



Learning English as a Foreign Language

Cultural Values and Strategies in the Chinese Context

Yunbao Yang

School of Educational Studies (Bundoora Campus), La Trobe University

Post code 3083, Melbourne, Australia

Tel: 61-419 396 821 E-mail: yangyunbaogeorge@hotmail.com

Abstract

Research on language learning strategies is not new. Numerous books have been written on the process of learning and the efficiency of learning English. Some English learning strategies are discussed in this paper to identify how they are defined and used and how they are determined by contexts and cultures.

Culture plays an important role in language learning and this leads to various learning strategies. Learning strategies used in one culture might be different from another, but, the central points are to achieve goals and purposes in learning.

Keywords: Learning strategy, Culture, Chinese, Context, Language learners.

Introduction

Language learning strategies often are discussed when learners have learning problems and this is an overwhelming phenomenon for both students and teachers in China where there is a continuous search for strategies to facilitate better learning. First of all, there is a need to understand what learning strategies are and what might be adapted to improve the academic performance of learners. Often, learning strategies are discussed in narrow ways and more often learners copy the learning strategies of others without tailoring them.

It is known that learning strategies are individualized and vary across cultures. Copying or borrowing the learning strategies of others in foreign language learning does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes nor guarantee learning success because there is no 'one-size-fits-all' strategy. More importantly, most strategies for language learning are derived from second language acquisition contexts and adaptation is needed for learners in different language learning contexts.

1. What are learning strategies?

Strategy-use has been a focus in foreign language learning both for learners and researchers in recent years. Many of the earlier researchers, such as Rubin (1975, 1981), Stern (1975), Naiman *et al.*, (1978) and Fillmore (1976, 1979) paid attention to the specific learning strategies that successful language learners had been reported to use. These researchers demonstrated that language learners do employ learning strategies in their language learning and that such strategies can be identified and classified.

Many other researchers (Stern 1983; Weinstein and Mayer 1986; Rubin 1987; Nunan 1988; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990) have defined language learning strategies. For example, "learning behaviours" were described by Politzer and McGroarty (1985), "cognitive processes" by Rubin (1981) and "tactics" by Seliger (1983). A more recent description was given by Oxford (1990) who defined learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). It seems from the latter that success in learning occurs if learning is effective, enjoyable and easier.

Oxford (1989) previously provided a seemingly straightforward functional definition for language learning strategies as "behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable" (p.235) and in her 1990 column she simply replaced the phrase 'behaviours and actions used by learner's with the more general 'steps taken by the learner,' which could accommodate both behavioural and mental steps and learning strategies are keys to greater autonomy and more meaningful learning" (p.4). The purpose of research on learning strategies is to gain "a better understanding of learners, their strategies, their thoughts and feelings during the learning process, their success as well as their difficulties and failures, that we may gradually arrive at a better understanding of language learning and teaching" (Stern, 1975, p.317).

Researchers such as Rubin (1975) and Brown (1987) have considered that learning strategies determine the success or

failure of an undertaking. However, are language learning strategies recognized in one context suitable in another setting? Are all “learning strategies” applicable to all language learners and improve their language performance as well?

2. Learning strategies across cultures

Culture is a significant factor to be considered when language learning strategies are discussed. The Chinese believe that the best way of learning is through memorisation and repeated practice (Liu, 1984; Biggs, 1992). As a result of this belief, Chinese teachers set extraordinary amounts of homework and assignments, and use frequent tests and examinations with the objective of giving students adequate practice and learning in order to achieve academic success. As noted by Schmidt and Watanabe (2001, p.329) “teachers of Japanese and Chinese as foreign language often argue that because of the importance of learning large numbers of characters (*kanji*) for these languages, memorization strategies are crucial.”

Taking learning English as a foreign language in the Chinese context, where English is not used by any community for communication, learners at different levels have to seek their own ways to maximize their potential in English learning and, naturally, learners apply their learning strategies used in Chinese to English learning. Characteristics like reciting and reading aloud are used to reinforce the information. However, these learning strategies often are defined as rote learning strategies. In such a context, students will use any strategies to memorize lots of facts, or understand basic principles, strategies perceived to maximize their chances of academic success (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). The stereotype of Chinese students as “hard working” has drawn much attention. According to Sha (2000), students have little chance to communicate in English; no English environment is available after class; and English is rarely used in daily life etc. Therefore, students pursue rote learning and recitation under the pressure of scores and enrol into higher schools.

Some researchers (for example, Liu, 1984; Biggs, 1992) consider that there are not efficient learning strategies. However, it should not be overlooked that in a context like China, learners are geographically distant from native English speaking communities and English is taught as a foreign language. It is understood that such learning strategies have invited much criticism, especially in the area of learning English as a foreign language. In spite of this criticism the context affects learning strategy; many learning strategies acknowledged in the second language context can hardly find a standing place in the foreign language context.

For example, ‘communicative English,’ a popular language learning strategy using a communication approach, never succeeded simply because the second language learning setting and foreign language were in totally different settings. Furthermore, a class of over 50 students was not uncommon in the Chinese educational system which never occurs elsewhere in classrooms where English was taught as a second language and this apparently made the communication approach hard to popularize.

In the Chinese context, using a foreign language communication background was not provided for and it is not surprising that the communicative strategy failed. Language learning strategies are not simply methods or ways to achieve an outcome; cultural layers, elements and attitudes are imbedded. As Lee (1996, p.25) stated “culture and attitudes towards education play a role in language learning success.” In other words, learning strategies are affected by cultures and educational systems.

Oxford (1996) argued that language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context and that various cultural beliefs, perceptions, and values significantly affect the strategies students adopt. This is illustrated in a study conducted by Levine *et al.*, (1996) in Israel, where the learning strategies of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union were compared with the strategies used by people who had lived in Israel for at least five years. The recent immigrants tended to show a preference for such traditional strategies as memorizing grammar rules, rote learning, repeatedly writing down words, or doing grammar exercises from a textbook, in contrast to the preference of the longer-term residents for more communicative approaches, including taking risks in the use of new structures and words. The characteristics of the new immigrants in this study appeared to share some similarities with Chinese rote learners. The ideas of learning strategies raised by Oxford (1990) were echoed by Levine *et al.* (1996); in short it was agreed that culture and tradition shape learning strategies.

More recently, Ehrman *et al.* (2003) came to the conclusion that:

a given learning strategy is neither good nor bad; it is necessary neutral until it is considered in context. A strategy is useful under these conditions: (a) the strategy relates well to the second language task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular student’s learning styles preferences to one degree or another, and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. (p.135)

This definition offers an additional explanation to answer why the ‘communicative approach’ discussed above failed in the Chinese context. It neither ‘related well’ nor is ‘a preference’ nor is ‘effective.’

When discussing language learning strategy, the question arises as to whether learners adopt the approach ‘the more the better’ or ‘the fewer the wiser.’ It has been assumed that good language learners use flexible learning strategies whereas poor learners use the same learning strategies. Yamamori *et al.* (2003) in commenting on the effectiveness of learning strategies noted:

low reported strategy use is not always a sign of ineffective learning. Also, reportedly high-frequency use of strategies does

not guarantee that the learning is successful. In a casual class observation, one might see some learners working eagerly and using many strategies, but ...do not employ those strategies effectively. Studies relying solely on frequency data may miss this point. Because frequency results alone do not explain everything about strategy use, it is necessary to include other indices of learners' behaviours that reflect their decision making. 'The more, the better' is not always the case in strategy use. (p.384)

Learners learn better if learning strategies work effectively for the individuals and multiple-use of learning strategies does not necessarily guarantee success.

Politzer and Groarty (1985) offered experimental data which was consistent with a relationship between learning behaviour and gain scores. They reported a correlation between language learning and ethnic background, indicating that learning strategies are influenced culturally. In this study students from different counties appeared to use different groups of learning strategies and it was argued that different learners bring with them different learning strategies.

Liang (1996) later provided a picture of ineffective strategy use in the learning of English in the Chinese context. It was noted that

students who don't know how to learn show the following traits: put Chinese phonetics to English words, rote memorizing words and expressions, go into depth of grammar, word-for-word translation, hardly shake off Chinese. Many students mistakenly think that English is a subject of knowledge and comprehension, they haven't laid their energy on reading, speaking, listening and writing exercises, therefore their skills could not be achieved and as they learn they find it more difficult and finally they fall behind. (p.8; translation by the current author)

Language learning strategies do not automatically turn into effective learning outcomes. Within learning strategies there are good learning strategies and poor learning strategies and counting the times of language strategy use does not help understand good and poor learners. The essence of learning strategy is that a learner who is comfortable and finds the learning process enjoyable and eventually succeeds with the learning progress.

It should not be overlooked that particular values may be cherished in certain contexts. For example, "hard work" is probably one of the prominent characteristics valued in the Chinese setting. This is a frequently discussed issue whenever learning by Chinese students is considered because the Chinese believe those who work hard will succeed sooner or later.

In this connection, Mencius (1970) considered that:

when Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on a man, it will exercise his mind [determination] with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the path of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent. (p.15)

Mencius (1970) pointed to the correlations between "hard work" and "success." In fact, hard work has been regarded not only as an attitude towards learning but also the basic element for success in the Chinese setting and it is deep-rooted value in its culture. This provides some insight as to why recitation and memorisation strategies are applied to learning in China. These learning strategies apparently are related to the education and testing systems which focus on reproducing what is taught rather than learned. Consequently, and naturally, learning strategies such as recitation and memorization are unavoidable even if not successful.

While discussing learning strategies, it is appropriate to bear in mind that learning strategies are generated from motivation. As noted by Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 53) "motivation often leads learners to use particular learning strategies that can facilitate greater skill in language learning." More recently, Yang (2004, p.43) noted that "motivation and learning strategy are often discussed in relation to language learning success because these two elements work as a body in learning." Effective, comfortable and enjoyable learning strategies are the outcomes of continuous trials of individual language learners. It is appropriate to consider that learning strategies are the extended actions or behaviours used to achieve ideal learning results. In fact, since learners are different, even in a given culture, they are completely different and it is unwise to apply learning strategy of one individual to another. Every language learner constitutes a micro-culture and a number of these micro cultures comprise a macro culture which many in sum contributes to the general culture, such as "hard work" in Chinese students.

Conclusion

One purpose of understanding learning strategy-use is to identify how English as a foreign language is learned more effectively. Through discussion and analysis, it seems that strategy-use in language learning is different across cultures, and basically a context-shift (often from second language learning to foreign language learning) requires learners to adapt their learning behaviours. It is acknowledged that not all strategies are effective ones; some are influenced by cultural factors which should be taken into account before labelling them. In other words, cultural factors must be understood before strategies in language learning can be comprehended. Learning strategies, and, in a specific Chinese context, some basis perspectives to learning strategies used by Chinese learners have been discussed in this paper.

References

Biggs, J. B. (1992). Why and how do Hong Kong students learn? Using the learning process questionnaires. *Education*

Paper 14. Hong Kong: Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong

Biggs, J., & Watkins, D. A. (1996). The Chinese learner in retrospect. In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: cultural psychological and contextual influences* (pp.269-285). Melbourne: CERC & ACER.

Brown, H. D. (1987). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New Jersey: prentice Hall Regents.

Dai, J. R. (1998). Problems and considerations about teachers' training in secondary schools. *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools*, 5, 5-7.

Entwistle, N., & Ramsden, P. (1983). *Understanding student learning*. London: Croom Helm.

Ehrman, M. E., Leaver, B. L., & Oxford, R. L. (2003). A brief overview of individual differences in second language learning. *System*, 31, 313-330.

Fillmore, L. W. (1976). The second time around: cognitive and social strategies in second language acquisition. *Unpublished PhD thesis*, Stanford University.

Fillmore, L. W. (1979). Individual differences in second language acquisition. In Charles J. Fillmore *et al.* (Eds.), *Individual differences in language ability and language behaviour* (pp.203-228). New York: Academic Press.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London, Ontario: Edward Arnold.

Gardner, R. C. (2001). Integrative motivation and second language acquisition. In Z. Dornyei & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 1-20). Hawaii: University of Hawaii.

Hu, C. D. (1996). On the differences of Zhang Sizhong's teaching and communicative methodologies. *Teaching Foreign Language in Schools*, 8, 4-6.

Lee, W. O. (1996). The cultural context for the Chinese learner: conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition. In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese Learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp.25-41). Hong Kong/Melbourne: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong/Australian Council for Educational Research.

Levine, A., Reves, T., & Leaver, B. L. (1996). Relationship between language learning strategies and Israeli versus Russian cultural-educational factors. In R. L. Oxford (Ed.), *Language learning strategies around the world: cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 35-45). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Liang, Y. (1996). On problems of two extremes in English teaching in junior secondary schools. *Foreign Language in Schools*, 3, 7-9.

Liu, I. M. (1984). *A survey of memorization requirement in Taipei primamry and secondary schools*. Unpublished manuscript, National Taiwan University, Taipei.

Liu, I. M. (1986). Chinese cognition. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The psychology of the Chinese people*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Mencius. (1970). Mencius, tr. D. C. Lao. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Naiman, N., Frohlich, M., Stern, H., & Todesco, A. (1978). *The Good Language Learner* Research in Education Series No 7. Toronto: the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Nunan, D. F. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oxford, R. L. (1989). Use of language learning strategies: A synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training. *System*, 17, 235-247.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House Publishers.

Oxford, R. L. (1996). Preface: why is culture important for language learning strategies? In R. L. Oxford (Ed.), *Language learning strategies around the world: cross-cultural perspective* (pp. ix-xv). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Oxford, R. L., & Nyidos, M. (1989). Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students. *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 291-300

Politzer, R. L., & McGroarty, M. (1985). An exploratory study of learning behaviours and their relationship to gains in linguistic and communicative competence. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 103-123.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the good language learner can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9, 41-51.

Rubin, J. (1981). Study of cognitive processes in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 2, 118-131.

Rubin, J. (1987). Learner strategies: Theoretical assumptions, research history and typology. In A. L. Wenden., & J. Rubin

- (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 15-30). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice_Hall.
- Schmidt, R., & Watanabe, Y. (2001). Motivation, strategy use, and pedagogical preferences in foreign language learning. In Z. Dornyei & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp.313-359). Honolulu: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Centre/University of Hawaii.
- Seliger, H. W. (1983). The language learner as linguist of metaphors and realities. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 179-191.
- Sha, J. H. (2000). Experimental report on overall reform at No. 1 Secondary School in Gaomi City of Shangdong. *English Teaching and Research Notes*, 1, 22-25.
- Stern, H. H. (1975). What can we learn from the good language learner? Canadian *Modern Language Journal*, 31, 304-318.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinstein, C., & Mayer, R. (1986). The teaching of learning strategies. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (3rd Edition) (pp. 315-327). New York: Macmillan.
- Yamamori, K., Isoda, T., Hiromori, T., & Oxford, R. L. (2003). Using cluster analysis to uncover L2 learner differences in strategy use, will to learn, and achievement over time. *IRAL*, 41, 381-409.
- Yang, Y. B. (2004). *Characteristics of good English learners – urban key senior secondary school students learning English in Yunnan – China*. Unpublished MA thesis. Melbourne: La Trobe University.