

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON EFL LEARNER'S LEARNING STRATEGIES

Ge Wei

North China Electric Power University

Huangfu Wei

North China Electric Power University

ABSTRACT: *To improve their language learning efficiency and outcomes, EFL learners tend to use many learning strategies in second language acquisition. This paper compares the definitions and categorizations of learning strategies provided by well-known western researchers, thus giving a general overview of literature in the field of English learning strategies. Then the paper employs the framework of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) proposed by the western researcher Oxford to make an empirical study on English learning strategies. The subjects of the research are four students from different university. Upon comparing their choice of learning strategies, the result shows that, due to their different requirements of English proficiency and language learning environment, they choose learning strategies with different emphasis. Finally, some suggestions about the application of EFL learners' English learning strategies are put forward. Chinese learners should be less introverted and be more willing to adopt social and affective strategies to learn English effectively.*

KEY WORDS: learning strategies, English foreign language learner, direct strategies, indirect strategies

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, there has been a significant shift in the field of language learning with much more emphasis being put on learners and learning process. Many researchers have attempted to explore a series of factors that contribute to the effectiveness of English learning. In Parallel with this progressive study of successful EFL learner, it has become the primary concern of the researchers as to how learners receive new information and what kinds of strategies they adopt to understand, learn or remember the information. Second language learning strategies are the learner's goal-directed actions for improving language proficiency, fulfilling a task, or making learning more efficient, more effective, and easier. The application of second language learning strategy is a dynamic process of practice. Strategies can determine the consequence of second language learning. Proper strategies can speed up the process of language acquisition. To students who try to learn foreign language, grasp of learning

strategies and skillful use of them, are important factors in language learning.

The Overview of EFL Learning Strategies

The Definition of Learning Strategies

The concept of language learning strategy started with the combination of the learning process and cognitive linguistics. When the concept of strategy is introduced in education, it has taken on a new meaning and has been further converted into learning strategies. As for the exact definition, Quite of few western scholars have different opinions on it so that there has still been a considerable argument about giving a appropriate definition of language learning strategies. However, language learning is a learners-oriented behavior, strategies should be proposed for serving language learners. Many western researchers give their definition on learning strategies from views (see table 1). Generally speaking, there is no agreement on some aspects of the definition of learning strategies. Therefore, to a certain extent, it is easy to cause the concept of ambiguity and inconsistency, which is worth paying attention to.

Table 1. The Definition of Learning Strategies

Author	Definition
Stern (1983)	In our view 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 behaviour.
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.
Rubin (1987)	Learning strategies are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly.
Oxford (1989)	Language learning strategies are behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable.
Cohen (1998)	Learning strategies are learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner. The words "consciously select" are important because they demonstrate the special character of strategy.

Although few researchers define language learning strategies in exactly the same way, there are plenty of basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of language learning strategies. The above definitions indicate that strategies are measures which taken by language learners. Besides, language learning strategies enhance language learning and help promoting language competence, as reflected in the learners' skill in

speaking, reading, listening, or writing.

All these above definitions give insights into understanding the process of learning a language. But, how to define learning strategies is still crucial in supporting the study of language learning framework.

The Classification of Learning Strategies

Ellis (1994) notes that learning strategies vary in numbers of ways, reflecting the type of language learners, the research setting and the particular interests of the researchers. Therefore, different researchers form different frameworks to classify learning strategies.

The work of Rubin (1975), Oxford (1985, 1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have made great contributions to the knowledge of learning strategies. Among their work, Oxford's Strategy for Language Learning is perhaps the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies. Oxford further distinguished the strategy, to divide learning strategies into two main groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consisted of subconscious strategies directly involving the target language while indirect strategies provided indirect support for language learning through more conscious way such as focusing, planning, evaluating. These two classes are subdivided into six subcategories: memory, cognitive, compensation, social, affective and meta-cognitive. Oxford's inventory has a well-understood organization of specific strategies into a hierarchy of levels.

Unlike Oxford, O'Malley and Chamot have divided strategies into three categories depending on the level or type, of processing involved: meta-cognitive, cognitive, social and affective. They grounded the study of learning strategies within the information-processing model of learning developed by Anderson. and In O' Malley and Chamot framework of learning strategies, meta-cognitive strategies include advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, advance preparation, self-monitoring, delayed production and self-evaluation. Cognitive strategies are defined as learning strategies that "operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990:44). They have an operative or cognitive-processing function, directly linked to the performance of particular learning tasks. Cognitive strategies include repetition, resourcing, grouping, deduction/induction, elaboration, translation, transfer and inference. Social/affective strategies concern the ways in which learners interact with other learners and native speakers or take control of one's own feelings on language learning. Examples of such strategies are cooperation and question for clarification. O'Malley and Chamot's three-way distinction is useful and has been generally accepted (Ellis, 1994). Perhaps the reason is that this classification is more consistent with a learner's use of strategies. It implies that second language acquisition is active and

dynamic mental processes.

Studies on the Use of Learning Strategies in Chinese EFL learners

According to applied linguists Skehan's theory, Wen Qiufang divided learning strategies into two groups, management strategies and language learning strategies. The former is about the learning process while the latter is concerned with the learning materials. The researches on foreign language learning strategies in China mainly focus on the following aspects: (1) The survey of strategies, mainly describing how foreign language learners use these strategies; (2) The relationship between the use of strategies and foreign language learning proficiency; (3) The relationship between gender differences and the use of strategies, mainly exploring the similarities and differences in strategy use among different gender groups and the relationship between strategy use and achievement; (4) Strategies training, mainly focusing on strategy training methods and the relationship between strategy training methods and performance. Most of the domestic researches take notice of achieving the good or the bad grades and pay less attention to the cultivation of motivation and interest, and most of researches indicate the problems of small sample size and lack of systematicness.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Subjects of Study

The participants of this research are female second language learners from four different universities, ranging in age from 22 to 25, who are excellent in foreign language acquisition. They are described in detail below.

'A' is a female postgraduate student, majoring in English literature at NCEPU University. She passed CET 8.

'B' is a female non-English Major, but her spoken-English is very good. Besides, she got 7 score in IELTS test. She doesn't have any trouble in communicating with foreigners.

'C' went to Australia to study the course of preschool education and had stayed in the English environment for more than two years.

'D' is also a postgraduate student, but studying in Japan right now. Her researches and courses also require her English ability.

Although all of them are pretty good at English, these four students learned in different language context, which must influence their choice of learning strategies and the result of foreign language acquisition.

Research Method

Interview is chosen as the measurement method of this study, for this is the most suitable measurement tool, considering the number of subjects and the actual situation. The main reason is that the investigator can make a comprehensive inquiry and survey

to the research subjects, then get more authentic data from the actual interview. However, sometimes, the questionnaire cannot accurately reflect the real thoughts of people, which will influence the quality and validity of the data to some extent. Therefore, for the effectiveness of the research, what questions are included in the interview is important. The fixed questions selected in the interview are from the Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)(Version for speakers of other Language Learning English) compiled by Oxford (1990:293). In this inventory, the questionnaire is used to measure six types of language learning strategies, including 50 items. Some questions will be adopted in the interview. In addition, the subjects' age, sex, learning style and other factors were also taken into consideration in the process.

Research Questions in Study

The interview will be structured around three major questions:

First, whether each strategy they used is in either a higher or a lower frequency.

Second, whether their learning environment influences the choice of learning strategies.

Third, whether the choice of English learning strategies is influenced by other factors.

The Research Process

For validity data, it is impossible to get the face-to-face interview, so everyone was interviewed by online video call. Firstly, the researcher marked their differences in education background, major, the time they spent in learning English, English proficiency level, and other factors. Secondly, interviewees were asked questions from the SILL, but not let them choose the level, rather than answer YES or NO. the answer is marked on the paper. These questions are used to measure their choices. Last, they were asked to answer questions based on their own experience to see the impact of the learning environment on their English learning, as well as other factors. Each person will be interviewed for no more than 30 minutes.

THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Analysis of Individual Learning Strategies

According to the answer from the SILL, the data was collected and collated into the table below. (see table 2)

'a/b' a means the number of behavior they have in the process of learning English,

b means the number of all questions in each strategies.

Table 2. Survey Results of the Research Subjects

	A	B	C	D
Memory Strategies	6/9	7/9	4/9	5/9
Cognitive Strategies	11/14	7/14	7/14	11/14
Compensation Strategies	2/6	1/6	6/6	6/6
Meta-cognitive Strategies	9/9	5/9	3/9	4/9
affective Strategies	1/6	2/6	3/6	3/6
Social Strategies	5/6	3/6	5/6	2/6

According to the data in the table and some information they mention in the conversation, we can clearly see that,

Subject 'A' applied strategies of memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive and social more frequently. She used more ways to memorize words than anyone else. As a postgraduate student, she needs to pay more attention to the details of English learning, like reading, writing and so on, so she got a high selection rate of cognitive strategies. But for compensation strategies, as she is an English-major, she is willing to use English words accurately, rather than the ambiguous expression. Then she almost used all methods of meta-cognitive strategies, which shows her strong motivation in English learning. Also she has strong confidence in learning English well, and she seldom use affective strategies to encourage herself. The most important goal of English learning is communication, so an English major will definitely use this social strategy to improve her ability.

Subject 'B' applied strategies of memory, meta-cognitive, affective more often. B is not an English major but pretty good at English, so she must use more methods of memory strategies to memorize those English words. She is likely to use meta-cognitive strategies to make clear the goal of learning English. Then these mental methods of affective strategies will lead her to make progress. Because it is difficult for her to find a suitable English learning environment and also get more chance to communicate with native-speakers, so she doesn't apply much more ways of social strategies compared with those of other subjects.

Subject 'C' is a little different. Because she studied abroad, her only goal of learning English is to communicate with people. So she prefers to choose the compensation and social strategies. She won't spend much time for making plans, memorizing new words and making adjustment of mentality. She would rather find more chance to talk with people in English, than learn English from books. So she got a much lower selection rate on other strategies.

Subject 'D' seems to choose more direct strategies than everyone else. She seldom use

the indirect strategies, but choose the cognitive and compensation strategies, because she often writes in English and reads English materials. Although her English is good, she seldom speaks English, so in the process of learning English, she's unlikely to use the social strategies.

The Overall Analysis of Learning Strategies

Because of the small number of participants in the study, the results could not be representative of the overall situation of all students. Therefore, further research is needed on this issue.

In the light of the data analysis and interview Q & A above, in general, it shows that the Chinese EFL learners used all six learning strategies more or less, and they show no preference or dislike for any of the six major learning strategies. However, not all of the six categories of learning strategies are used equally. Compared with other kinds of learning strategies, these students used more meta-cognitive strategies and social strategies. The results of this study indicate the proportion of strategies used by successful foreign language learners, but do not indicate the frequency of strategies use in their actual learning process. These learners use these learning strategies only on a limited number of times, and some strategies are not often used at all. The frequency of using learning strategy is probably one of the most fundamental reasons that lead to the failure of English learning. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of increasing the frequency of learning strategy use for foreign language learners.

This study also shows that these foreign language learners are less likely to use affective and social strategies. The personality of Chinese learners and their cultural background may be the key factors for this phenomenon. The Chinese cultural background determines that learners attach importance to saving face, are unwilling to take too much risk, and tend to be quiet and introverted. As a result, those learners are not aware of the importance of reducing learning anxiety, lack of initiative and cooperation in the learning process. Chinese learners are not good at motivating themselves and controlling their emotions in learning. According to Oxford, these are an important part of affective and social strategy.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides the background of language learning strategies, and reviews classifications and definitions of different learning strategies, aiming to find the proper strategies for different purposes of learning. Through the empirical study, it is clear to see that every successful learner has their own choice of learning strategies. A great deal of studies have suggested that individual differences play an important role on the second language acquisition. Learners themselves may have clear insights into how

they can learn second language efficiently.

Generally speaking, learning English is not only a process of language acquisition, but also a procedure of strategy application. Different people learn English with different purposes, so they get different English proficiency. Chinese EFL learners tend to agree with their preferred learning strategies, but often doubt the validity of other strategies. But for overall improvement in speaking, reading and writing, some learners need consciously learn from others, they need to be convinced that other successful methods are worthy to be attempted. It is believed that the language learning will become more effective with adopting appropriate strategies.

References

- Cohen, A. D. (1998) *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language* [M]. London: Longman.
- Ellis, R.(1994) *The study of Second Language Acquisition* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1994:529
- Lv Yuanyuan.(2016) The Comparison of the Learning Strategies of Different Learners in Second Language Acquisition.[J].*The Science Education Article Collects*, (12):38-39.
- O'Malley, J.M. & A.U. Chamot. (1990) *Leaning strategies in second language acquisition* [M]. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R.D. Crookall. (1989) Research on language learning strategies: methods, findings and instructional issues [J]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73 (iv) : 404-419.
- Sun Ni.(2007) An Empirical Study of adult second language learners' learning strategies[J]. *Journal of Xi' an International Studies University*. 2007(03):45-48
- Williams,M,& Burden,R.L.(1997) *Psychology for Language Teacher* [M].Cambridge:Cambridge University Press.
- Xu Rongrong.(2013) A Study on Adult's English Vocabulary Learning Strategies Based on Vocabulary Acquisition of Second Language.[J]. Shandong Normal University.
- Xu Jianguo. (2007) The Application of Second Language Acquisition and Learning Strategy in English Learning.[J]. *Qianxinan Teachers' College for Nationalities*, Xingyi, Guizhou, China. (06):113-116