

Language Learning Strategy Use of Chinese Students in Relation to Their English Language Proficiency

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Abstract: the present study aimed to examine the language learning strategy use of Chinese EFL students in a British university and to explore the impacts of their English language proficiency on the selection of these strategies. Postgraduate students of different majors (N = 102) were investigated through the administration of Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and some respondents (N = 20) were also interviewed to confirm the quantitative research findings. Significant differences were identified in the use of language learning strategies with more proficient students reporting more use in cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies than their counterparts. In addition, compensation strategies were most preferred by participants in this study whereas affective strategies were the least favored. Pedagogical implications for language learning strategy instruction have been suggested in order to help improve the language learning performance of Chinese EFL students in both Chinese and overseas universities.

Key words: language learning strategies (LLS), proficiency, Chinese students

1. Introduction

In recent years, it has been increasingly prevailing for Chinese students to study abroad. English-speaking countries, such as Britain and America, have become the main destination for this group of population. The shift of learning context may also trigger the change in learning performance like the use of language learning strategies. As Oxford and Anderson (1995, p. 205) assert, the relationship between second or foreign language learning and learning contexts is 'inextricably linked'. According to Chamot (2001, p. 25), applied research on learning strategies has two main goals: "to identify and compare the learning strategies used by more and less successful language learners, and to provide instruction to less successful learners that helps them become more successful in their language study". Thus, the present research aimed to identify the relationships between language strategies and L2 proficiency. In particular, the differences in the use of learning strategies by learners of diversified levels of English language proficiency were examined in order to help language teachers to identify appropriate language strategies for Chinese EFL students and enhance their learning performance through learn strategies instruction.

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2. Research into Language Learning Strategy in the Past Few Decades

Language learning strategy has been defined broadly since the mid-1970s by different scholars in the domain of second and foreign language acquisition (Rubin, 1975; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stern, 1992; Naiman et al., 1996). Meanwhile, various classifications of LLSs have been developed by researchers (Rubin 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992 & Ellis, 1994). One of the most influential taxonomy of LLSs was offered by Oxford that has been cited frequently by researchers. According to Oxford (1990), LLSs can be divided into two major categorizations: direct and indirect; and there are three sub-categorizations under each class: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies constitute the direct strategies while metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies form the indirect strategies. According to Oxford (1990, p. 14), "direct strategies and indirect strategies support each other and each sub-strategy group is interrelating and cooperating with one another". Despite the disagreement and conflicts in categorizing LLSs, Oxford's taxonomy is relatively more comprehensive and scientifically validated. As Ellis (1994, p. 539) affirms, "it is perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date." Thus, it is employed as the guideline for the present research.

A range of variables have been identified as potentially having influence on the selection of LLSs in language learning contexts, and a large body of research has been concentrating on exploring these factors. Having compared the existing studies (Politzer, 1983; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and summarized the main findings, Oxford (1993) states that the use of LLSs can be affected by parameters such as motivation, gender, cultural background, type of task, age and L2 stage, and learning style. Ellis (1994) believes that the selection of learning strategies is determined by individual learner diversities such as beliefs, affective states, general factors, and previous learning experiences as well as various situational factors, for example, the target language being acquired, whether the learning context is formal or informal, the nature of the instruction and the particular tasks learners are expected to fulfill. Therefore, it is predictable that the strategy use of language learners may vary considerably as the consequence of these variables.

Numerous studies concentrating on the association between strategy use and language proficiency have identified that more proficient language students deploy more types and more frequent use of learning strategies than less proficient students (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths, 2003; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Wharton (2000) discovered a linear relationship between proficiency level and frequency of strategy application with more successful learners reporting more strategy use than less successful learners. Likewise, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) identified that self-assessed language proficiency strongly impacted strategy choice with greater strategy use accompanying perceptions of higher proficiency.

The relationship between strategy use and tested language proficiency has also been explored. Findings demonstrated that effective learners reported a higher frequency and variety of language strategy use than less effective learners (Green & Oxford, 1995). Similarly, Griffiths (2003) discovered that not only did more successful students make highly frequent use of LLSs, their strategies also tended to involve more metacognitive techniques rather than memorization and to be more interactive compared with strategies used by less successful students. According to Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006), the most preferred strategy for the advanced language learners was social strategies and the least favored category was memory strategies whereas for beginning and intermediate learners the least preferred were affective strategies. A positive linear relationship between strategy use and English proficiency of EFL students was thus identified in the research. Similar findings were also

discovered by Park (1997), who identified that cognitive and social strategies are more typical of high proficient learners than the other four categories of LLSs.

While the criteria measuring proficiency in these studies were different and the survey contexts were varied as well, it has been suggested that positive relationship between language proficiency and strategy use may exist. Not only such strategy category as social strategies are likely to be the predictor of language proficiency, the differences in strategy use by students of diverse proficiency levels may also be reflected from other aspects. Successful language learners tend to adopt learning strategies typical of their proficiency that may be different from less successful learners'. However, the distinction should be connected closely with the specific learning background when interpreted and it should not be taken for granted that students of the same proficiency level in different studies are typical of the same language strategies.

3. Research Methods

The investigation was conducted at the University of Sunderland in the UK. One hundred and two undergraduate students enrolled in different programs were randomly selected to participate in the research. Most participants began their study of English at primary school and had been learning English for over ten years. None of them had experience of studying abroad before and many of them had been studying in the UK for about eight months when the survey was carried out. The participants were allocated into different groups according to their English proficiency level, which was assessed by both self-rated proficiency and IELTS scores that they achieved for the application of their registered programs. In regard to the categorization by self-assessed proficiency, none of them rated their English level as excellent, 43 students rated their English proficiency as good, 46 as fair and 13 as poor; there were also four criteria for the grouping by IELTS reports, with 7 participants having an IELTS score under 6, 36 having 6, 37 having 6.5, and 22 students achieved above 6.5.

In this study two different types of questionnaires were applied as measurements to accomplish the research purposes. The first one was a background questionnaire adapted from Oxford's version (1990). Answers to the questions of self-rated English proficiency level and self-reported IELTS scores were directly referred to during the data analysis process. Since the research aimed to analyze the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency, both self-assessed and tested proficiency were used as criteria to measure the participants' English proficiency levels in this study. The second one was Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which was the main instrument employed to examine the participants' strategy use.

Quantitative as well as qualitative research methods were used in this investigation in order to confirm the findings. The main method for collecting the qualitative data was interview. Semi-structured interviews were designed and performed when the data collected from questionnaires had been analyzed. On the basis of quantitative survey results, the interviews were employed to validate these findings and to identify the true internal relationships between the participants' strategies use and their English proficiency.

Before the interviews, ten participants were deliberately selected from the participants and were assigned into three different proficiency groups (group A = good, group B = fair and group C = poor) mainly according to their answers to the question of self-rated proficiency level in the background questionnaires. They were not randomly selected because they were required by the research to be typical of certain characteristics of strategy use to represent the remaining respondents in each group. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded. They were transcribed verbatim and some transcripts have been selected and presented in the discussion section.

4. Results

The relationship between strategy use and self-assessed proficiency was examined by ANOVA and the results have been presented in Table 1. An apparent positive relationship between strategy use and self-assessed proficiency was discovered from the analysis, which meant the more proficient students reported a higher frequency of overall strategy use with a descending rank of mean scores ranging from 3.24 to 2.75. What has also been shown in the table is that participants who believed their English was good employed the highest frequency use of social strategies ($M = 3.51$) although they reflected a nearly same frequency in the use of metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.50$) and memory strategies ($M = 2.75$) were the least preferred by this group of students. While those who thought their English was poor favored more compensation strategies ($M = 3.04$) compared with other categories and engaged in cognitive strategies least ($M = 2.48$). For those who considered their English was fair compensation strategies ($M = 3.19$) were also the most frequently used whereas affective strategies were the least used ($M = 2.63$).

The connection between strategy use and proficiency tested by IELTS scores was also analyzed by ANOVA (see Table 2). A linear relationship was identified from the results, which suggested that the more proficient participants reported more use in overall strategies than less proficient participants with the mean scores going from 3.40 down to 2.73. Significant differences were shown in the use of two strategy categories: cognitive strategies ($F = 5.45$, $p < .05$) and metacognitive strategies ($F = 3.00$, $p < .05$). However, students with IELTS scores above 6.5 reported the most use of metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.64$) even though they also reflected similarly extent of preference in the other two categories of strategies, cognitive strategies ($M = 3.63$) and social strategies ($M = 3.62$). Likewise, the memory strategies ($M = 2.94$) were also the least favored strategy by students with the highest IELTS scores. It has been demonstrated by the statistics that participants of the other three groups reported the most use of compensation strategies ($M = 3.19$, $M = 3.21$ and $M = 3.04$) and the least use of affective strategies ($M = 2.75$, $M = 2.56$ and $M = 2.08$), which corresponded with the general features of overall strategy use by all the participants (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of Variation in LLS Use by Self-Assessed Proficiency

Strategies	Good (n = 43)		Fair (n = 46)		Poor (n = 13)		<i>F</i>	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Memory	2.75	.535	2.97	.466	2.61	.280	2.26	.115
Cognitive	3.44	.396	3.18	.453	2.48	.437	14.9	.000
Compensation	3.41	.581	3.19	.660	3.04	.690	1.35	.268
Metacognitive	3.50	.428	3.08	.694	2.85	.769	4.64	.014
Affective	2.80	.749	2.63	.645	2.69	.963	.331	.720
Social	3.51	.628	3.01	.811	2.83	.722	3.91	.026
Total	3.24	.468	3.01	.531	2.75	.674	4.45	.023

* $p < .05$

Table 2 Summary of Variation in LLS Use by IELTS Scores

Strategies	Above 6.5 (n = 22)		6.5 (n = 37)		6 (n = 36)		Under 6 (n = 7)		<i>F</i>	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Memory	2.94	.543	2.85	.520	2.75	.460	2.70	.265	.472	.703
Cognitive	3.63	.400	3.13	.511	3.00	.460	2.91	.525	5.45	.002
Compensation	3.50	.508	3.19	.728	3.21	.592	3.04	.726	.906	.444
Metacognitive	3.64	.528	3.18	.623	3.04	.657	2.86	.676	3.00	.039
Affective	3.05	.700	2.75	.770	2.56	.619	2.08	.700	2.40	.078
Social	3.62	.789	3.12	.803	3.05	.640	2.79	.760	2.06	.116
Total	3.40	.495	3.04	.586	2.94	.531	2.73	.631	5.31	.035

*p < .05

5. Discussion

In general, participants in this study demonstrated medium use of language strategies with a most preference for compensation strategies and least preference for affective strategies, which coincides with some of the previous studies on Chinese EFL students (Chang, 1990; Bremner, 1999; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Gao, 2006). The characteristics of strategy use of Chinese EFL students in this study suggested that they tended to engage in more strategies in order to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, particularly, of vocabulary. As Oxford (1990) states, compensation strategies enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production in spite of limited knowledge. It seems that they had little inclination to control their emotions and attitudes about language learning in that they reflected the least use of affective strategies even though affective aspect of the learner is perhaps one of the most crucial factors influencing language learning success and failure.

Several reasons may contribute to these features. The shift of the learning context is the principal reason. These Chinese students were studying in an intensive English learning context which was completely different from that of their previous learning experience. In order to address the lack of English knowledge, in particular the limitation in vocabulary, these Chinese students had to employ compensation strategies such as guessing or inferring from unknown words, synonyms and gestures. These strategies facilitate the language difficulties that these EFL students encounter during their everyday study and help them to develop language confidence, thus help them adapt to a novel learning environment.

The change of learning setting has also triggered the relinquishment and preference of other language strategies. Traditional Chinese educational system is examination-oriented and rote-learning is favored by most Chinese students in their language learning. However, it has been discovered in the data that memory strategies were nearly the least preferred by the participants ranking only slightly higher than affective strategies. This indicates that these Chinese EFL students had no longer relied considerably on memorization to learn English since they were exposed to a natural English setting and they were offered sufficient opportunities to apply what they had learnt, which was absent from their previous learning environment. This natural language context leads to informal learning, making the learners resort to conscious learning and seek out opportunities to practice specific linguistic knowledge they have mastered (Ellis, 1994). As one participant from group A said:

“I think I have got more opportunities to put what I have learnt into practice after I came to the UK, including vocabulary and the way of thinking in English. And I even find the logic of my expression has been improved...I think rote-learning such as mechanical memorizing will make language learning boring so I

learn new words through daily life because you are living in such a context in which you are exposed to those words every day”.

Cultural perceptions have also been reflected in the strategies used by these Chinese EFL students. “Culture clearly includes beliefs, perceptions and values which affect language learning, including general learning styles and specific learning strategies” (Oxford, 1996, p. 10). In the current study participants’ attitudes in learning English largely affected their strategy selection. For many Chinese EFL students, the conception of learning English as a tool is so strong that they learn the language because of necessity rather than interest or pleasure. As indicated in the background questionnaires, most participants studied English because it was required by the disciplines or needed for the future career other than for interest in the language or culture. In terms of strategies, the participants reported a relatively low frequency of use in affective strategies, which means the students did not facilitate the language learning through adjusting and controlling their emotions, motivations, values and attitudes. The argument can also be confirmed by interview data. As one participant in group B claimed:

“In my opinion, most Chinese students learn English because it is required by exams and they don’t have too much interest in it...as to me, English is just a tool”.

In the current study the relationship between the use of language strategies and learners’ proficiency were examined by two measures, self-assessed proficiency and tested proficiency by IELTS scores. A linear relationship between strategy use and proficiency was identified in both tests, which meant that the more proficient the participants were the more language strategies they tended to deploy. This finding has been supported by many previous studies (Chen, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; Goh & Kwah, 1997; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths, 2003; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Significant differences in the application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies have been revealed in both studies. However, the use of social strategies has also been found to be significantly different among participants of diverse proficiency levels in the self-assessed proficiency analysis.

Comparing the results from both the examinations (see Table 1 and Table 2) it is notable that the more proficient participants in this study preferred social and metacognitive strategies most and memory strategies least. Besides, cognitive strategies could also reflect students’ proficiency. The shift of learning context again may be the possible factor accounting for these findings. These Chinese EFL students were studying in a complete English speaking context in which they were exposed to English every day everywhere. There was no need for them to resort to traditional learning strategies such as rote-memorization as they did before because they were acquiring the language naturally. Meanwhile, they were offered sufficient opportunities to practice and improve their English through interactions with others, which was particularly appreciated by those who had appropriate English proficiency. As one student from Group A said:

“I make full use of group discussion with my foreign classmates to practice my spoken English and try to speak as much as I can...I go to church in my community every Monday evening though I am not a Christian and I don’t quite understand what they are talking about. At least this is a good opportunity for me to communicate with locals and I wish to have more communication with them. I imitate their pronunciations and intonations in order to be more native-like in my speaking”.

In addition, the more proficient students are clearly aware of how to manipulate their language learning process, which means they have an appropriate application of metacognitive strategies. They know about how to arrange time, set goals, seek opportunities and self-evaluate their study. According to Oxford (1990, p. 136), the conscious use of metacognitive strategies can help learners to regain focus on their study particularly when they

are overwhelmed by too much ‘newness’, which includes unfamiliar vocabulary, confusing rules, different writing systems and non-traditional instruction methods. Just like what one interviewee in Group A stated:

“I have clear goals for English learning and specify what to do for every single day...I preview before each session to make sure I can understand professors well during lectures. I analyze and summarize the mistakes I made during my learning process in order to make progress in the future”.

Furthermore, cognitive strategies are typical of more proficient students as well. As can be seen from the data, more successful participants reported high frequent use of this category of strategies both by self-rated and tested proficiency whereas those who considered their English was poor reported the least use of such strategies. The finding suggests that more proficient students have the knowledge on how to promote their language proficiency through managing the learning materials, for example, analyzing, practicing and summarizing while the less proficient students lack such knowledge, which has been strengthened by a participants’ remarks in Group A:

“I extract beautiful sentences while reading or watching movies, particularly those sentences that I may use in daily life. While reading journals I also make summaries of some good sentence patterns and use them in the similar way in my writing...while reading I like to think critically and make summaries in my own words...I even analyze feedbacks given by professors on my assignments...”

Compared with their successful counterparts, less successful students engage in more compensation strategies. The possible explanation for this is that less proficient students might feel frustrated when using social strategies such as interacting with others to develop the language due to their limited English knowledge and the lack of confidence. Instead, they resort to strategies that enable them to make up for the missing knowledge. Meanwhile, these less proficient students lack the knowledge of deploying such in-depth strategies as cognitive strategies, which can be recognized from the utterance of an interviewee in Group C:

“I don’t have too much contact with foreigners even though I do have some foreign classmates... I am afraid of speaking English because of the lack of confidence. If I don’t know a word, I will try to express it in another way. For example, if I don’t know “kettle”, I say it is something you can put and boil water in...sometimes even body language can help”.

The lack of confidence and proficiency may lead to a slow progress in language acquisition, which triggers the shrink of interest in the language consequently. Thus, the students may reluctantly improve their language through managing their beliefs, motivation or attitudes, which is probably the reason why these groups of participants reported the least use of affective strategies. The remark of one student in Group C may prove this: ‘when I found my English was not progressing as much as before I lost interest in it’. However, the more successful learners are more aware of this category of strategies and regulate their emotions intentionally in order to make their language learning more successful. As one of the participant from Group A uttered:

“I encourage myself each time when I am giving a presentation...I give myself a small present whenever I get a high mark for the assignment and I believe I will get a higher mark next time if I am not satisfied with the previous one”.

To sum up, more proficient students are aware of more types of language strategies and fully utilize the learning context to apply these strategies. Besides, they tend to employ such in-depth strategies as cognitive strategies. In contrast, less proficient students prefer surface strategies like compensation strategies and they demonstrate a limited use of other strategy categories.

As can be seen apparently in the findings, the strategy use of Chinese EFL students is influenced by their English level. Therefore, it is vital for teachers to figure out that some strategies may be more applicable to some students than to others because students at different levels use different strategies. For learners at primary stage, the teachers need to promote declarative and procedural knowledge in a direct way because this type of knowledge can highlight the features of desired language acquisition. For learners at intermediate level, the teacher's role shifts with the realization that these learners have developed certain strategic knowledge as well as a fair amount of content such as vocabulary and grammar. The challenge for these learners is to work out how to make appropriate choice of strategies for particular learning tasks and for themselves as individuals. For advanced learners, since they have shown a great awareness of strategy use, the task they face is how to refine and add to new learning strategies in order to become as efficient as possible.

6. Conclusion

The current research examined the strategy use of Chinese EFL students in a British university. Nevertheless, the results revealed by this investigation may be mirrored in other settings though further research is still needed to verify the findings. It has been revealed in the analyses that compensation strategies were the most frequently used strategies by this group of students whereas affective strategies were the least preferred by them. Significant differences in the use of strategies have been discovered among students of various proficiency levels with more proficient students reporting more application of learning strategies in three categories: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. The positive relationship between proficiency and language strategies use, and significant differences in the use of certain strategies suggest that learner's proficiency is an important factor that impacts their choice of language strategies. Such elements as change of learning settings and cultural differences may trigger these findings. However, the teachers still need to identify appropriate strategies for language learners and instruct them how to apply these strategies to various learning tasks and activities in order to improve their learning performance.

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