A Review of Selected Research into Chinese EFL Learner Strategies Over the Last Two Decades

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Abstract. This article reviews part of the research on Chinese EFL students’ language learning strategies carried out in the last 20 years and classifies these studies into six main categories: comprehensive strategy use, vocabulary strategies, listening strategies, reading strategies, writing strategies and oral communication strategies. Through comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities in methods and findings of these studies, the author believes that future research in the same domain should be conducted in various cultural contexts and participant selection should not be restricted to tertiary education scenario. Besides, different aspects of the language should also be examined through integrated research methods.

Introduction
Since the late 1970s, there has been widespread research interest in the strategies that learners deploy in acquiring and using second language. Language learning strategy (LLS) has been defined broadly by different scholars in the domain of second and foreign language acquisition [1-3]. Meanwhile, various classifications of LLSs have also been developed by researchers [4-6]. 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. It is predictable that the strategy use of language learners may vary considerably as the consequence of these variables. Numerous studies have been carried out in order to explore the learner strategies of different social-lingual scenarios. The language learning strategies research into Chinese EFL learners started in the early 1980s [9]. From then on, research of great quantity has been documented on Chinese EFL learners’ use of strategies in different subjects as well as learning contexts. This article reviews some of these studies in the last two decades to make summarization and comparison and discusses the main characteristics and limitations of the selected investigations. Fresh but deep insights are given and recommendations for future research are put forward.

A Selective Review of LLSs into Chinese EFL learners

Comprehensive Surveys
Numerous studies have been carries out on the general strategy use of Chinese EFL students and the factors influencing the selection of their strategies. Wen [10] used questionnaires to test 242 tertiary second year EFL major students in order to find a relationship between learn strategies and EFL achievement, identifying that of 15 variables, a combination of traditional and non-traditional learning approaches made a better contribution to learners’ EFL achievement. Later on, Wen and Johnson [7] carried out another survey to investigate learner strategies and their relationship to language learning outcomes in 5 institutions by employing self-developed questionnaires. The respondents were also tertiary EFL majors and the research reveals that there were six variables including three learner traits (sex, L1 and L2 proficiency) and other three clusters of learner strategies (vocabulary learning, tolerating ambiguity and mother tongue avoidance), which had direct effects on EFL achievement. Besides, management strategies had the strongest indirect effect on achievement. These findings were quite similar to those of previous surveys [11]. Based on the previous self-designed questionnaires, another survey was conducted in 2001 by Wen [8] on 72 tertiary 1st, 2nd and 3rd year EFL major students to examine developmental patterns of modifiable
learner variables, their relationship on a longitudinal basis. The researchers found that there were statistical significant differences in the subjects’ perceptions of the variables over a three year period, all of which increasing with the grade they were in at the university; there were stable relations among all the variables; and beliefs and strategies were affected by motivation, and meanwhile strategies were also influenced by beliefs. Likewise, effects of learner factors on EFL learning were tested by Wu et al. [12] through various instruments on 250 second year EFL majors in six foreign language institutes. It was identified that aptitude, motivation, higher institution type, gender, types of middle schools, and field-independent cognitive style had more significant effects on learners’ EFL achievement.

Investigation has shown that the most frequently used strategies were compensation strategy whereas the least frequently used was affective strategy and there was a positive relationship between the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and L2 proficiency [13]. Besides, cognitive and compensation strategies demonstrated significant positive alterations in terms of the proficiency level, which meant that the more proficient learners tended to use these strategies more frequently. Further to this, it was revealed by the statistical analysis that more proficient students also used cognitive and metacognitive strategies significantly more frequently than less proficient students who appeared to favor compensation strategies [14]. Apart from these findings, learners’ strategy use also tends to be influenced by other factors like the learners’ academic major and their learning styles [15, 16].

Strategy use of Chinese EFL students in English learning contexts has also been examined. It was revealed by Goh and Kwah [17] that metacognitive strategies were most frequently employed whereas memory strategies were least often utilized. The results also suggested that more skilled students deployed more cognitive strategies compared with less skilled students and similar situation was also discovered in the use of compensatory strategies. How strategies use relates to language proficiency among Chinese research students in the UK higher education was also analyzed. It was illustrated by the data that the most commonly used strategies were metacognitive strategy. In addition, more proficient participants were likely to take full advantage of naturalistic use of the L2 while less proficient participants found it more frustrating and thus relied on more formal, structured approaches to language learning [18]. Gao [19] tried to identify changes in LLS use of a group of Chinese EFL students at a British university after they moved from China to Britain and discovered that fresh motives, knowledge, and beliefs as well as LLSs were being acquired by some of the students after they began to study in the new learning contexts. Although the conception of learning English as a ‘tool’ was still strong, many participants had stopped the application of rote-learning such as memorizing, regular reviewing and note taking to remember new words. Instead, they resorted to adopting more social and interactive strategies to guess, learn, and apply meanings of new words in real conversations.

Vocabulary Strategies

One of the most heated research topic related language learning strategies is on vocabulary strategy use. Gu [20] used two tertiary second year non-EFL major students as subjects to identify vocabulary learning strategies of good and poor EFL learners through the usage of think-aloud verbal report, finding that good readers try to assign meaning to vocabulary, but the poor readers tend to be rigid in strategy use. Self-designed questionnaires were also employed as instrument to examine vocabulary learning strategies and the relationships between particular strategies and measures of proficiency and vocabulary size [21]. It has been identified by the researchers that self-initiation, selective attention, contextual guessing, skillful use of dictionaries, note-taking, paying attention to word formation, contextual encoding and activation of newly-learned words are predictors of EFL achievement. Another investigation carried out by Gu [22] aimed to discover differences in vocabulary learning strategies and learning outcomes across gender and academic majors, involving the use of self-developed questionnaires and a vocabulary size test. Significant gender differences in strategy use were found, with women using more strategies than men, but there were no apparent differences between science and arts students. Through an adapted version
of questionnaires based on O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Wu and Wang [23] investigated the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and the quality and quantity of students’ vocabulary knowledge, the correlation of which was discovered and there were significant differences between good and poor learners in strategy use on the all 10 categories of strategies. Zhang [24] compared the features of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Masters’ degree level English and non-English majors through questionnaires and vocabulary exercises. It was shown in her findings that while the option of strategies between the two groups overlapped; the frequency of strategy use was statistically diversified, with non-English majors reporting more variety and higher frequency of social-affective vocabulary learning strategies than their counterparts in acquiring basic vocabulary. However, English majors reflected more use of meta-cognitive strategies.

The study involving the largest population on vocabulary strategy use in Chinese EFL students was conducted in Hong Kong by Fan [25]. 1067 first-year degree students of various disciplines, who were also Cantonese speakers, throughout 7 local institutions of higher education were investigated to find out what strategies were conductive to acquiring vocabulary, particularly high- and low-frequency words, and to examine the real usefulness of the vocabulary strategies employed. Data collected through vocabulary tests and the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaires indicated that the respondents in this study used and considered useful the strategies for reviewing and consolidating their knowledge of known words, and that they preferred to employ dictionary strategies. Meanwhile, less proficient students in L2 vocabulary were likely to rely on repetition and association strategies during their learning than their more proficient counterparts.

**Listening Strategies**

Listening strategy use is another research field attracting scholars’ interest. Jiang [26] carried out an investigation at 11 tertiary institutions among 348 second year EFL major students by using questionnaires and language proficiency tests as instruments to find learner strategies and their relationship to their EFL listening comprehension. It was identified that EFL majors’ comprehensive listening comprehension ability was better predicted by functional practice in language learning and reading practice. Goh [27] performed an investigation on 40 tertiary first year EFL learners through think-aloud, interviews and learner diaries to explore listeners’ comprehension strategies and perceptions about ESL listening in relation to proficiency levels. Nine metacognitive and three cognitive strategies were identified in the findings and both successful and less successful listeners showed metacognitive knowledge concerning listening in a second language. Again, Goh [28] examined these listeners’ strategies and skills through which the strategies were exploited. In total 44 listening tactics from the respondents retrospective verbalization were identified. Besides, the researcher found that the higher ability listeners reported more effective use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Hence, it can be concluded that the examination of specific tactics is useful in clarifying some strategies in the literature. Chen, Zhang and Liu [29] studied Chinese EFL students listening strategy use and factors influencing their strategy use in a Web-based computer assisted language learning system. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies were found to be the most frequently used strategies by the participants. It was also revealed that motivation, learning anxiety and learning styles significantly affected the learners’ selection of various listening strategies. However, gender and proficiency levels tended to have no significant influence on the use of listening strategies.

**Writing Strategies**

Research on Chinese EFL learners’ writing strategies is of small quantity. Scholars addressing issues related to this field include Cheng [30], Kirkpatrick [31], Yu [32] and Wang and Wen [33]. Cheng’s research [30] was mainly on how teachers corrected students’ essays by locating learner error types appearing in their work in the writing process, therefore writing strategies were not clearly categorized. Kirkpatrick [31] analyzed traditional Chinese text structures and their influence on the writing in Chinese and English of contemporary mainland in Chinese students, so his focus was on contrastive rhetoric. By contrast, Yu [32] compared the revision in L1 and L2 writing
showing that revision was useful in light of the reinterpretation of revision. Meanwhile, it was revealed in the study that the characteristics of revision in CL1 and EL2 writing were basically similar though some differences between CL1 and EL2 were also identified. It was concluded by Yu that revision could promote the overall quality of a text both in L1 and L2 writing. Wang and Wen [33] examined the use of L1 in composing in L2 through think-aloud protocol analysis on 16 mixed levels of tertiary EFL major students with 4 students from each four levels. They found that the subjects were able to use their L1 and L2 when composing in their L2. It was very likely that while dealing with their writing processes, generating and organizing ideas they depended on L1, but they resorted to L2 when conducting task-examining and text-generating activities. Effects of the manipulation of cognitive processes on EFL writers’ text quality were examined by Ong and Zhang [34]. Results showed that the learners’ writing was improved by the free-writing condition, and the task-content-given condition and the task-content-organization-given condition generated significantly better quality texts than the task-given condition for the former reduced the cognitive load of the task on the EFL writers’ working memory resources.

Reading Strategies

Similarly, studies on reading strategies of Chinese EFL learners have also been scarcely documented. Li and Munby [35] explored the metacognitive reading strategies employed by two Chinese students on the Social Sciences Masters program at Queen’s College, Canada. Data collected through interviews, think-aloud and journals from the participants indicated that the most frequently used strategies were: ‘use of background knowledge’, ‘translation’, ‘self-questioning’, ‘summarization’, and ‘prediction’ (p.204). The subjects were also found to turn to their native Chinese on difficult tasks as it was challenging for them to think in English. Feng and Mokhtari [36] contrasted the reading strategies by advanced Chinese readers with high English proficiency level at an American University, discovering that the use of reading strategies varied according to the degree of difficulty of the texts and the language involved in the texts. L. Zhang [37] adopted a Chinese version of Carrell’s (1989) Metacognitive Awareness Questionnaire (MAQ) to examine possible differences between high-scores and low-scores in their metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among 160 pre-university ESL learners in Singapore who were to start their EAP program. As found by the study, high-ability and low-ability readers showed differences in the use of reading strategies. In addition, guessing at unknown vocabulary items and detailing vocabulary meaning were found to be two predictors of EFL reading achievement. Zhang and Seepho [38] examined metacognitive strategies of English major students in academic reading through a Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire, interviews and reading comprehension tests. A significant positive correlation between metacognitive strategy use and English reading achievement was identified, but the metacognitive strategy use of both high and low proficiency students was at medium level. Paralleled with these findings was another study carried out by Lau and Chan [39], who discovered that poor readers scored lower than good readers in using reading strategies, particularly in the use of sophisticated cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Moreover, the researchers also identified that intrinsic motivation and strategy attribution might facilitate reading development through their positive relations with strategy use.

Communication Strategies

Research into Chinese EFL learners’ oral skills is scant. Chen [40] conducted an investigation on second year graduates and third year undergraduates in Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute to identify communication tactics in English in relation to levels of EFL proficiency. Self-designed concept-identification tasks were used as instruments and the findings demonstrated that frequency, type and effectiveness of oral skills varied according to the subjects’ proficiency levels, with high-proficiency students reporting more use of communication strategies than their low-proficiency counterparts. Moreover, the gap between L1 and L2 was also found to influence the option of communication strategies. Hua et al. [41] investigated the communication strategies among a group of Chinese EFL students to test the frequency of use and types of strategies, finding that the most frequently employed communication strategy was code switching; an inter-lingual
strategy and the least used strategy was word coinage, which belongs to intra-lingual strategy. Besides, it has also been indicated by the investigation that different levels of oral proficiency affect the use of communication strategies through two aspects: the frequency of use and the option of types of communication strategies. Peng [42] analyzed the factors influencing willingness to combination in Chinese EFL classrooms. The data collected through instruments such as semi-structured interviews, learning journals and classroom observations indicated that six elements tend to affect the speakers’ willingness to communicate, namely, learner beliefs, motivation, cognitive factors, linguistic factors, affective factors and classroom environment, and the classroom itself was social-culturally constructed as a function of the interaction of individual and environmental factors.

Discussion

Cultural Contexts

Based on the literature reviewed above, it is apparent that some characteristics of strategy use tend to be typical of Chinese EFL learners. However, it seems that there is a dynamic relationship between strategy use and the learners’ learning contexts. When learning in mainland China the students seem to employ different strategies as while studying in an English learning context due to the shift of learning and cultural settings. However, whatever strategies may be used by Chinese EFL learners, the interpretation should always be related to the specific social and cultural contexts within which language learning is fully situated and be analyzed from social-cultural perspectives. Hence, different cultural contexts would offer novel challenges for the future research. Intercultural comparative studies of classroom practices or across sub-cultural within the country would also offer some fresh concepts to the scholars interested in the associated study. As Norton [43] claims, ‘we wish to study the changing contexts of language learners and the diverse negotiations of language learner identities—research which goes beyond the microstructure of power to investigate the systemic patterns of control that communicative events are indexical of’. Besides, the role of different timescales in strategy use should also be focused. In other words, strategy use across micro time-scales and across more macro timescales, and how the differences in various time scales interrelate and are dynamic should be the interest of future researchers [44].

Subject Selection

Most frequently, the researchers have put their attention to the tertiary students and the majority of the studies were carried out in higher education institutions. Thus the findings reported from these investigations should not be generalized to all Chinese students. While notable achievements in the research related to the learners’ strategies have been accomplished, there is still huge research gap in the selection of subjects for the future studies. For instance, middle school EFL learners have been neglected in the previous research agendas as the investigations concerning middle school EFL students are truly of small quantity. The reasons for the great number of studies focusing on tertiary students may mainly be that most researchers are teaching in universities or colleges thus the collection of data should be easier for them even without the support from other institutions. However, the emphasis of future research should be put on middle school learners not only because this group of population takes up a very import position in the learning context of China as EFL students, but also because that they at a critical crossroad in terms of EFL learning, and once their learning issues are identified and addressed, they can move forward smoothly in the journal of English language learning [45]. Furthermore, different ethnical groups within the country would also be the target for future research. Since the population of China consists of 56 different ethnical groups and most of the minority people have their own language system, therefore they may deploy different strategies when learning the same foreign language though Mandarin Chinese is the commonly accepted language for communication. The research into these ethnical minorities should be interesting.
Aspects of Language

The review of research indicates that comprehensive surveys into Chinese EFL learners’ use of language learning strategy are really many in number. Nevertheless, when it comes to the specific skill areas studied so far, it seems that there still is a long way to go. Statistics are showing that investigations into listening and vocabulary learning strategies are increasing gradually while research into reading, writing and oral communication strategies has been on the decrease. Therefore, reading, writing and communication strategies need to be further explored by the future researchers. One reason for the insufficient documented research into reading may be that reading is often regarded as an efficient and easy way in which Chinese EFL students learn the language most of the time, and the teachers and researchers do not think that Chinese EFL learners encounter challenges in their reading [45]. However, writing skills are generally acknowledged as the most difficult skills, which are expected to test the proficiency level of an EFL learner. Thus, the comparative research on how reading and writing skills are related in learner development would contribute much to the interpretation of issues involved in EFL pedagogy. In terms of oral communication strategies, as developing learners’ communicative competence is being increasingly emphasized in China’s EFL curriculum research into this domain would be of great value to the pedagogical practices. In addition, strategies for less researched aspects of language competence also need to be further explored, such as research on strategic learning of cohesion and coherence, speech acts, and sociolinguistic competence—with a focus on differential strategies for dealing with accuracy, fluency, complexity and appropriateness [44].

Integrated Research

While various instruments have been employed in the studies reviewed, limitations still exist methodically. For those investigations involving only one single instrument such as reports based on quantitative method like questionnaire, the data collected may not be solidly valid due to the limited use of methodology; and for the research based on different qualitative methods (interviews and think-aloud), the results may also not be generalized as the number of participants is very small; even for the studies involving both diverse methods and sufficient sample of subject, there still is some gap needing to be filled. For example, such studies would explore how learners apply strategies to specific language-related tasks and would draw on the perceptions of both teachers and learners concerning the effectiveness of various strategies [46]. Therefore, in order to maximize the reliability and validity of the results, future research should not only involve diverse methods but also should devise new instruments to collect data that would be validated in different contexts, that is to say, for different age groups and educational levels, but also perhaps for different languages [44]. Ideally, integrated approach should be explored to investigate language learning strategies in the future. Cognitive, social and affective variables should be taken into account while the research is being carried out as these factors are vital to the appropriate interpretation of strategy use, including strategy preferences and behaviors deemed in a contextualize and more holistic manner. Thus, for future studies, both quantitative and qualitative, integrated research approach is definitely the optimum option.

Conclusion

It is apparent that LLS research into Chinese EFL learners has gradually become mature in both research design and instrumentation despite minor deficiencies. The relatively small corpus of the research studies reviewed in this paper indicates that the empirical research findings have contributed significantly to the understanding of Chinese EFL learners’ strategy use and to the pedagogical practices in the classroom. Nevertheless, there is still enormous room for the future research related to the similar topics. Diverse social-cultural contexts should be taken into account while the research is carried out and the subject selection could access to middle school students as well. In terms of the particular skills focused in the research, many different aspects of the language
could be studied in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategy use by Chinese EFL learners. In addition, the research methodology involved in the future research studies should be integrated for a more valid and reliable research findings.

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