ABSTRACT

Research on CALL environments that explicitly focuses on the development of strategic competence is almost non-existent. This chapter reports on an exploratory study which was conducted as a semester-long, Web-based project to facilitate the development of L2 strategic competence by means of online collaboration among advanced EFL (English as a foreign language) learners who are students in an EFL teacher education program at a German university. The project—called the “Online Learner ABCs”—combines an autobiographic approach to raise the learners’ awareness of their own strategy use with data-driven activities to foster diagnostic skills with regard to strategy use. Overall, the “Online Learner ABCs” was found to be conducive to the students’ development of L2 strategic competence, in particular by raising the students’ awareness of a considerable number of language learning strategies. Deep-level reflections on strategy use, however, remained scant, indicating that further instructional fine-tuning is needed.

INTRODUCTION

Research on L2 strategic competence has become a continuous effort since the 1970s. In the beginning, the focus was on communication strategies which second language learners employed when their linguistic prerequisites were not adequate (Selinker, 1972; Varadi, 1980). That is, speech production and the mismatch between communicative intentions and linguistic resources were
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emphasized (Bialystok, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Færch & Kasper, 1983; Rababah, 2002; Stern, 1983).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the need for life-long learning triggered another perspective on L2 teaching objectives (Finkbeiner, 2005), and alongside it research on the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of autonomous L2 learning. These developments have been reflected in language learning strategy research (Cohen, 1998; Finkbeiner, 1998, 2005; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 1996; Rababah, 2002; Rubin, 1975). Most recently, a group of renowned L2 strategy researchers has initiated the International Project on Language Learner Strategies (IPOLLS) as a comprehensive effort to further advance language learner strategy research (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). This chapter links up with IPOLLS’s work on learning strategies and situates it in a collaborative online environment.

Given the long-standing tradition in L2 learning strategy research, it is surprising that empirical studies looking at the intersection with CALL (computer-assisted language learning) have remained rather scant. For example, when consulting the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, a search for (empirical) research reports yields a total of 29 publications (as of June, 2007) based on database queries using combinations of the following descriptors: “English (second language),” “foreign language instruction,” “foreign language learning,” “foreign language teaching,” “language learning (foreign),” “second language instruction,” “second language learning,” “computer assisted instruction,” “computer-assisted learning,” “intelligent computer-assisted instruction,” “computer uses in education,” “communication strategies,” “learner strategies,” publication type: “reports research.”

As will be evident from the literature review further below, research on CALL environments that explicitly focuses on the development of strategic competence is almost non-existent.

In order to begin filling this void, this chapter reports on a semester-long, Web-based project to facilitate the development of L2 strategic competence by means of online collaboration among advanced EFL (English as a foreign language) learners who are students in an EFL teacher education program at a German university. The project uses the “Online Learner ABCs” as a vehicle to promote reflection on one’s own language learning history as well as on language learning strategy use. It is an adaptation of the ABCs of cultural understanding and communication (Finkbeiner & Knierim, 2006; Finkbeiner & Schmidt, 2006; Schmidt, 1998; Wilden, 2006). The “Online Learner ABCs” project designed here employs an autobiographic approach (Schmidt, 1998; Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006) together with the LMRplus approach (Finkbeiner, 2001, 2004), which is a professional tool that aims at raising learners’ awareness of their own strategic competence.

**LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES**

The core question of the “Online Learner ABCs” project is, first of all, whether and, secondly, how learners’ L2 strategic competence can be fostered through online collaboration. Therefore, we will first define the key construct “strategic competence” and then examine how this notion has been taken up in the CALL community so far.

Following Cohen (1998), one can distinguish between “language learning strategies” and “language use strategies” as being two subsets of “language learner strategies.” It should be noted, though, that the distinction between language learning strategies and language use strategies is not always clear-cut in that the latter (e.g., a communication strategy such as circumlocution) can also contribute to L2 learning (e.g., acquisition of a new lexical item based on an interlocutor’s circumlocution). In the SLA (second language