then respond based on their comprehension. English is a second language in Mongolia and language learning strategies (LLS) have not been assessed yet. This paper explores which strategies are used by 6th and 8th grade students in mastering English language receptive skills. Such LLSs help students to gain more responsibility for their own learning. Data were collected with an online questionnaire among those graders. The results showed the 6th graders prefer to ask questions to clarify meaning, to use key words, to do mind mapping, and to use "speaker's voice" to understand the content for listening strategies. For reading, students indicated that they would rather guess the words from the context, participate more in reading activities, divide the story if it is long, and predict the main idea from its title. Moderate correlation was found between the children's attitude towards listening and reading and their LLSs. Age and mother's education negatively affected their LLSs while students' listening and reading attitudes affected their learning strategies.

Keywords:

Language learning strategy, attitude, receptive skills, influence factors

Introduction

A number of studies (e.g. Nation, 2013, Pavičić, 2008, Thèkes, 2016) explored learning strategies involving English language vocabulary; however, these studies did not focus on receptive skills. Since the goal of language learning is communication, students need to comprehend spoken and written language first then respond based on their comprehension. Koch's (2016) research indicated having strong receptive skills provided a solid base for achieving success in productive skills. In addition, to achieve success in language learning, students need to use effective strategies beyond depending on their teachers. Bandpay (2016) stated learners need to develop their own learning strategies to work with written and spoken text. Other researchers have found factors that influence students' success in language learning. Zare (2012) reported the following factors

in his literature review which influenced students' language learning strategies: age, sex, attitude, motivation, and language proficiency. English language learning and teaching is always under discussion in Mongolia since the Mongolian government added English as a second language to its language policy in 2005. While it is recognized that language learning strategies help students to gain more responsibility for their own learning, language learning strategies (LLS) in Mongolia have not been well researched yet.

Many attempts to define strategies can be found in educational research. The most commonly used definition is by Scarcella & Oxford "language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques —such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task— used by students to enhance their own learning" (as cited in Oxford, 2003, p. 2). Also, language learning strategies are classified by some researchers differently. Oxford subdivided Rubin's strategies into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies in her *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*(Oxford, 2003, p. 12-14). In the current study, we used Oxford's 1990 classifications and identified LLSs for receptive skills. Receptive language skill refers to answering appropriately to another person's spoken language (Bandpay, 2016). Receptive skills are a base for achieving success in language learning. Both reading and listening involve much more internal mental processing than productive skills. The most frequently used definitions of English language listening and reading skills are found in Field (2008), Nation & Newton (2009) and Vardergrift & Goh (2012). Vardergrift & Goh (2012) provide the following definition: "listening is the ability to extract information from spoken English and it is a complex, dynamic, active and two-sided (bottom-up and top-down) process during which learners deduce and attribute meaning and interpret what they heard"(p. 23). Grabe & Stoller (2011) described the term 'reading' or 'reading comprehension' as the following:

The ability to extract information from written English texts. This includes



various simultaneous processes of understanding in the course of which readers construct meaning with the help of information given in the text (bottom-up), word knowledge gained from experience (top-down) as well as reading strategies. (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 7)

Nation (2008) used a similar definition for these terms.

The ministry of education makes English language learning and teaching a priority in Mongolia. Many projects, standards, and curriculums have been used successfully. The core curriculums for primary, basic, and complete secondary education are the most important documents for English language teachers. The core curriculum for basic education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2015) includes 6-9 grades and provides guidance for each subject including syllabus, teaching methods, and assessments. In this curriculum, English language students in 6th-8th grade are required to meet the English language A1 to A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) and students are taught to learn to work on unseen text using acquired receptive skills. Therefore, this study begins to fill the need for identifying learning strategies used for English language receptive skills, for exploring how attitudes towards those language skills can be correlated with LLSs, and for observing how students' age, gender, mothers' education and attitude towards language learning effect their LLSs.

Theoretical background

There have been numerous attempts to define language learning strategies. Griffiths and Cansiz (2015) defined language learning strategies as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" (p. 475-476). Schmidt and Watanabe (2001) identified four types of learning strategies (cognitive, social, study, and coping). Many researches seek to discover how learners learn something, what makes learners successful at learning something, and why some people are more effective at learning than others (Khalil, 2005, Säälük, 2015, Weng., Yunus., & Embi, 2016.etc). Researchers focused on factors that can affect students' language learning skills. Khamkhien (2010) and Zare & Nooreen (2011) mentioned in their studies that many factors influence students' language learning strategies: age, sex, attitude, motivation, aptitude, learning stage, task requirements, teacher expectation,

learning styles, individual differences, motivation, cultural differences, beliefs about language learning, and language proficiency.

For language learning strategies, English language vocabulary learning strategies are mostly studied; very few studies were found on English language listening and reading strategies which are mostly used outside the classes. For example; Sayer & Ban (2014) found students like to use English outside the class by listening to popular songs, watching movies in English, playing video games, using the Internet, and using Google Translate. Butler, Someya and Fukuhara (2014) investigated the effect online games had on language learning. Thèkes (2016) stated the following in his dissertation regarding access to English outside the classroom:

Józsa and Imre (2013) investigated out-of-school activities of Hungarian YLs [young learners] and secondary school learners. They discovered that students in Hungary encounter English language while listening to music and watching films, and searching for information on Google followed the first two activities in ratio and occurrence and Doró and Habók (2013) found that metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used ones by YLs, while compensation strategies were the least often used ones in Hungary. (pp. 21-22)

These studies show that students actively engage in English listening and reading outside the classroom.

For receptive skills, successful learners mostly use affective strategies which lower their anxiety and encourage them to stay focused on reading and listening tasks (Koch, 2016). Therefore, instructors should train students in using affective strategies, even though this study did not include any affective strategies to be shown as other strategies. Additionally, English teachers are taught to use pre-, while- and post- activities for receptive skills in their lesson plans.

Jeon and Yamashita (2014) mentioned that "the recent investigations of first (L1) and second language (L2) reading abilities have largely owed to the component-skills approach to reading" (p. 161). This approach views reading as multiple cognitive processes (e.g., decoding, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, metacognition) and involves separate measurements of subskills of reading. For reading, two fundamental types of learning strategies, metacognitive and cognitive,



are mostly used. According to Oxford (2011) metacognitive strategies are as set of activities to plan, obtain, organize, coordinate, monitor and evaluate the construction based on cognitive process. Nandi (2011) mentioned “in ELT, the students without metacognition have been treated as learners without direction who cannot monitor their process of learning,” (p. 175). In recent years, researchers have used the method of meta-analysis to investigate issues regarding bilingual reading, such as cross linguistic transfer across various language variables (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg,

2011) or the role of phonological skills in word reading ability among bilingual children (Melby-Lervåg, Lyster., & Hulme, 2012). These studies show that native language and its phonology affect the second language reading skill and comprehension as well. Extensive reading in English helps children to overcome these phonological issues.

Once can see how receptive skills are taught in Mongolia from the content and criteria for English language listening and reading skills’ for the 6th and 8th grades in Table 1.

Table 1. The Content and Criteria of EL listening and reading skills for the 6th and 8th grades.

Grade	Listening	Reading
6	To learn proper pronunciation and the structure of simple sentences by listening to simple expressions, short dialogues, and short texts.	To learn to make questions and answer someone’s questions after reading short texts.
8	To compare ideas and express own idea after listening to simple conversations and short passages	To identify synonyms and antonyms and find relations/reasons for something in the text after analyzing a text.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to follow activity instructions • the ability to understand personal information • the ability to distinguish author’s main and supporting idea • the ability to guess the main idea/content of information • the ability to recognize different types of texts 		

Source: Core curriculum for basic education of Mongolia (MECS, 2015)

Method

1. Participants

Participants in the study were 6th grade students (N=99) and 8th grade students (N=114) (44.9% male and 55.1% female) from 11 schools in a province of eastern Mongolia which includes a major city, Choibalsan, and the villages in its metropolitan area. This province represents 2.5% of the population of Mongolia and it does not differ significantly from other districts of the country. Dornod province is one of the biggest provinces and the central urban area for economic, social and educational status in the eastern part of Mongolia. It shows all relevant characteristics of the Mongolian education system and may be considered as a culture bearing unit fitting well to the purpose of the study. This study covered all public schools in the center of the province and 3 schools in rural areas, so that it can represent the urban and rural area language education.

2. Instrument

The survey questionnaire was based on numerous international questionnaires (PISA, 2015, Huseynova, 2007, Leppänen, 2007) and with

a few extra items added to account for Mongolia-specific differences in the educational system. The questionnaires consisted of 13 blocks of questions and only listening attitude and strategy for listening attitude items were different for 6th grade based on an online test of [English Language receptive skills] content which was taken after the survey questionnaire (37 items for 6th graders including background, listening and reading attitude, and listening and reading strategies; 23 items for 8th graders including background, reading attitude, and reading strategies). Listening strategies were analyzed separately for 6th grade data while reading strategies’ analyses were done on both grades. Both questionnaires are reliable (Cronbach’s alpha=.68 for grade 6th and .76 for grade 8th grade). Two items for listening and three items for reading strategies were assessed with categorical responses, and 5 items for listening and 6 items for reading strategies were assessed on a five level Likert scale (1= strongly agree; 5= strongly disagree)

3. Procedure

Data were collected anonymously from January to March in 2017. Access to the online questionnaire was granted using the eDia system (eDia.hu, 2009).



For analyses of results descriptive statistics were used to explore the most commonly used strategies, correlation analysis was used to identify the relationship between students' attitude towards language learning and language learning strategies, and regression analysis was used to investigate influence factors of language learning strategies.

Results

Listening strategies were asked separately only for the 6th graders. Descriptive statistics were used to find the most frequently used listening strategies by

Table 2. The frequencies of listening skill strategies by 6th graders.

Strategies	M	SD
I choose key words while listening	4.5	.74
I ask questions to clarify anything that I don't fully understand	4.4	.97
I do mind mapping while listening	4.2	.89
I understand the content through speaker's intonation	3.6	1.09
I take notes while listening	2.8	1.26

6th graders. Likert values were 4-5 for agree and strongly agree, 3 for neither disagree nor agree, and 1-2 for strongly disagree and disagree. In Table 2, students mostly asked questions when they didn't fully understand (M=4.4, SD=.97), chose key words while listening (M=4.5, SD=.74), and did mind mapping while listening (M=4.2, SD=.89). For the two categorical questions, the highest results showed 44.8% of the students spent 5-10 minutes on listening tasks everyday and 41.7% of them listened to English songs to improve their listening skills.

Reading strategies with matched items were asked of both grades. Table 3 shows the results using independent sample t-tests to identify when there was a significant difference between both grades' reading strategies. A statistically significant difference was found for only one strategy "If the story is long I divide it into small parts" between two grades (M₆=4.0, SD₆=1.15; M₈=3.3, SD₈=1.30). In both grades, students mostly guess new words from the context (M₆=4.1, SD₆=1.15; M₈=4.1, SD₈=1.30) and predict the main idea from its title (M₆=4.0, SD₆=1.15; M₈=3.8, SD₈=1.00). The 6th graders also mostly divided the long story into small parts (M=4.0, SD=1.15) and 8th graders participated more in reading activities in a class (M=4.0, SD=.94). For the non-Likert categorical questions, the highest percentages were 53.7% of 6th grade students read tales and 45.1% of them spent 5-10 minutes on reading tasks every day. While for 8th grade students, 49.1% read a long story and 41.4% of them spent 5-10 minutes on reading tasks every day.

Table 3. Reading strategies used by both graders.

Strategies	Grades	M	SD	t	p
I guess the meaning of new words from the context	6	4.1	.88	-1.70	n.s
	8	4.1	.92		
I ask questions before I read the story	6	2.5	1.39	-1.69	n.s
	8	1.9	1.23		
I participate more in reading activities in the classroom	6	3.6	1.02	-1.00	n.s
	8	4.0	.94		
I read the story and choose key words	6	3.5	1.17	.27	n.s
	8	3.5	1.25		
If the story is long I divide it into small parts	6	4.0	1.15	-2.13	.035
	8	3.3	1.30		
I predict the main idea of the whole passage from its titles	6	4.0	.99	-1.20	n.s
	8	3.8	1.00		

Note: Significant at p<.05.

Correlation analysis was used to identify any relationship between attitude towards language learning attitudes and language learning strategies for both grades. Both grades' attitudes and strategies' means were computed into a single variable before the correlation analysis made. In Table 4, the students' attitude towards English language reading and attitude towards listening had a significant, moderately strong correlation (r=.399,



$p < .05$). Also, listening strategies and attitude towards listening had a moderately strong and significant correlation ($r = .370$, $p < .05$) and listening strategies and reading attitude also had a significant correlation ($r = .459$, $p < .05$). Listening and reading strategies had a moderate strong significant correlation as well ($r = .399$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. Correlation between students' attitude towards language skills and language learning strategies

	1	2	3	4
Listening attitude	–	.399**	.370**	.233*
Reading attitude		–	.459**	.289**
Listening strategy			–	.399**
Reading strategy				–

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regression analysis was used to explore how learning strategies were affected by gender, age, mothers' education and attitude towards language learning. Reading and listening strategies of both grades were computed into a single variable before doing a regression analysis. The result shows that students' age and mothers' education negatively affect LLSs while their attitude towards language learning positively significantly predict students' LLSs ($R^2 = 0.227$, $F = 12.13$, $p < .05$). In the model tested, gender had no significant influence on the LLS variable (see Table 5).

Table 5. Variables predicting language learning strategies

Independent variables	β	r	p	$r^* \beta * 100$
Gender	.098	.143	N.S	1.4014
Age	-.240	-.259	.001	6.216
Mothers' education	-.186	-.187	.007	3.4782
Attitude towards language learning	.315	.369	.000	11.6235

Total variance explained: 22.71%

Discussion and conclusions

This paper presented a study situated in the Mongolian English language education and learning system. It especially, the study reviewed national criteria for receptive skills and collected data on students' self-reported assessment of their use of learning strategies and what students felt were the most helpful learning strategies. Based on the results it is evident that the 6th grade students use mostly cognitive and compensation strategies for listening skills and both 6th and 8th grade students tend to use cognitive strategies for reading skill to practice reading, to analyze the text and to try to find the reasons and effects of textual content. There is not much difference between the two grades' usage of learning reading strategies. Sixth graders use strategies a little bit more than 8th graders and divide long stories up more often to understand well. Eight graders more participate in reading activities than the 6th graders. The students' attitude towards English language reading and their attitude towards listening had a statistically significant moderately strong correlation. Also, reading strategies and listening strategies are moderately correlated. Students' attitude towards

language learning positively and significantly predicts their language learning strategy while their age and mothers' education had negative effects on LLSs. This negative relationship might be explained by noting that younger students use more strategies and a mothers' education status doesn't translate to English language skills that could help their children's learning. Based on Koch's (2016) research, when pre-, while-, post teaching strategies and students' learning strategies match each other, the learning outcome should be more successful. Therefore, language instructors need to incorporate LLSs into their teaching and train students to apply appropriate language learning strategies to help students be more successful in their receptive efforts by staying focused on reading and listening activities since the students answered that they sometimes read books and spend only 5-10 minutes on reading and listening tasks not concentrating on understanding deeply.

4. Limitations of the Present Study

There are several important limitations of this research. It would be useful to have more detailed measures of students' language learning



strategies and furthermore, future studies are needed to examine how teachers teach receptive skills and strategies, so that we can see the relationship between students' learning strategies and teaching strategies. Also, this study was restricted to self-reported student observations and would benefit from objective outcome measures. Such data would enable more precise estimates of the associations of particular features of teachers'

instructions with students' learning outcomes. In addition, this study was limited to public school curriculum and didn't cover the private school models. This study was restricted to one province and should be duplicated in other provinces and the capital city to see if the results are the same elsewhere. This study did not link learning strategies with learning outcomes.

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