Incorporating Language Skills Strategies into Library Instruction for ESL Students

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Abstract

The four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are the cornerstones of ESL (English as a second language) instruction. Both the productive skills (speaking and writing) and the receptive skills (reading and listening) employ strategies as language learning tools. These strategies can lend themselves to the learning of library content for ESL students. This paper describes a self-reflection study that identified language learning strategies and how they were used in library instruction sessions for ESL students. The identification, articulation and incorporation of language learning strategies can enhance library instruction for ESL students by providing them with opportunities for increased learning.

Introduction

ESL (English as a second language) students have long been a key target population for academic library instruction efforts. This paper will describe how the use of specific language learning strategies in the skill areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are present in library instruction for ESL students and how a deeper understanding of these strategies can lead to enhanced teaching and learning prospects.

Literature Review

ESL students have appeared in the library literature over the last few decades as a particular population of students requiring special consideration by academic librarians.[1] Much of this literature has been devoted to the study of effective provision of library instruction for ESL students.[2] The connection between library instruction and ESL students has been investigated from the point-of-view of librarians discovering and responding to the needs of ESL students in a library instruction context,[3] preparing for instruction with these students,[4] proposing various models of ESL library instruction,[5,6] and recommending a strengthening of ties between librarians and ESL instructors.[7]

A substrand of the literature dealing with library instruction for ESL students has studied this connection from a language teaching and learning perspective. For example, Conteh-Morgan offers an overview of second language acquisition theories such as the innatist theory and the interactionist theory in an effort to explain how people learn second languages, and she encourages the application of these theories to library instruction.[8] Amsberry has considered the teaching perspective of communication issues that may arise between librarians and ESL students in the library instruction classroom by focusing on the unintended consequences of "teacher talk" in this setting.[9] And Laskin and Diaz look at information literacy itself as an effective language learning tool in a bilingual environment of literary research.[10]

This current study seeks to add to this substrand of library literature that looks at teaching and learning

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perspectives of library instruction work with ESL students. It attempts to do so by incorporating an ESL instruction framework into a library study. ESL instruction has long relied on the development of the four language skill areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as the basis for sound teaching practice.[11] In addition, the literature of ESL instruction has also relied on the use of language learning strategies as a method for improving students' learning.[12]

Methodology

Self-reflection was used as the vehicle for studying how the language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening play out in a library instruction setting. I chose this method after considering Heidi Jacobs' recent call to librarians on the need to engage in more self-informed practice in which she advocates the use of reflection: "If we are going to address the issues of librarians' roles within educational endeavours systemically, we, as a discipline, need to foster reflective, critical habits of mind regarding pedagogical praxis within ourselves, our libraries, and our campuses."[13] Her call for librarians to engage in self-reflection arises directly from James Elmborg's thoughts on our need to develop a "theoretically informed praxis" of librarianship.[14] The literature of ESL instruction has a strong history of using reflection as a method for informing language teaching,[15] so its application as a method of investigation in this study seemed doubly well suited.

Setting

This study resulted from a self-reflection on library instruction sessions I have given and continue to give for ESL students in a series of settings at a midsized Canadian university starting four years ago. These library instruction classes include three different types of sessions: those given for high intermediate and advanced ESL students in a pre-university intensive English language program, those given for bridging students who have been admitted to a university program on the condition that they complete an additional language proficiency course, and those given for international students in graduate level Education programs for international students. The number of classes given in all of these areas averages approximately 35 sessions per year. This self-reflection looks at data from the last four years, so the 140 discrete library instruction sessions that this encompasses

form the data on which this current study is based. Each type of library instruction session is described in more detail below.

Intensive English Language Program

The first type of library session runs through the intensive English language program that operates as a pre-university admission learning setting at this university. Students in these classes are working on improving their English language proficiency in order to apply for admission to the university in a degree-granting program. The students take formal classes in reading, writing, speaking and listening in this program. The library sessions take place in the writing classes at the high intermediate and advanced levels. These classes have specific library assignments for students in the form of research needed for a short paper. The library instruction sessions take the form of 50-minute workshops offered across six to eight writing classes per semester. The sessions consist of the librarian offering a brief introduction to library services and the organization of the library home page, followed by group work, and then ending with a full class discussion. The group work has the students being divided into four groups and given a set of guided questions to answer as a group. After a specified period of time (generally 15 minutes or so), the groups reconvene as a full class and share answers to their questions. The librarian guides the discussion at this stage and offer additional information and support to the students as they present what they found and how they found it.

In addition to these sessions, this study also looks at a writing project that went beyond the in-class library seminars two years ago. That project looked at process essays written as homework assignments. The assignment was for the high intermediate and advanced ESL students to write a one page process essay describing how to use the library. Students willing to volunteer allowed the researcher to grade their essays in terms of both writing proficiency and information literacy proficiency. Evidence was found that the dual processes of writing and information literacy took place simultaneously.[16] The data from that study was examined once again for the current self-reflection study described in this article because it offered a further forum in which to investigate my own use of language learning strategies as a method for teaching library content.

Bridging Program

The second type of library session is the bridging class. These bridging classes are given to students who have been accepted to a degree granting program at the university but who are still seen as needing some additional support in developing their English proficiency. The form that library instruction sessions for this group generally take consists of interactive PowerPoint sessions in which the students both follow along with the librarian and are asked to participate interactively at several points in the presentation. Participation occurs through students answering open ended questions after a resource has been introduced. For example, the librarian offers an explanation of how to use the library catalogue and then has students try to find various sources in the catalogue in a guided searching exercise.

Graduate Education Programs

The third and final type of library session is the one designed for international students in graduate Education programs. These library sessions follow more of a lecture format interspersed with or followed by open ended questions or open searching time. Although questions are interactively embedded into a PowerPoint session as for the bridging students mentioned above, the library sessions for these higher level students rely more on open conversation and discussion of topics of personal interest to the graduate students in their own areas of research. So while the resources used and services described are very similar for the three types of library instruction described above, the format of the sessions differ between the levels. This range of library instruction settings constitutes the basis on which I conducted my self-reflection.

Research Questions

Can evidence of librarian use of language learning strategies in the four language skill areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing be identified in library instruction sessions conducted with ESL students? If so, how might this knowledge enhance library teaching and learning for ESL students?

Procedure

The procedure I followed to conduct this study involved collecting data, identifying the appearance of language skills in the data (speaking, listening, reading, or writing), and then determining if a particular language learning strategy could be labelled when use of the language skill was discovered. The final piece of the reflection involved my consideration of how incorporating these language strategies into ESL library sessions can lead to better learning.

For data, I relied on physical evidence I collected for this study in the form of audiotapes, written materials, and personal notes I kept describing how I conducted multiple library workshops for ESL students. This data included eight transcribed audiotaped hours of myself giving library instruction sessions this past year, and a review of the physical evidence used in the different sessions over the past four years: all the PowerPoints with embedded questions that I have used, all of the guided question sheets I produced for group work activities, and a review of the essays collected for the process essay assignment described below. In addition, I consulted all notes and correspondence I have kept over the last four years with my teaching colleagues who requested these library sessions.

In terms of identifying patterns, I began this phase of the self-reflection by considering all the ways in which the four language skills manifested themselves either through me or through my interactions with the students in the library context. I looked first at the productive skills (speaking and writing) because they were easier to capture at the start since they involved some kind of output that could be observed or noticed. Then I looked at the receptive skills (listening and reading) to see if I could also capture instances of their presence as well. For example, I listed all the ways in which speaking was present: students speaking with each other in activities and my giving instructions, clarification and feedback. I then considered how I used these different ways of speaking to see if they showed the use of a particular language learning strategy.

I followed this same pattern for all four language skill areas. What I found was evidence of the presence of language learning strategies for all four language skill areas. What this suggests to me is that any single ESL classroom encounter between students and librarians offers much rich evidence of language learning strategy use in action and that our incorporation of this knowledge can enhance library instruction for ESL students.

Language Learning Strategies

Instances of speaking, listening, reading and writing were found throughout all the library instruction

work I engaged in over the past four years. Speaking took place by me giving instructions, directing activities, and asking students for participation in pair and group work. Listening took place as I listened to the students engage in these speaking activities and as we all listened to each other and to videos. Reading took place in the form of text presented in handouts or on PowerPoint, through the hands-on activities involving the use of databases to find appropriate journal articles, and through the reading of assignments. Writing took place through written responses to questions, written feedback and the production of a process essay. Each one of these manifestations of the language skills relied on the use of specific language learning strategies. These strategies are described below.

Speaking Strategies

The speaking strategies I found were think-pair-share, recasting, impromptu speaking, register, and similes.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-pair-share is a general instructional strategy often applied to language learning situations because it necessitates the use of speaking. I used this strategy when I divided students into pairs, asked them to discuss with each other what tools they used for finding information, and then directed them to share their answers with the full class. Use of this strategy gave the students the opportunity to formulate and practice an oral answer with a partner first before speaking to a larger group.

Recasting

Recasting is a form of feedback. It involves the instructor taking the student attempt and reframing it as a question with the correct content. An example of recasting I found was a student saying, "Use the description choice" and my replying, "Use the descriptor choice?" My use of this strategy reflects the importance of offering oral feedback to students in a non-threatening way.

Impromptu Speaking

Impromptu speaking is a language learning strategy that asks students to respond to something orally without much preparation in order to develop spontaneous speaking fluency. An example of impromptu speaking was my question, "Why do you think students go to Google first?" at the start of one of the

sessions. The students had no time to prepare an answer and I told them that there was no right or wrong answer, that I was simply curious. I use this strategy to both promote conversational fluency and to get a sense of what they are really thinking at that moment, so that they do not have time to consider what I might want to hear and then adjust their answer accordingly.

Register

Register refers to the formality of a speaking event. It asks students to judge whether formal or informal speech is more appropriate in a given setting. I made use of register when I asked students to informally chat with each other about past searching practices, but then to draw up a list which they would then formally present to the full class. This strategy allowed them to use very informal language with each other ("this site is awesome") but it also gave them an opportunity to practice professional speech as well ("this database contains useful information").

Similes

The use of similes is a language learning strategy that asks students to think about an idea or concept by describing it as something else that conveys similar characteristics by using "like" or "as" in a comparison. An example of use of similes that I found was my saying, "Entering a search statement is like writing. You need to think of the best word to use to convey a particular idea." My use of similes is meant to broaden their understanding of what conducting a library search can be compared to in terms of a process they are already familiar with.

Writing Strategies

The writing strategies I found were freewriting, brainstorming, journaling, process writing and vocabulary enrichment.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a language learning strategy that asks students to write for a very short period of time as a warm up activity and it is generally not collected by the teacher. An example of freewriting I found was my saying, "Take one minute and write down what you already know about using the library." My use of this strategy was to invoke their background knowledge in the hopes that it would connect to the library instruction session being given that day.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is writing strategy that asks students to come up with as many ideas as they can about a topic with no limits as to what ideas are acceptable. It is used as an active learning stimulus. An example of brainstorming happened when I said, "In your groups, write down as many ways as you can think of to evaluate a web site."

Journaling and Process Writing

Journaling refers to the practice of asking students to informally write down their thoughts as they go about doing something, while process writing refers to the formal writing of an essay or paper that describes how to do something step-by-step. In the writing project described earlier, students wrote short journal entries on how they used libraries before they wrote a formal process essay on "How to Use the Library." I made use of these writing strategies to further the students' learning beyond the classroom through methods that they were already familiar with.

Vocabulary Enrichment

Vocabulary enrichment refers to a set of language learning strategies that are often used in reading and writing classes. An example of my use of this type of a language learning strategy could be seen in my asking the students, "What is a synonym for 'international'?" I used synonyms as a language tool to show them how they could broaden their searches. After that initial question and some suggested responses from the students, we searched the library catalogue together for first "international", then "global", then "foreign" to compare search results. The use of vocabulary strategies directly relates the experience of library searching to their experiences of learning new vocabulary words.

Reading Strategies

The reading strategies I found were pre-reading, previewing, skimming, scanning, and guessing words in context.

Pre-Reading

Pre-reading is a language learning strategy that asks students to connect their background knowledge to something that they are about to read. Examples of pre-reading I discovered were my saying, "Do you know what services the library offers?" or "Have you used any services that the library offers?" before looking together at the description of the services on the library's home page. My beginning a library instruction session with a question about their own personal experiences was an attempt to make the content of the session relevant to their own lives.

Previewing

Previewing is a reading strategy that has students quickly look over a text – the title, the subtitles, any graphics, the first and last paragraph – before reading a text in full. Its purpose is to give students a way to gain an overall impression first of the content of something rather than reading every single word, start to finish, right at the beginning. I used previewing when I asked students to determine if an article they had found was relevant. I heard myself directing them very specifically in how to do this: "Look first at the author. Who wrote it? Then look at the journal title. Is it scholarly? Then look at the title. Now glance at the subtitles. Finally read only the first and last paragraph." I used this strategy to give them a way to quickly judge the merit of an article before committing the time and effort to reading every single word before deciding if it seemed relevant.

Skimming

Skimming is a reading strategy that is very similar to previewing. The difference is that previewing asks students to look over specific pieces of a text quickly, while skimming asks them to look over the full text generally in order to determine the main point. An example of skimming was my asking students to read the abstract very quickly to tell me what the main point of an article was. I asked them, "What is the most important thing the author is trying to say?" when I asked them to skim the abstract. My use of this strategy was to give them a way to very quickly decide whether what they found fit what they were looking for.

Scanning

Scanning is a companion reading strategy to skimming, but scanning asks students to look for details, not the main point. An example of my use of scanning occurred when I asked the students, "What date was this article written?" My purpose in using scanning for details such as dates was meant to help them determine the usefulness of what they found. I also

often used the scanning question, "What other subject headings are attached to this record?" as a way to get them used to looking for these details so that they could potentially broaden or refine their searches with further useful vocabulary.

Guessing Words in Context

Guessing words in context is reading strategy that asks students to guess the meaning of an unknown word by looking at the words that surround it. Using this strategy can make them more fluent and efficient readers. An example of guessing words in context took place when I asked students, "What do you think 'equivocation' means in this abstract?" I wanted them to look at the surrounding words and not use their dictionaries. Use of this strategy in a library instruction session gives students a further way to become more fluent readers when trying to assess the worth of a piece of information.

Listening Strategies

The listening strategies I found were using authentic library material for listening, listening for the main point, distinguishing form and content words, and identifying thought groups to aid comprehension.

Use of Authentic Library Material

The use of authentic material for listening purposes is a strategy that gives ESL students the same information as that of native speakers. In other words, the material is not simplified or abridged in any way for non-native speakers. I used authentic listening material when I played a video for the students that gave a brief introduction to the new library web page. The recording was not slowed down or adjusted in any way for these students. The purpose of using authentic materials is to raise the proficiency level of non-native speakers by offering them a real language learning experience. All librarians working with ESL students probably already make use of this strategy because we want the students to function with our actual search tools, services and materials in the same way that native speakers do.

Listening for the Main Point

Listening for the main point is a language learning strategy that asks students to identify the most important information from listening. An example of this was my asking the very straightforward question,

"What do you think the main point of that video was?" in order to gauge how well they could understand the content from listening to it.

Distinguishing Form and Content Words

Distinguishing form and content words is a language learning strategy that asks students to identify the words that carry the most meaning. In language terms, content words are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Form words are prepositions, conjunctions and other words that serve a grammatical function. I used this strategy in a listening mode when I asked the students orally, "Which words do you think are the most important?" in an example given by the instructor as a sample search topic. The statement was, "Should citizens be given the right to die?" When the students identified "citizen" as one of the most important words, I asked them what part of speech it represented (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, etc.). In library terms, this grammatical knowledge can be put to exceptionally good use because content words are the keywords we use to form search statements. My use of this strategy was meant to connect their grammatical knowledge to the knowledge of how best to form search statements.

Identifying Thought Groups

The last listening strategy I found was my use of identifying thought groups to aid comprehension. This language learning strategy asks students to listen to pauses in speech. The pauses represent a break between main ideas. This is language learning strategy that gives students a way to digest a lot of oral information so that it doesn't overwhelm them by coming into their ears in one long unbroken stream of speech that would be difficult to fully understand. An example of my use of this strategy occurred when I played them the short video welcoming them to the new library web page. I gave them the words on a piece of paper in front of them without punctuation (i.e. periods at the end of sentences and capital letters at the starts of sentences). I then played the video and asked them to draw a vertical line between thought groups (i.e. when they heard a pause). We then compared our pause breaks and looked at the content between the pauses. I then played the video again. The students indicated that this approach helped them fully comprehend what they heard the voice saying. I used this strategy to aid their oral comprehension. While

this strategy might be too time-consuming for many library instruction sessions, I found that it did help the intermediate level students the most. It may be enough in the future to supply our video with words and then draw their attention to the pauses orally.

Improving Student Learning

The first part of my self-reflection sought to discover if language learning strategies in the four language skills areas were present in the library instruction work I have done with ESL students. My second goal was to then consider how incorporating their use could benefit student learning. When I thought about improved student learning, I considered two types of proficiency where learning might be seen: language proficiency and library proficiency.

From my observations, I saw evidence of increased student learning in both language and library proficiency. The areas of increased language proficiency appeared in terms of fluency, comprehension/comprehensibility, and affect. The areas of increased library proficiency involved enhanced abilities to construct better search statements and the ability to better evaluate search results.

Fluency, the ability to communicate information without stopping for error correction, occurred when students were able to articulate why one article was a better result than another article. Because I was not correcting their English for grammatical errors, their spoken English became more flowing and less hesitant over the length of a class.

Comprehension improvement could be seen in both speaking and writing. Improved speaking comprehension occurred when students could fully explain to the rest of the class how they had found a piece of information while the other students followed along with the steps being described. Improved written comprehension was visible in more complete answers to questions on worksheets from the start of a class session to the end of a class session. Comprehensibility, the ability for non-native speakers to be understood by native speakers, likewise improved. After small group discussions, I found that I could more easily comprehend what they were looking for because the students were better able to articulate their needs to me in a way that I could understand.

Affect, the emotional facet of language learning, also improved in these library instruction sessions. Students became visibly more comfortable as the

classes progressed. They became happily engaged in animated discussions with each other about what they had found, sometimes even to the point of congratulating each other on good search results. With emotional defences down, more learning can take place.

Constructing better search statements was a noticeable improvement in library proficiency on the parts of the students. By asking them to draw on their own grammatical knowledge of content words, I was able to see the students apply deeper thinking as to what the best search terms might be. They could immediately see the value in choosing appropriate search terms by comparing search results using different words.

Evaluating search results effectively, another key pillar of library proficiency, also improved. By employing reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, the students became better able to articulate what information was the most valuable for them and why.

Although this study relied on self reflection to find instances of improved language and library proficiency, enough evidence of their appearances may warrant further study. And in considering how speaking, listening, reading, and writing manifest themselves in library sessions with ESL students, librarians can both contribute to student learning and improve their own practice. For particularly enthusiastic librarians, a good place to acquire more personal knowledge about language learning strategies might be *The Practice of English Language Teaching* by Jeremy Harmer.[17] This text is used as a foundation course book in many TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programs because it offers such a wide overview of the background, settings, and teaching and learning issues associated with working with ESL students.

Conclusion

Language learning strategies in the four ESL skill areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing can be found in library contexts. Many librarians might be surprised at how many are evident in our own practice, ranging from speaking strategies such as recasting to reading strategies such as previewing. By first recognizing and then incorporating these language learning strategies into our library instruction sessions, librarians can give ESL students increased opportunities to become better learners in both lan-

guage learning and library learning. And in so doing, we may also be giving ourselves more opportunities to likewise enhance our own professional teaching and learning abilities.

Notes

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