

University Students' Listening Strategy Development through Scaffolding in Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine how scaffolded L2 listening strategy instruction in blended learning affected learners' listening strategy and comprehension, and their self-efficacy. As for the design of the research, 15 high-intermediate level university students from an intact class participated in the study for 6 months with a 3-hour offline and another 3-hour collaborative online session every week over the 6 month period. Data were driven from 9 participants, using qualitative research including online and offline observations, reflective journals, as well as a strategy questionnaire and pre- and post-tests. The research questions addressed: 1) How did scaffolded strategy instruction in multiple modes and types affect learners' listening strategies and comprehension?; 2) What are the patterns identified in the use of strategies both in online and offline environments?; and finally 3) To what extent did various modes of scaffolded strategy instruction affect learners' self-efficacy over the course of time. The findings suggested that scaffolded instruction had a positive impact on learners' listening strategy and comprehension with certain similar and dissimilar patterns of strategy use emerging in the online and offline environments. The major pedagogical implication of the study is that multiple modes of scaffolding in L2 listening strategy instruction as well as classroom activities among peers constitute a major component of an optimal listening instruction model.

Keywords: L2 listening strategies, scaffolding, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on strategy in L2 listening comprehension have recently been narrowing its focus on how actual employment of strategies were taking place and identifying certain patterns of use (Graham, Santos & Vanderplank, 2008; Macaro, 2008). This departs from the traditional approach in L2 listening strategy research that has paid more attention to identifying the strategies that are often used by proficient listeners with a pedagogical implication of transferring those strategies to less proficient listeners. However, the shift in focus to 'how' strategies are used from 'what' those strategies are seems to be as significant in that the actual use of strategies differs in kinds and degree, depending on variables such as task demands, topical knowledge and the learners' sense of self-efficacy. Moreover, the identification of strategies used by proficient listeners does not directly translate into the way less proficient listeners comprehend aural input without deeper understanding of and effective follow-up productive practice of those patterns where a certain strategy is used in tandem with another. Furthermore, there has been a lack

of attention to the development of effective instructional model that can provide systematic learning opportunities with effective instruction and an actual hands-on experience of using these strategies with concrete feedback on the use. The paucity in discussion of these optimal environments and instructional models may make the insightful findings in research in L2 listening of little use. Another gap in L2 listening strategy research is that the role of various modes of scaffolding other than explicit modeling in instruction has not been actively explored. Therefore, this study attempted to fill the gaps identified above by looking deeper into how a blended learning model that provides online and offline learning opportunities can be effectively applied to L2 listening pedagogy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategy Instruction in L2 listening

Studies in second language strategy use have been accompanied by research on the effect of strategy instruction on listening comprehension achievement (Cross, 2009; Graham, Santos & Vanderplank, 2008). Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) presented a pedagogical cycle that can systematically blend metacognitive strategies into an actual lesson, implicitly and explicitly encouraging learners to use those strategies. They empirically demonstrated that the less proficient experimental group that followed the pedagogical cycle outperformed the control group with no strategy instruction. Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari's (2010) study also addressed qualitative aspects of change or development by using the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) to identify learners' metacognitive awareness (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006). Using MALQ and an immediate follow-up stimulated recall interviews on the responses, Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) delved in-depth into the actual thoughts of the learners as changes of strategy use occurred in the learners' perception (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). A similar line of study was conducted by Graham, Santos and Vanderplank (2011) in which actual instances of strategy use were qualitatively analyzed. Although it was a study with no intervention, it identified a few patterns in the use of strategies.

Although foregoing studies purported to show the strategies involved in the learners' processing of oral input, using various methodologies and to examine how they change and develop with or without instruction over time, a simple frequency of certain strategies and an analysis of the unobservable figurative changes perceived by the learners in the cognitive paradigm between pre and post time points do not establish cause-effect relationship (Graham, Santos & Vanderplank, 2008), nor does it represent the whole picture of dynamics of strategy use and development that learners are actually experience. Another issue that the majority of studies so far have paid less attention to is the optimal instructional model that facilitates appropriate strategy instruction accompanied by the practical experience of employing strategies for their own needs within the context of various task demands.

Multiple Layers and Dimensions of Scaffolding in Instructional Design

Scaffolding is a term that stems from the constructivist approach to learning, referring to various forms of assistance that enable learners to go beyond the current level of cognitive development. In child cognitive development study, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) specified various modes of this assistance including instructing, questioning, feeding back, contingent management and cognitive structuring. Taking this constructivist paradigm, in the field of educational engineering, van Merriënboer, Clark and de Crook (2002) came up with an instructional design of 4C/ID Model that applied the concept of scaffolding into two types of assistance at a micro-level and the gradual reduction in the degree of assistance at a macro-level. While 'supportive information' assists the performance of the non-recurrent aspects of tasks, 'Just In Time Information' (JIT information) was provided to handle more pre-requisite nature of demands. At a macro-level, this model systematized the degree of assistance to be reduced with time to develop more independent operation of certain skills. Another dimension of scaffolding was classified in Lee's (2009) study on online learning. Lee (2009) classified scaffolds into hard and soft types based on the criteria of the immediacy (online/ offline) of contingency of the assistance on problems that the learners face or may face. In the current study, multiple types and dimensions of scaffolding identified in previous studies will be applied at various points of the cycle of the instructional model.

Blended Learning in L2 language Skills Development

Blended learning in teaching and learning L2 language skills has been explored in a few recent studies (Bañados, 2006; Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005; Yoon & Lee 2010). Various modes of multimedia tools were employed to create an optimal environment, combining online and offline components and empirically tested the effectiveness of the pedagogical models. In terms of L2 listening strategy skills, a major contribution of blended learning would be the systematic continuity of opportunities that can bridge strategy instruction in a tradition classroom and the independent employment of those strategies in a more autonomous online environment. This study therefore attempted to address these gaps with the following research questions: 1) How did scaffolded strategy instruction affect the development of actual use of strategies and comprehension?; 2) What are the most salient patterns identified in the use of strategies both online and offline environments; and finally 3) To what extent did scaffolded strategy instruction affect the learners' sense of self-efficacy over time?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Nine students from an intact high-intermediate listening class at a program in a university language institution in Korea participated in the study for a six month period. The students had taken listening classes once or twice in the past in the same language institution but did not have any experience with strategy-based instruction or blended learning in L2 listening in their previous learning experiences. All the participants were placed in the same class based on in-house placement test results and were further tested by the researchers with a pre-test administered at the beginning of the study to examine the initial listening proficiency level more specifically.

Instruments

Observations

Observations were made during both online and offline sessions. The whole offline classroom interaction of each group was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Online observation was made through the group chat log during the online session. A similar amount of data to those in offline observations was subject to analysis to maintain consistency for further comparison of strategy use. Each portion of transcripts was further coded according to unit and stage of listening.

Reflective journals

Reflective journals were written and collected on a bi-weekly basis immediately after the completion of one cycle of both online and offline sessions, to encourage the learners to reflect on the successful and less successful resolution in comprehension and use of strategies that were employed.

Strategy questionnaire

A strategy questionnaire was administered at the beginning, mid and final points over the 6 month period. The strategy questionnaire was adapted from three major taxonomies developed in the literature (Oxford, 1993; Vandergrift, 2003; Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006). Three main strategies of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies were addressed using the 6 point Likert scale. The questionnaire was pilot tested with a separate group of 20 students to establish the reliability of the items. Cronbach alpha was at .89.

Pre- and post-tests

In order to test the learners' listening skills specifically for the purpose of the study, pre- and post-tests in a free recall form were developed by the researchers. Content validity was established by rating the paired audio texts in terms of the number of idea units, lexical difficulty, length, and proportion of main idea and details.

Procedures

Overall online & offline procedures

Learners met once for a total of 3 hours per week in an offline traditional classroom setting and for another 3 hours of an autonomous online session using a Bulletin Board System (BBS) set up by the researchers. Figure 1 illustrates a complete pedagogical cycle of the blended learning model adapted from Lee and Lee's (2012) 'Instructional model for L2 listening in blended learning.' During the offline class, learners worked in a group of three, following a strategy-based instruction procedure modified from the learning cycle suggested by Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010). One major variation from the suggested cycle is that the model first incorporates systematic scaffolding between the verifications. Following the offline class session, the students move on to the online session, with the first one or two days of the individualized learning period and a following group collaboration session through the chat program provided in the class BBS, resolving the differences in comprehension and collaborating to employ strategies on the parts that they had difficulties with. The whole cycle took one week to complete.

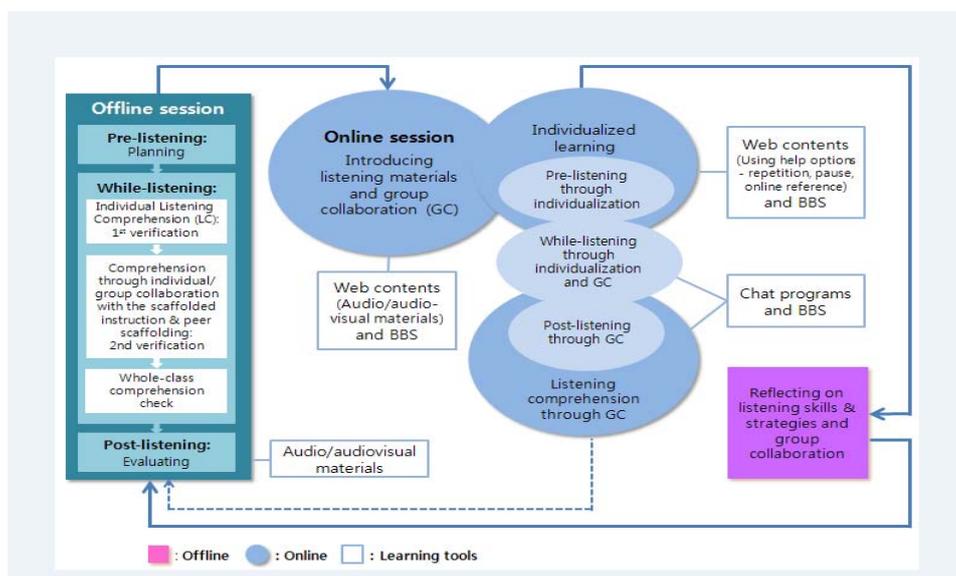


Figure 1. The Scaffolded L2 Listening Strategy Instructional Model in Blended Learning

Scaffolded instruction

One of the modifications made from the suggested pedagogical cycle (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010) is the element of concrete individualized strategic assistance to encourage the employment of strategies in the process of comprehension. Offline scaffolded instruction was given in the form of strategic stimulation or prompts whenever a group faced failure or uncertainty in comprehension. Each group received at least two individualized scaffoldings upon its needs (soft scaffolds) and whole-class scaffolding during the second verification stage. Online scaffolded instruction was provided in the same form of prompts and clues in specific areas deemed challenging by the researchers (hard scaffolds).

Peer scaffolding

During the offline collaboration, peer scaffolding was encouraged by having the students ask for strategies the others used for either confirmation or compensation during the second verifications stage. The same process occurred during the online collaboration sessions by assigning responsibility to the leader of each group to make sure they went through this process in each part of the audio text.

Data Analysis

Verbal protocols from online and offline group collaboration at three points of time (Time 1: Week 2 & 3, Time 2: Week 11&12, Week 23& 24) were analyzed by identifying explicit and implicit instances of strategy use, and counting and categorizing them to examine the changes made in terms of frequency

and kinds. The analysis of observed uses of strategies was then compared with those of strategy questionnaire to see how much these two results corresponded. A 6 point Likert-type scale questionnaire that measured perceived use of strategies at 3 points of time was analyzed in percentage. The second question on the major patterns of strategy use was addressed by identifying and analyzing all the instances where strategies were used in terms of the patterns of use (in a cluster or in isolation) and purposes of use (confirmatory or compensatory) for both online and offline collaborations. The last question of the effect of scaffolded strategy instruction on the learners' self-efficacy was examined by the data from reflective journals.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The Development of Strategy Use: Observation & Perceptions

Overall, metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies showed steady increase over the 3 points of time that were compared. In terms of metacognitive strategies, there was improvement in both the online and offline environment with a drastic progress between Time 1 and 2, followed by modest progress towards Time 3. In cognitive strategies, however, steady increase in the use was noticeable throughout the whole period, which seemed to contrast the pattern in the development of metacognitive strategies. Social strategies seemed to take a different pattern from those of metacognitive and cognitive strategies in that they started with a higher frequency of use on the onset and remained more frequent than other strategies. The analysis of data on the strategy questionnaire of the nine participants indicated that learners' perceived use of metacognitive cognitive and social strategies increased with time. In terms of metacognitive strategies, the percentage of positive responses changed from 11.6% to 55.7% and 66.6% at Time 1, 2, and 3 respectively. As for the cognitive strategies, the percentage changed from 11.1% to 66.6% to 88.8%. In social strategies, similar pattern of increase was shown except at a higher percentage at Time 1 (44.4%).

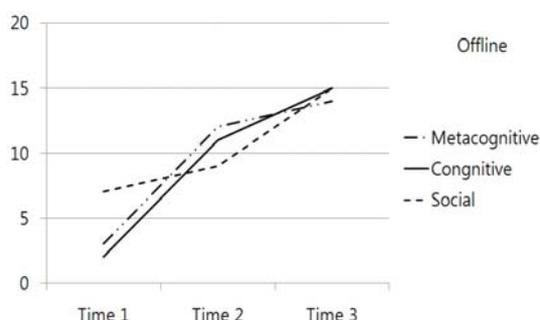


Figure 2. Frequency of Strategy Use in the Offline Environment

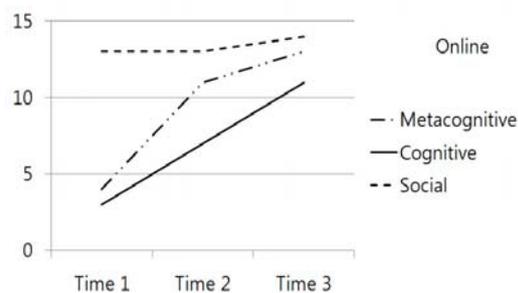


Figure 3. Frequency of Strategy Use in the Online Environment

Patterns of Strategy Use

The most frequent pattern identified in the sample data indicated that strategies were used in a cluster rather than in isolation as Macaro (2008) demonstrated. In particular, problem-solving strategy (metacognitive) was often used in tandem with other cognitive strategies (linguistic and between parts inferencing). Moreover, the social strategy of questioning was frequently accompanied by the metacognitive strategy of problem identifying. Another pattern identified with time was that the purposes of using strategies were both compensatory and confirmatory (Field, 2004), but higher proportion of instances had to do with compensatory purposes. This point was also expressed in the reflective journals.

Scaffolded Instruction and Learners' Self-efficacy

Learners' perspectives towards the multiple modes of scaffolding were highly positive. Self-efficacy improved with time, with higher dependence on the scaffolded instruction in the early stage and more

value put on the scaffolding provided among peers through collaboration in online and offline environments in the later stage. Motivation, in particular, seemed to improve as learners gain more confidence in their management of strategies by experiencing the process where scaffolding helped them resolved actual challenges in their comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Multiple types of scaffolding in offline instruction and peer scaffolding that were systematically encouraged during online collaboration through computer-mediated communication (CMC)-based multimedia tools of the BBS and the chat program in a blended learning environment appeared to have positively affected the learners' development of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies. The most prominent pattern in the use of strategies was that listening strategies tended to be used more in a cluster than in isolation. Another pattern was that the learners used strategies more for compensatory than confirmatory purposes. As for the learners' sense of self-efficacy, multiple layers of scaffolding created in this blended learning model seemed to have positively affected the learners' affective domain especially in terms of motivation and confidence. All in all, the blended learning model in L2 listening where strategies are systematically learned offline and reinforced by autonomous practice online with timely scaffolding seems to have brought about positive changes in the management of challenges learners often face in L2 listening comprehension both in terms of outcomes and self-efficacy.

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