

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study investigated the impact of the listening strategy instruction on four Taiwanese junior high school students and their ongoing problems when dealing with listening comprehension tests. This chapter first summarizes the findings of this study. Next, suggestions and pedagogical implication are provided. Later, limitations and further studies are discussed.

6.1. Summary for the Findings

The case study, based on qualitative inquiry, investigated the listening strategy use of four 8th grade junior high school students and discussed their perceptions toward an 18-week-long listening strategy instruction designed by the researcher. The instruction contained six listening strategies including selective attention, guessing, note-taking, grouping, inferencing, and asking for clarification. One Sample GEPT Listening Test was first conducted to test the four students' level of listening proficiency and then the instruction was carried out. Each student was required to keep learning journals once every one or two weeks through the instruction to let the researcher know their problem, about reflections on and perceptions of their use of the listening strategies and the instruction. Only two students managed to keep an English journal and acquired the ability to think in English through the process. The other two rarely kept the journal or kept it in Chinese, making it hard for the researcher to perceive whether they had acquired the same ability or not. Meanwhile, each case was interviewed individually or in a group at least three times during data collection.

The result was that these four students of varied proficiency used 'previewing the

test questions' in order to gain 'selective attention' most often, which helped them to focus more on meaning than on form. This finding suggests that they all understood that 'top-down' strategies could help them perform better when dealing with listening comprehension tests. They preferred to use 'guessing' strategy and their 'background knowledge' to make inferences and guess from the context.

Nevertheless, Tom and Jin Pin, the less skilled listeners, could not always manage to use top-down strategies. Tom tended to use 'bottom-up strategy' more, putting too much emphasis on each word and therefore attending to form rather than to meaning. He especially resorted to 'direct-translation' in listening and writing. When he had trouble with words, he became trapped and was less able to derive the meaning from the context.

Jin Pin was troubled by her lack of ability to memorize words. Even though she could derive meaning from the context, she was unable to spell words correctly in 'fill-in-the-blank' tests, and such tests would not be listening tests but spelling tests.

Through the cross-case analysis, some findings that pertain to all the four students suggest the importance of using more socio-cultural perspectives to analyze the issues of language learning and instruction than just using traditional cognitive-based theories. In this present study, all the teenagers highlighted and recognized the need to have an adult surrogate or a more knowledgeable guide to assist them toward self-regulation. Adult surrogates are important because they are not just someone who is more experienced; instead, they need to be sensitive enough to know where and when to intervene as well as when and how to withdraw the help. Most importantly, they need to support the teenagers emotionally and assist them to overcome their emotional fluctuations. Therefore, these adult surrogates are given the term 'significant others' in this study to mean someone whose opinions and actions

'matter' to the learners and their self-concept. Significant others, similar to the language or to the material tools, serve as a form of mediators, as the term used in Vygotskian theory. Teenagers need to maintain good social relationship with their significant others in order to accept their mediation and to develop a positive attitude to learning. They may be more willing to put efforts on studying under such conditions, making it possible to push their learning forward toward their potential level instead of being that they spend most of their time struggling with their emotional fluctuations.

Therefore, the learner's attitude toward the adult's help is especially important. The learners need to maintain a positive attitude toward the learning situation and the people in this environment to create strong motivation, which will further influence the learning effect (Gardner, 1985). It will be easier for the learners to develop a positive attitude toward learning itself if they maintain a positive attitude toward the help offered by their significant others. It will also be much easier for the learner to internalize the strategies offered by these mediators. As a consequence, when the scaffolding is removed from the learner, he or she is expected to be self-regulated or in cognitive terms, to be able to put into effect metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation of his or her own learning. It is at this stage that he or she starts his or her learning toward being more autonomous without the help from his or her significant others.

Through the study, it was found that the learners' learning conditions were less controlled by the nature of the instruction itself, but more controlled by the learners' emotional status, the affective domain. Whether the teenagers hold a positive attitude toward both the learning and the people around this learning plays a key role to determine whether they can learn well or not. Since their emotions are usually deeply

connected with their social-relationship with others, they tend to feel more stable and secure if they have positive social relationship with others. With these helpful emotions, they can learn better, no matter what they are being instructed in.

This finding is somewhat different from the traditional cognitively-oriented SLA studies in that strategy learning seems not only an information processing procedure, but also a process in which many factors, like the learners' emotional status and their socio-relationships with others, may also contribute and interact to determine the learning outcome. Therefore, this study claims the importance of putting more emphasis on the socio-cultural perspectives of learning when dealing with SLA issues.

6.2. Conceptual and Pedagogical Implications

6.2.1 Conceptual implications:

Consistent with Gardner's ALS model (1985), this present study confirms that the affective component of attitudes really matters in teenagers' learning process. If the learner holds a positive attitude toward the learning situation, he or she will learn better and more effectively. On the contrary, if teenagers do not hold positive attitudes toward their attitudinal objects, their negative affective attitude will influence what they know or believe about these attitudinal objects, like their learning situations or the teachers. Namely, the affective component of their attitude will influence the cognitive component of their attitude, which later will change or determine their behavioral component and decide the actions they take as well as the way they learn in the learning process.

This present study maintains that both significant others and the learning environment play crucial roles to decide the quality of the learning. Therefore, some pedagogical implication may also be described as follows.

6.2.2 Pedagogical implications:

The first implication concerns the teachers' role. Teachers need to pay more attention to the learners' affective domain. The teacher must not only instruct effectively, but also assist every learner to find his or her own significant others, and to check the learner's emotional readiness for help from mediators and his or her attitudes toward learning situations. If time permits, teachers may also need to communicate with the learners' significant others frequently to let them understand how and when to help the learners as well as when to withdraw help.

Likewise, it is important for the teacher to help the learner "acquire the attitude that enables them to use the strategies or skills more confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher" (Wenden, 1991, p.15) in order to successfully promote learners' autonomy. The teachers need first to help the learner acquire a positive attitude toward learning itself. They should be more sensitive not only to where the learner's actual level and potential level are, but also to the learners' affective domain and their attitudes toward the learning situation and the people around this environment. Hence, the job for a teacher at this level is to be sensitive and considerate to know not only how and what to offer as help but also when to offer it. If help is given at the right time, it can ease the learner's unstable emotions and help him or her to cope with a negative attitude toward learning or the people around the learning. Only in this way will the learners' attitude toward the learning situation be positive enough so that they can accept the scaffolding as their mediation to learning.

The teacher, having so many tasks to do as a helper, is therefore one of the significant others of every learner and can never be underestimated.

In addition to the roles of the teachers, some other issues discovered during the

instruction and the discussion with the cases could lead to some pedagogical suggestions. For example, from the case of Tom, who can not make any association between words and pictures, it is found that teachers had better consider the effectiveness of using pictorial inputs to test the listeners' understanding of the listening material when designing the listening tasks. Not every student can get a gist from the picture; instead, they might only think in words. Therefore, this kind of pictorial task might not be suitable for every listener because it might lose its construct validity. If the trend of using pictorial inputs to test the understanding of listening materials is inevitable, then the teachers might need to train the students' ability in perceiving and finding the clues in the pictures.

Furthermore, from the case of Tom and Jin Pin, who still complained about not knowing when to use certain strategies after the 18-week-long instruction, teachers may need to give learners enough opportunities to practice the instructed strategies. If the learners were given more time to practice, they might have a clearer picture about how or when to employ a certain strategy.

Still, some materials designed to help teach the six strategies were found to be useful as they not only mediated the learners' learning but also increased their motivation to learn. For example, when the researcher used foreign advertisements and some funny clips to teach 'guessing' strategy, Jasmine and Natalie learned happily and used their background knowledge to guess the meaning. They not only acquired 'guessing' naturally through these films, but also autonomously found more films on the net to practice the strategy and offered them as supplementary materials for the researcher to use to teach other students. In this way, the films functioned as authentic materials and as a mediator enabling the learner to apply "guessing" strategy naturally.

Last but not least, a further result of this study suggests that keeping a learning journal in English is useful for both teachers and learners. For teachers, it enables them to know about the learners' proficiency as well as about their ongoing learning problems. It offers a platform for teachers to understand the students better and to know when to intervene and offer assistance. For learners, it enables them to evaluate their own learning and make them better self-regulated learners. Also, the learner may acquire the ability to think in English while writing in English continuously, and have a better chance to improve their writing rather than resorting to direct translation all the time. Natalie and Tom are two examples that benefited from keeping English learning journal. They both learned to think in English as discussed earlier in Chapter four. The time they spent on English expanded a lot and their devotion to evaluating their learning processes also increased. It seems that they became more and more autonomous and self-regulated by keeping an English learning journal day by day.

Further research is still needed to investigate learners' self-regulation and their affective domain in terms of Vygotskian social cultural theory in the context of SLA strategy learning. Yet, another urgent question for practitioners is how can a teacher be sensitive, patient and helpful enough to deal with the learners' affective problems or their negative feelings and stress in regard to the learning environment under a typical intensive schedule of teaching a big class of more than 35 students; and taking care of more than 4 classes in a semester. Therefore, this present study reveals the need to have at least two teachers in a class of no more than 25 students in order to play a role as the learners' significant others.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

This present study extended from 18 weeks of strategy instruction to more than 2

semesters of observation of the four students' lives and learning habits but nevertheless, has certain limitations.

First, as a consequence of the restricted time and limited human power, this study could only observe four cases. Even though this qualitative case study did not aim to generalize the findings; yet, if the number of the cases can be expanded, it would be possible to see a larger trend in the use of strategies by teenage students.

Likewise, one logistical problem was identified while conducting the study. With limited time and energy, the researcher had trouble regulating every participant to keep a learning journal every day. Two participants, Jin Pin and Jasmine, actually kept learning journals only twice, which made it difficult for the researcher to understand and evaluate their ongoing problems in time. Therefore, the researcher could only interview them in person. The analyses of these two cases depended on the interview data and observation only, as so they lacked some concrete support as compared to the other two cases. It is suggested that further study may need to leave sufficient time and human power to observe the participant and to check their journals day by day. In this way, the participants may have more motivation to cooperate.

Following Vygotsky's perspectives, this present study suggests that more research is thus needed to investigate how to conduct strategy instruction, particularly with socio-cultural perspective. It is also then our responsibility as language educators to make sure that interaction mediated by these materials will bring about successful language learning leading toward self-regulation.