

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE APPLICATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES (LLS) BY CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The field of foreign/second language teaching became familiar with the concept of language learning strategies (LLSs) through the work of Rubin (1975). Since then a lot of researches have focused on shedding light on different aspects of language learning strategies. A sufficient volume of research has concentrated on investigating the effect of different factors on the use and choice of LLSs. From among these influential elements “cultural background” sometimes referred to as “ethnicity”, “nationality” or “national origin” has been reported to affect students’ use of LLSs and thus leading to individual differences within various cultural contexts. Also, it has been reported that learners in second language learning environments use strategies more frequently than those in foreign language learning situations. Based on these premises, the current study attempts to take a detailed look at the patterns of LLSs used by Chinese EFL learners, aimed at shedding light on possible differences and similarities with other EFL or ESL contexts. To obtain a better understanding, first, definitions, characteristics as well as different taxonomies of LLSs are presented. Then providing some information about Chinese culture as well as the traditional education system in China, this paper focuses on reviewing a series of studies conducted on LLSs in Chinese EFL context. Finally drawing on the obtained findings the implications and applications of using LLSs in Chinese EFL context are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Language Learning Strategies (LLSs), Nationality, Chinese EFL Context

INTRODUCTION

Having a look at the history of language teaching and learning reveals that, in either ESL or EFL context, much effort has been taken by language researchers and scholars to make the path of language education more fruitful. At the early days of structuralist linguistics and behavioristic psychology, most studies focused on investigating teachers' characteristics and teaching practices in the classrooms and ignored the crucial role of learners in the same path. This limitation is well reflected in some scholars' views as Dansereau (1978) refers to the inadvertent reinforcement of ineffective and non-transferable learning strategies as one of the main drawbacks of teaching methods. Similarly Harlow (1988) reports that although the instructional process involves both teachers and learners, the bulk of research efforts throughout the history of education focused upon teaching techniques, and neglected the importance of learners. Expressing the rise of a new paradigm, Reiss (1985, cited in Aliakbari & Hayatzadeh, 2008, p. 73) reported the shift of emphasis from teacher to learner in L2 research.

Therefore, in 1970s, following the emergence of social interactionist approaches, the paradigm shifted from the previous teacher-centered methodologies to include learners as possessing the major role in the field of second language teaching. As a result of this shift of focus from language teaching to learning, learners' characteristics came to be given priority and most researches started to investigate this new trend. In the same direction, one of the key features which drew the attention of many second language researchers was proved to be language learning strategies (LLS) employed by the learners in the process of acquiring a second or foreign language.

Ehrman and Oxford (1989) define learning strategies as the steps taken to facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. As Montazeri and Hamidi (2013b) argue, in communicative language teaching, the use of appropriate strategies helps language learners partly overcome their inability to communicate in the target language. This issue of appropriateness is of high importance in humanistic education at all levels (Khatib, Sarem & Hamidi, 2013). Studies on language learning strategies have shown that appropriate language learning strategies (LLS) are useful in the development of communicative competence, improved proficiency and learner autonomy (Oxford & Crookall, 1988, 1989; Oxford, 1990). Oxford and Crookall (1989) remark that: "No matter what they are called, strategies make learning more efficient and effective" (p. 404). As Williams and Burden (1997) point the questions like how learners go about learning something, what makes learners successful at learning something, and why some people are more effective at learning than others can be only answered by investigating learning strategies.

Skehan (1989) considered language learning strategies as one of the most important factors accounting for individual differences in language learning. In this regard, one area of research which has attracted the attention of many scholars is the identification of LLSs used by successful language learners. This line of research is influenced by the assumption that successful learners differ to some extent in the particular sets of cognitive processes and behaviors which account, partly, for their success (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Oxford & Nyikson, 1989; Cook, 1991). Hosenfeld (1979) maintains that these studies followed this goal that once the

strategies of good language learners are identified, they can be made available through teaching to less successful learners to help them learn a second or foreign language more effectively.

From another perspective, many studies have been devoted to exploring the effect of different factors on the choice and use of language learning strategies (LLSs). The findings of such studies revealed that factors like age, proficiency, gender, affective variables, personality traits, aptitude, language teaching methods (Oxford, 1990) and many other factors can be influential in this regard. Among these elements, one crucial item which bears significant effects on students' learning outcomes and has allocated a plethora of quantitative and qualitative researches to itself is reported to be the "nationality" or "national origin", sometimes put under the title of "cultural background". Many of these studies feature a one-dimensional aspect and have been conducted within a specific nationality domain. On the other hand, a sufficient volume of research in the literature preoccupies a two-dimensional nature and has concentrated on comparing the role of different nationalities on the use and choice of LLSs.

With the increasing development of globalization and economic development in China, more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad, with many of them lacking sufficient English proficiency to be successful in their academic studies. Within the 'explosion of activity' (Skehan, 1991, p. 285, cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 529) of the study of learning strategies, the world of Second Language Acquisition has seen several studies conducted in Chinese EFL context by Chinese teachers and using Chinese subjects. Taking all the above points into account, the current paper tries to take a detailed look at the application of LLSs by Chinese learners in approaching English as a foreign language. Moreover, shedding light on the types of strategies used, this paper wants to examine the cognitive capabilities of Chinese students in comparison to other EFL or ESL learners across the world.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: DEFINITIONS, CHARACTERISTICS, CLASSIFICATIONS

Following the emergence of cognitive psychology, as was mentioned earlier in this paper, learners' characteristics got importance and were introduced within the field of second language research. From among these factors, more specifically, the field of foreign/second language teaching became familiar with the concept of language learning strategies through the work of Rubin (1975). Since then, a lot of researchers focused on investigating this phenomenon under various circumstances and, as a result, a variety of definitions were proposed by different language scholars. Among the first authors, Rubin (1987) defined learning strategies as "strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which learners construct and affect learning directly" (p. 23). As Wenden (1987, p. 7) says "Learning strategies are the various operations that learners use in order to make sense of their learning". Oxford (2001) defines learning strategies as "specifications taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more efficient, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 166). Also, Williams & Burden (1997) indicated that when students are involved in a learning task, they have several resources which they use in different ways to finish or solve the task, so this can be termed process of learning strategy. O'Malley and Chamot (1990), based on a

cognitive information processing view of human thought and action, described learning strategies as “special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information” (p. 1). Rigney (1978), and Rubin (1987), define language learning strategies as behaviours, steps, or techniques that language learners apply to facilitate language learning. Cohen (1998, cited in Akbari & Hosseini, 2008) defines language learning strategies as “the conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with explicit goal of improving their knowledge of a target language” (p. 68). Cook (2001) defines learning strategy as “a choice that learner makes while learning or using the second language that affects learning” (p. 80). Chastain (1988) cites Weinstein and Mayer (1986) defining learning strategies as “behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning and that are intended to influence the learners encoding process. Thus, the goal of any particular learning strategy may be to affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge” (p. 164). Griffiths (2007) defines language learning strategies as “activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (p. 91). For Chamot (1987), “learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information” (p. 63). Another definition belongs to Stern (1983) who makes a distinction between strategies and techniques. To Stern (1983), strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behavior.

As is seen above, a plethora of definitions have been suggested for LLS, all aimed at emphasizing the vital role they occupy in the process of language learning. It deserves mentioning that learning strategies are not merely limited to learning English; yet, they can be utilized in learning other fields like mathematics. In summary, it can be claimed that learning strategies are learning skills, learning-to-learn skills, thinking skills, problem skills or, in other words the methods which learners use to intake, store, and retrieve during the learning process. In short, language learning strategies are applied by language learners as a means to acquire and to use information that learners have acquired, stored or recalled, and can also promote autonomous learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, pp. 78-9). Also, based on the above definitions, as Richard (1994) concludes when language learners encounter language learning tasks such as reading or writing, they can apply the several different strategies to complete the tasks. Language learners will be successful in the tasks due to use of an appropriate language learning strategy.

Despite the fact that the mentioned definitions seem to clarify the critical role of learning strategies, some other scholars contend that they are not without drawback and that they do not reflect the full utility and usefulness of such strategies. Instead, such scholars prefer to focus on the characteristics of LLSs some of which are mentioned below.

Oxford (1990), the prominent figure in devising out definitions and classification of LLSs enumerates the key characteristics of them as follows:

1. Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
2. Allow learners to become more self-directed.

3. Expand the role of teachers.
4. Are problem-oriented.
5. Are specific actions taken by the learner.
6. Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
7. Support learning both directly and indirectly.
8. Are not always observable.
9. Are often conscious.
10. Can be taught.
11. Are flexible.
12. Are influenced by a variety of factors.

Moreover, Ellis (1994, pp. 532-533) characterizes the term 'strategies' in the following way:

1. Strategies refer to both general approaches and specific actions or techniques used to learn an L2
2. Strategies are problem-oriented and the learner deploys a strategy to overcome some particular learning problem.
3. Learners are generally aware of the strategies they use and can identify what they consist of if they are asked to pay attention to what they are doing /thinking.
4. Strategies involve linguistic behavior (such as requesting the name of an object) and non-linguistic behavior (such as pointing at an object in order to tell its name).
5. Linguistic strategies can be performed in the L1 and L2.
6. Some strategies are behavioral while others are mental. Thus some strategies are directly observable, while others are not.
7. In the main, strategies contribute indirectly to learning by providing learners with data about the L2 which they can then process. However, some strategies may also contribute directly (for example, memorization strategies directed at specific lexical items or grammatical rules).
8. Strategy use varies considerably as a result of both the kind of task the learner is engaged in and individual learner preferences.

Along with the many definitions and characteristics put forward by different researchers, much of the investigation in 1970s concentrated on compiling inventories of the learning strategies that learners were observed to use or reported to use. As far as the classification of the LLS is concerned, different realizations have been screened. Accordingly, researchers have classified them differently according to various criteria, as whether they are cognitive or metacognitive (O'Malley et al., 1985); whether they contribute directly or indirectly to learning (Rubin, 1981); and whether they are practiced in the classroom, in individual study, or during interaction with others (Politzer, 1983). In fact, from the 1980s on, researchers tried to identify broad classes of learning strategies, under which large numbers of more specific strategies could be grouped. Some of the important classifications of LLSs are mentioned below.

In his classification, Rubin (1981) divided learning strategies into two primary categories and a number of subcategories. His first primary category consists of strategies that directly affect

learning and includes clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing, inductive and deductive reasoning, and practicing. The second primary category involved strategies which indirectly contribute to learning and includes creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as communication strategies. Like Rubin, another scholar who favors direct and indirect strategies is Oxford (1990). In her famous classification, Oxford synthesized language learning strategies which were divided into two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies which help students to learn a target language. Direct strategies are specific ways that involve use of language, sub-divided into memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies do not directly involve using the language, but they support language learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990), and are further divided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. These six broad strategies include nineteen secondary strategies with a further sixty-two specific strategies and lay the fundamentals of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) used as a valid and reliable questionnaire in many research studies (Oxford, 1990).

Mochizuki (1999) believes that in the field of L2 acquisition, there are two types of strategies: learning strategies and communication strategies. The former deals with input, or taking messages from others, in ways such as processing, storage and retrieval, whereas the latter deals with output, or how we deliver messages to others. O'Malley et al. (1985), studying the use of some 24 strategies by learners of English as a second language (ESL) in the United States, divided their strategies into three main categories: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Cohen (1998) makes a distinction between language learning strategies and language use strategies. Language learning strategies are involved in identifying the language material, distinguishing it from other kinds of material, grouping it to facilitate learning, having recurrent contact with it, and formally committing it to memory when its natural acquisition seems impossible. Cohen further differentiates language learning strategies according to whether they are cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social. Cognitive strategies deal with identification, grouping, retention, and storage of language material. Metacognitive strategies encompass the strategies of pre-assessment and pre-planning, on-line planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities. Affective strategies contribute to the regulation of emotions, motivation, and attitudes. Finally, social strategies focus on the learner's interaction with other learners and with native speakers.

As it is seen a variety of classifications have been devised out by different researchers all trying to shed light on the use and choice of general categories and subcategories of LLSs in different contexts and circumstances. However, taking a look at the conducted studies shows that either in EFL or ESL contexts Oxford's (1990) classifications is basically advocated and utilized. Even, in China, as an EFL country, most studies on LLSs have utilized Oxford's inventory as the basic instrument for collecting data. There are some reasons for this preference: Compared with earlier research into language learning strategies, Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies is more comprehensive and detailed (Jones, 1998). Recent studies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Phillips, 1991; Green, 1991) applying the SILL claimed that using language learning strategies would have valuable influence on language proficiency. Based on this complete list of strategies, Oxford (1990) developed SILL, which is a useful instrument designed to test ESL/EFL learners' strategy use. In addition, according to Oxford and Burry-

Stock (1995) it is reliable and valid across many cultural groups, and it links individual strategies, as well as groups of strategies, with each of the four language skill areas of listening, reading, speaking and writing. Oxford's taxonomy is different from other taxonomies in that Oxford classifies heterogeneous strategies into more specific categories (Ehrman et al., 2003).

In the above lines, a detailed look was taken to the definitions, characteristics as well as the different taxonomies of LLSs in order to accentuate the importance of using them as the most basic instrument in research investigations. Furthermore, it was concluded that Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Strategies is widely used in both ESL and EFL contexts. Knowing these points, the next section, corresponding to the purpose of the current study, takes a look at the effect of "cultural background" or "national origin" on the use of language learning strategies to pave the way for justifying why Chinese EFL learners might apt for certain types of strategies in their learning practices.

THE EFFECT OF LEARNERS' NATIONALITY ON LLS USE

National origin sometimes referred to as ethnicity or cultural background is considered as another factor which affects the choice and use of language learning strategies. In other words, it refers to the fact that certain types of learners defined by cultural background are predisposed to use certain types of strategies, and many language learning strategies may be based on ethnocentric assumptions about effective language learning (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Oxford (1996) points out that culture is one of the factors which influence LLS use. Gardner's (1985) social-educational model, also, reflects sufficiently the influence of social factors like ethnicity or national origin. This model enhances our understanding of how students choose and apply LLS in L2 acquisition. Gardner's (1985) social-educational model proposes that the social and cultural milieu in which learners grow up influences their beliefs about the language and culture. Much in the same way, as Oxford (1990) states, these beliefs are also critical in determining types of strategies used.

Studies which have investigated nationality as a factor in language learning strategy use are not easy to find. This deficiency is reflected in the statement by Politzer and McGroarty (1985): It is difficult to argue that researchers have adequately investigated the effects of cultural background in determining strategy preferences. However, some of the conducted strategies are as follows. The main finding in Bedell's (1993) study cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) was that different cultural groups use particular kinds of strategies at different levels of frequency. Differences in strategy use are apparent between FL and SL settings. In general, learners in SL learning environments use strategies more frequently than those in FL learning situations (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oh, 1992).

According to Politzer and McGroarty (1985) Asian students tend to prefer rote memorization and rule-oriented strategies. For instance, Taiwanese students seem far more structured, analytical, memory-based, and metacognitively-oriented than other groups (Oxford, 1994). O'Malley & Chamot (1990) also found that Asian students prefer their own established rote learning strategies, and showed Asian students to be less willing than Hispanic students to try new

learning techniques. Moreover, Huang and Van Naerssen (1987); Tyacke and Mendelsohn (1986) pointed out that Asian learners prefer strategies including rote memorization and a focus on the linguistic code. Griffiths and Parr (2000, cited in Griffiths, 2004) found that European students reported using language learning strategies significantly more frequently than students of other nationalities, especially strategies relating to vocabulary, to reading, to interaction with others and to the tolerance of ambiguity. Politzer (1983) found that Hispanics used more social, interactive strategies, while Asian groups educated in traditionally didactic settings chose memorization strategies (Cited in Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Politzer and McGroarty (1985) and Noguchi (1991) found social strategies to be generally unpopular among Chinese and Japanese students. Wharton (2000) found that bilingual Asian students learning a third language (English) favored social strategies more than any other types. McGroarty (1987, cited in Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) found that Spanish learners use highly traditional strategies such as using a dictionary to learn words. Similarly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found that students of Asian background prefer their own established rote learning strategies. Usuki (2000), using a journal writing method, discussed the psychological barriers to the adoption of effective language learning strategies by Japanese students, who are typically regarded as passive learners, and recommended more co-operation between students and teachers. The use of appropriate strategies may partly be done by learners using their own experience and needs analysis (Montazeri & Hamidi, 2013a).

All the aforementioned studies accentuate the effect of cultural background or national origin in determining the types of strategies used by different ESL or EFL learners. Reviewing the conducted studies available in the literature, the researcher concentrates on the Chinese EFL context to examine the type of strategies used by Chinese students.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CULTURE

According to Brislin (1993, cited in Rao, 2006) three sources of Chinese culture are often claimed to have an important effect on attitudes and behaviours of Chinese learners. The first one is collectivism and interdependent self in the Chinese culture. Chinese society is marked by a strong tradition of filial piety and familism which encompass a non-individual collectivistic orientation among the Chinese (Brislin, 1993, cited in Rao, 2006). As Yang (1992) mentions such a social orientation has resulted in a dependence-emphasizing society with a strong sense of collectivism.

Chinese students' strong collective orientation has resulted in socialization for achievement. In the Chinese cultural context, achievement orientation is based firmly on collectivist rather than individual values. This can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure in a collectivist culture affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. Chinese students strongly believe in hard work and effort. The final well recognized source of influence on attitudes and behaviours of Chinese learners originates from people's attitudes to power and authority. In China, people in lower positions are expected to obey those who are in high positions and humble people should show respect to those who are superior in society. When this

is applied to language learning, it is apparent that teachers are authorities and students are passive learners. Teachers tell students what to do and students listen and obey (Cited in Rao, 2006).

Overall, Chinese culture is characterized by collectivism, socialization for achievement and high acceptance of power and authority. Chinese students' high achievement orientation can be explained in terms of a combination of cultural, societal and pragmatic factors, such as traditional emphasis on collectivism in Chinese culture, high expectation from parents and relatives and their own belief in hard work and effort for success (Cited in Rao, 2006, pp. 494-49).

AN OVERVIEW OF TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

China as the biggest country in the world has a very long history of 5000 years and also it features a long history in education. Traditionally, Chinese education is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach, and an emphasis on repetition, reviewing and rote memory. Here is the brief description of how the traditional Chinese classroom runs every day provided by Rao (2006, pp. 495-496).

Class begins with the reviewing of the material learnt the day before, followed by the new material. First, the teacher explains the meaning of the new vocabulary, and then stresses the different uses of the words. After that, the teacher gives discourse analysis at sentence, paragraph and passage levels. When the teacher finishes his explanation, the students are to read the material just learnt 100 times: at first, read slowly, then a little bit faster. The text should be read with rhythm, correct pauses and accurate use of the four tones. If any student cannot perform the reading properly, another 100 times of reading are required. (Shu, 1961, p. 86, cited in Rao, 2006, p. 495)

Several distinctive features emerged from the above description. First, the teacher is considered as the 'fount of knowledge', and it is the teacher who decides which knowledge is to be taught, and the students accept and learn that knowledge (Ginsberg, 1992). In order for teachers to run each course well, a selection of good textbooks is especially important (Harvey, 1985). Teachers devote almost all their effort in class on focus texts – the nice, compact text of just the right length and level, in which they can find language points they want to elaborate on, and on which hours can be spent explaining, analyzing, paraphrasing, asking questions, practicing patterns and reading aloud, retelling, etc., until the students very nearly, if not literally, learn every word by heart. Chinese teachers of English believe that 'Learning sparsely but well' is a practical and economic way to facilitate language acquisition (Li, 1984, as Cited in Rao, 2006, p. 495).

Such teacher-dominated and text-focused classroom teaching results in a great emphasis on linguistic details and accuracy. There is a keen interest in the exact understanding of every word, a low tolerance of ambiguity and a focus on discrete points and specific syntactic constructions (Rao, 2002). To facilitate the process of gaining linguistic knowledge and a thorough understanding of a text, Chinese students first employ 'repetition as a route to understanding' (Hess & Azuma, 1991, p. 6). 'How pleasant it is to repeat constantly what we are learning' is one

of the sayings by Confucius, who laid a strong foundation for the development of Chinese education. For most Chinese students, repetitive skill development comes first, followed by meaning and interpretation, with repetition being used as the tool for creating meaning (Gardner, 1989). Secondly, Chinese students constantly review what they have learnt. Confucius' maxim 'by reviewing the old, one learns the new' is one of the Chinese students' beliefs in education (Biggs, 1996). In Chinese students' view, there is no limit to things and knowledge. What one has already learnt and understood is old knowledge; but when one has a new understanding of what one has already learnt, it will become new knowledge (Biggs, 1996, as Cited in Rao, 2006, pp. 495-496).

It is obvious, from this brief historical review of traditional education in China, that Chinese students are more accustomed to teacher-centered classroom activities than student-centered ones. They are likely to emphasize accuracy, repetition, memorization and reading difficult passages. However, due to the paradigm shift in the field of teaching methodology from the previous teacher-centered classrooms to introduce the learner-centered methodologies, like most EFL countries, significant changes occurred in general language education and specifically in language instructors' teaching practices in China. By applying instructional modifications, much effort was taken to make the learners take on responsibility for their own learning and make them autonomous language learners. As Dickinson (1987) puts it, Learning strategies are seen as particularly important in the enhancement of learner autonomy because the use or adoption of appropriate strategies allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, language education in China turned to the instruction of LLSs and encouraged students to utilize them in their learning practices. As Wenden (1987) put it, "One of the leading educational goals of the research on learner strategies is an autonomous language learner." (p. 8), and Brown (1994) believed that "teaching learners how to learn" is crucial. Due to these changes of perspectives, an extreme line of research began in Chinese EFL context to see how Chinese students' patterns of strategy use are different from other contexts. In this regard, the following lines are devoted to a review of the researches conducted on LLSs in China.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS

Findings of past research on the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners have contributed to the stereotype of Chinese learners as rote-learners who tended to use a limited range of LLSs in their learning. For example, Biggs (1996) as well as Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1996) suggest repetition and memory-based strategies are important in facilitating understanding because of the high value placed on effort and perseverance in Confucianism. Likewise, Other research findings and observations including Harvey (1985); Politzer and McGroarty, (1985) also suggest that Confucianism is a prominent factor which contributes to the stereotype of Chinese learners as rote learners. However, with the proliferation of research, Chinese ESL learners were found to use a variety of learning strategies. Besides, more and more research seems to provide evidence which is contrary to the earlier conclusion that Chinese learners are rote learners. In Goh and Foong's (1997) study of ESL students from PRC, the following metacognitive LLSs were found to be popular among the respondents: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Among other studies

on the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners, Bedell and Oxford (1996) found that compensation strategies were the most frequently used LLSs among 353 secondary and tertiary students in China. Surprisingly, memory strategies were found to be the least frequently used LLSs.

While earlier studies on LLS use focused more on integrated use of LLSs, more recent studies focus on the use of LLSs in specific language tasks. Asian students were found to have high resistance to using the cognitive LLS of grouping in learning vocabulary (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper & Russo, 1985) and imagery in learning vocabulary (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Gu and Johnson (1996) reported that in learning vocabulary Chinese ESL learners used selective attention and self-monitoring frequently. In listening, Goh (2002) found that Chinese ESL learners used inferencing, directed attention, elaboration, contextualization, and self-encouragement more frequently. More proficient Chinese ESL listeners were found to use planning, monitoring, self-evaluating more frequently than other cognitive and social LLSs (Wang, 2002). In reading, Chinese-speaking university students in Canada were found to use a number of LLSs, namely using background knowledge, translation, self-questioning, summarizing, prediction to plan, monitor, evaluate and remedy their comprehension (Li & Munby, 1996). However, as Zhang (2003) mentions, there has been a lack of research in the LLS use of Chinese ESL in speaking and writing. Furthermore, Huang and Van-Naerssen (1987) studied 60 graduating English-major students who had completed four years of university education by means of written questionnaires on use of learning strategies and an in-depth interview. The subjects also took an oral examination to help establish their oral communicative ability. With regard to formal practice and monitoring strategies, no significant difference was found between the two groups of high and low proficiency learners. Although no direct cause and effect relationship was found, Huang and Van-Naerssen, in their conclusion, tentatively suggest that the use of functional practice strategies can contribute to success in the development of oral communicative abilities.

Whereas Huang and Van-Naerssen were interested in the possible relationship between language learning strategies and oral communicative proficiency, Gu and Johnson (1996) turned their attention to vocabulary learning strategies and language learning outcomes. They studied 850 sophomore non-English majors at Beijing Normal University, China. This study came to the following main findings: (1) The studied group of EFL Chinese learners reported using more meaning oriented strategies than rote strategies in learning vocabulary, (2) Strategies like self-initiation, selective attention, contextual guessing, skilful use of dictionaries for learning purposes, note-taking, paying attention to word formation, contextual encoding, and intentional activation of new words showed positive correlation with vocabulary size and general language proficiency. (3) Finally, it was found that oral repetition correlates with general language proficiency. Furthermore, Wen and Johnson (1997) examined 242 second-year English-majored students in five tertiary institutions in Shanghai and Nanjing, China. They looked at language learning variables and their relationship to English achievement in this context. Among the many variables examined are the following groups of learning strategies – vocabulary learning strategies, tolerating ambiguity strategies, mother tongue avoidance strategies and management strategies. In their study, Wen and Johnson (1997) came to these findings: (1) Vocabulary learning strategies and mother tongue avoidance strategies have positive effects upon English

language proficiency; (2) Tolerating ambiguity / risk-taking strategies have negative effects upon general language proficiency; (3) Finally, management strategies, including planning, evaluation, study habits and affective control, play an important role in differentiating successful and unsuccessful learners.

Hou (2008) investigated the language learning strategy (LLS) use of 45 Chinese ESL students enrolled in the Ohio Intensive English Program (OPIE), a pre-academic intensive English program at an American university. The findings indicated that students across all levels of proficiency tended to use more strategies related to interaction and communication since their coming to the U.S. Advanced students seemed to use a wider range of strategies and use certain strategies more frequently, such as vocabulary learning and the management of learning than intermediate and beginner learners. Compared with male learners, the female participants in this study tended to use more strategies regarding the management of learning. Overall, the participants showed awareness of some strategy changes since they started studying in OPIE and they have adopted certain strategies in order to be more integrated into their new English-speaking environment.

Wu (2008) explored the language learning strategy use of 10 Chinese ESL learners of Hong Kong studying at a vocational institute. Results revealed that research participants used a wide variety of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective LLSs. Social/affective LLSs were found to be more popular than metacognitive and cognitive LLSs among the participants. The more popular LLSs found were: the metacognitive LLSs of advance organization, advance preparation, organizational planning and self-management; the cognitive LLSs of resourcing, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, and translation; and finally the social/affective LLSs of questioning for clarification, co-operation, and positive self-talk. Besides, research participants were found to use different LLSs for different tasks and in different situations. Three contextual factors, namely the role of English in Hong Kong, the education system, and Confucianism, in addition to some learner characteristics, were suggested as possible influences on LLS use.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study, took a very detailed and critical look at the use and choice of language learning strategies by Chinese learners of English. For this purpose, different definitions, characteristics as well different taxonomies of LLSs by various scholars were proposed in order to help learners obtain a full understanding of the issue. Next, focusing on Chinese context, characteristics of the culture and traditional education system in China were discussed aimed at knowing the Chinese context in comparison to other EFL or ESL environment. In order to emphasize the undeniable influence of different cultural contexts on the use LLSs, a section was devoted to discussing this issue. Finally and more specifically, in line with the aim of this study, a detailed look was taken at most of the recent studies conducted on the use of LLSs by Chinese students. Before talking about any conclusion, it should be warned that in an EFL context as large and complicated as in China, any generalization may be incomplete or even misleading. This review only looked at the major findings of some recent studies done on Chinese English learners. More research is needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of Chinese EFL

learners and their language learning strategies. However, based on the research findings reviewed here, certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the use of LLSs in China.

According to Abdolmanafi-Rokni, Hamidi and Gorgani (2014), any strategy or methodology which is capable of improving the learners' language proficiency should be taken into account. It was concluded that there was a direct relationship between the use of LLSs and language proficiency. It was shown that successful language learners are more willing and take advantage of LLSs in their learning behaviors than less successful learners. This finding has been mentioned in almost all the studies done on LLS worldwide pointing to the similarities of English language learning in both EFL and ESL contexts. This important finding implicates that LLS instruction should be included in teaching practices by language instructors in Chinese EFL context. According to Hosenfeld (1979), once the strategies of good language learners are identified, they can be made available, and where useful, used by less successful learners to enable them to learn a foreign / second language more effectively. Therefore, the concept of strategy training comes to the scene, and an important role assigned to teachers is that of providing an environment which facilitates the identification and use by students of those strategies which work best for them, and also suggesting alternative strategies to the learners.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study offer some insights into ESL or EFL instructional practices. For example, based on the findings about the strategy use favored by Chinese learners at different levels of proficiency, instructors can make some specific teaching adjustments according the proficiency level of the students they are teaching. Studies have shown that beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners have quite different strategy use preferences and they change their strategy use in different ways. Thus, specific teaching techniques and tasks should be employed at different levels of proficiency to introduce those students to LLS they may not even be aware of. Research results shows that self-management of one's own learning process is very critical among Chinese learners. In Wen and Johnson's (1997) study, management strategies were classified into four groups: planning, evaluation, study habits, and affective control. They found that management strategies had strong direct effects on most of the learning strategy latent variables and showed the largest indirect effect upon students' general language proficiency (p. 389). Gu and Johnson (1996) also found that students generally dwelled on self-initiation and selective attention, although the latter appeared slightly weaker than the former (p. 654). This finding is in line with the main stream literature in the world of SLA.

Moreover, the obtained findings showed that Chinese EFL learners do not utilize all types of strategies, instead the apt for specific types has. This implicates that teachers should try to understand learners' reasons for using or not using LLSs, and to identify the factors which are facilitative to LLS use and to rectify misconceptions which learners may have and which may lead them to use or not to use certain LLSs. Another important result obtained in Chinese EFL context was the skill- and situation-specific use of LLSs. The implication of this finding for teaching is that LLS instruction should be skill- and situation-specific. This indicates that the LLSs participants use in examinations are different from those they use in their classroom learning. Therefore, in LLS instruction, in addition to introducing the LLSs to learners, teachers have to inform learners about the skills and situations in which the LLSs can be used. What is

more, based on the reported LLS use of the participants in the Chinese context, the use of LLSs can also be different for different individual learners. Some learners may have a stronger inclination towards using certain LLSs, but other learners can be less adept at or more resistant towards some LLSs. The implication of this finding is that teachers should be aware of individual differences and give learners sufficient choice in their LLS instructions.

One of the promising implications of LLS use which bears significant applications for language teaching in Chinese context as well as other educational contexts worldwide is awareness-raising. It has been found in empirical studies that successful language learners are more consistent in their self-report of their use of learning strategies than their unsuccessful peers (Lawson & Hogben, 1996, p. 127; Wen & Johnson, 1997). If successful students tend to give more stable and consistent answers in the questionnaires and interviews about learning strategies, it indicates that they are more clearly aware of the strategies they use. It is likely that, among the many variables influencing one's language learning and proficiency, awareness of one's own learning strategies and learning styles, and of how one learns the language most effectively, may help enhance the learning process and contribute to the learning outcome.

This awareness of one's learning strategies can be achieved through a process of self-discovery. Language learners should be encouraged, and helped when it is necessary, to recognize and identify their own learning styles, their own preference as to how best to learn, and to analyze how their own learning strategies facilitate their language learning. In EFL contexts in China where teachers and students experience a serious lack of opportunities to engage themselves in real communicative activities, this self-discovery of their own learning strategies and learning styles can serve to provide some chances for purposeful communication. Teachers and students can be encouraged to talk about their language learning and teaching experience, and students can discuss with each other and exchange ideas about how they prefer to learn. This can also build up a bridge for teachers and students, students themselves as well, to understand each other. The affective state of the little community within the classroom has also an important part to play. As pointed out by Porte (1988, p. 171), language learners may be "better served by making sure that we help them to identify, nurture and where necessary and feasible, refine their own current repertoire of learning strategies".

Although there are minute differences between Chinese EFL context and other English language learning contexts across the world, remarkable similarities exist in the use of LLSs. Regarding the China itself, however, much care has to be applied in the generalizability of the findings, since China is a very big country with different cultures and thus different individual language learners.

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