



Fostering Effective Language Learning Strategies: A Case Study of Successful Learners

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated how college-level Chinese language learners identified effective Language Learning Strategies (LLS) that were influenced by learners' prior learning experience and their native Chinese-speaking teachers' feedback. The finding revealed how these learners were able to adopt LLS based on their learning needs.

Keywords: LLS, language learning strategies, adult learners, learning preference

1. Purpose Statement

Adult language learners come into the classroom with their own beliefs in learning, such as the opinions about curriculum, instruction, as well as language learning strategies (LLS) (Banya & Cheng, 1997) [1]. LLS is defined by Oxford (1990) [2] as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language, and are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability (p.18).

The participants of the non-intervention qualitative study were full time advanced-level adult students of a Chinese program at the School of Resident Education of DLI. The purpose of this case study is to describe how advanced-level adult Chinese language learners at Defense Language Institute (DLI) readjust their language learning strategies (LLS) in a target-language only immersive learning environment.

2. Research Question

The general research question is:

How do American adult language learners enrolled in college-level Chinese language programs identify and adopt effective the language learning strategies (LLS) in order to improve language competency given that there are discrepancies of learning strategy preferences between teachers and students due to cultural differences?

The above research question is three-fold:

First, which LLS are considered effective and most commonly adopted by adult Chinese language learners?

Second, how does adult Chinese language learners' prior learning experience in an American educational setting play a role in their beliefs in LLS?

Third, how do adult Chinese language learners readjust their prior beliefs in LLS based on the inputs from their native-speaking teachers?

3. Research Methodology

The above research question focuses on culture's impact on LLS and explores the role culture plays in fostering a learner's LLS. According to Patton (2014) [3], the notion of culture is central to ethnography approach which aims to describe the culture of a particular group of people and how culture explains their perspective and behaviors. The researcher followed the ethnographic approach to focus on identifying and describing the cultural meanings revealed by the participants under the study. The 16-week case study was ethnographic in nature that involved the investigation of participants' behaviors and culture in a real-world learning setting instead of an experimental setting.

3.1 Participants

The three participants of the study were all advanced-level adult students at the Chinese Program of Continuing Education at Defense Language Institute (DLI). The participants all had previous Chinese learning experiences. They were eligible for the college-level class only after they had successfully



graduated from the Basic Chinese Course at DLI or had achieved the equivalent language proficiency as Basic Course graduates. In addition, all the participants were native speakers of English who grew up and was educated in the US.

The participants started their coursework at DLI in May 2018. They had been selected by their respective Military Units to attend the class at DLI. Because they came to the program at approximately the same time, the three students were assigned to a class taught by two native Chinese-speaking instructors. So, the selection of the participants was random and out of the researcher's control.

The two native Chinese-speaking instructors were hired by the DLI to teach Mandarin Chinese courses as civilian teachers. Both were from Mainland China and had completed their undergraduate education at China's universities. These two teachers both had a master's degree from a university in the US and had over three years' Chinese teaching experience at DLI. Both students and teachers participated in the following study after their consent forms are obtained.

Purposeful sampling was adopted. As Patton (2014) [3] pointed out that purposeful sampling aims to select information-rich cases which will illuminate the study with their nature and substance. This study involved small sample size and focused on the in-depth issues related to language learning strategies. The researcher mainly used criterion-based purposeful sampling and purposeful random sampling. The subjects were all veteran learners with at least 3 years' experience of language learning. These experienced language learners were conscious about their learning styles and strategies and had metacognitive competence to re-adjust their learning strategies in a new learning environment.

In addition, the research agreed with Patton (2014) [3] that random sampling adds credibility to a qualitative research even for small samples. The researcher randomly selected half of the enrolled classes. The current class size was six at DLI. The researcher randomly selected three students to participate into this study.

3.2 Data types

Two types of data were collected and presented in this study. The researcher collected data via interview and class observation.

Interview. Four interview questions were designed by the research in alignment with the research question (see Appendix A). The questions in the interviews were open-ended. The first question was on the subjects' preferred LLS. The second question explored the subjects' prior learning experience and its impact on their LLS. The last two questions focused on how the subjects reacted to their native Chinese-speaking teachers' suggestion on LLS.

Class observation. The researcher designed a scheme for the observation of the participants:

Familiarity with the contents

Do participants seem to have previewed the text? Do they seem to have previewed the new words?

Note taking

Do participants write notes? How much time do they spend on taking notes in class?

Use of dictionary.

Do participants use paper dictionaries or electronic translators? How often do they use them? When?

Do they take notes from the dictionary?

Uptake to errors

Do participants make errors in class? Which kind of errors? How often are errors made? Does the teacher correct participants' errors? Do participants respond with self-repair? Do participants contribute to peer-repair of classmates' errors?

Talking in class

How much do participants speak in class? How many times do they volunteer to speak in English either to answer the teacher's questions or respond to fellow classmates' talk? Do they interrupt the teacher's talk to ask a question? When the teacher checks students' understanding by asking "any problems," do they offer questions?

Talking in group or pair work

What are the participants' roles in group or pair work? Do they volunteer to talk or to organize the group discussion? Do they keep silent? Do they take notes of words said? Do they present the result of group discussion in the class?



3.3 Data triangulation

The research combined the methods of class observation and interviews to collect data. The researcher used interviews to explore students' preferred learning style. The researcher also conducted open-ended interviews with participants and their teachers. All the interviews were semi-structured with an overall framework but allowing for flexibility. Moreover, the researcher combined class observation and document evidence to investigate students' performance. These two types of data provided different perspectives and were complementary to picture the subjects' genuine beliefs in LLS and their practical use of LLS in classroom.

3.4 Data collection

Interview. The interview with the three participants was intended to be executed three times, that is, at the beginning of the semester, in the middle of the semester and at the end of the semester, while the interview with the teachers would be conducted only at the end of the semester. Due to the constraint of time, the researcher only completed the first round of interview. During interview, the researcher changed the order of questions and ask extra sub-questions to obtain extensive follow-up responses.

The researcher did not take notes during the interview because it might be distracting to the interviewees and the researcher expected a natural and relaxed atmosphere in the interview. Instead, the researcher audiotaped the interviews, then transcribed and analyzed the transcription later. There was no time limit to the interview. It finished when the researcher had all the information needed.

Class observation. The researcher received approval of those observed including the teacher and all the students in advance. In addition, the researcher obtained the permission from DLI authorities. The researcher asked for lesson plans from the teacher so that the researcher had an overall idea about the learning schedule of the participants during that period. The researcher did not explicitly announce which period of class to be observed so that the teacher and students did not make special preparation. The researcher stayed quiet during the class session to make sure that the presence of the researcher in the class would not make the students and the teacher feel uncomfortable. The class was videotaped.

4. Presentation of Data

4.1 Coding process

The three subjects' answers to the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. Data transcription was proof read by the participants. In addition, the researcher videotaped the observed class session and took detailed field notes in each aspect of the planned observation schemes. The author created the following five themes of coding and used Nvivo to process the sources and frequency.

Nodes	Frequency
Students learn the language through interaction	11
Students learn the language in context	7
Students take risks in language learning	6
Students take advantage of prior learning experience	4
Students select effective learning strategies offered by teachers	5

Table 1. Frequency Counts of Codes

4.2 Data analysis

The first three themes are created to answer the first aspect of the research question. The researcher aimed to discover the most commonly valued LLSs by the participants. The first three themes in addition to the fourth one so shed light on the second aspect of the research question: culture's impact. The fifth theme focuses on how the subjects perceived their teachers' preferred LLS.



Learning through interaction. All the subjects highly valued the importance of learning the language via interaction. The frequency count for the themes is 11. The participants constantly mentioned how they had benefited from learning by communicating with native speakers in target-language speaking communities. For example, Student 1 mentioned that “I also love to speak the language with native speakers. I have been to China and Taiwan for immersion and travel. I enjoyed talking to the locals in Chinese.” The subjects’ passion in interaction was observed in their participation in group and pair work in the classroom. The participants were actively engaged in pair work with their learning partner. In addition, the subjects had substantial student talk in the classroom which was also observed by the researcher.

Learning in context. The frequency of this theme is 7. All the subjects had mastered certain LLS of learning and practicing newly learned language in context. They valued the use of context for learning vocabulary and grammar patterns. None of them preferred rote memorization and grammar-translation method. For example, Student 1 provided vivid details on how he picked up vocabulary. According to him, he would “prefer learning vocals in the context like a reading material. I like to learn the vocabulary in the context because it helps me make good guess based on the known information. But, I always make notes of the newly learned vocabulary.”

Taking risks. The frequency of this theme is 6. Two out of the three subjects explicitly mentioned that they are inclined to take risks in learning the language. They explained that they did not feel timid or anxious when they made mistakes. It was observed during the class that the subjects were positive with the teacher’s error correction. Subject 2 particularly appreciated the teacher’s timely and effective error correction. The researcher noticed during class observation that all the subjects appeared positive to the teachers’ feedback and volunteered to try the newly learned grammar patterns.

Prior learning experience. This theme aims to answer the second aspect of the research question: culture’s impact on the learners’ preferences of LLS. All the three subjects agreed that cultural background played a critical role in shaping their LLS. All the subjects claimed that they were educated in a “flexible” and “interactive” learning environment before they started language learning at DLI. The subjects’ prior learning experience was transferred to language learning and influenced their LLS preference. For example, Student 2 mentioned that when he studied Spanish in high school, he enjoyed the pair work.

Selecting LLS offered by teachers. The participants had different attitude with the LLSs suggested by their Chinese teachers. The frequency of this theme is 5. Only Student 3 explicitly admitted the effectiveness of the LLSs offered by the teachers. In contrast, the other students did not appreciate their teachers’ preferred LLS and considered them “unnecessary” and “ineffective.”

It was observed that during the class, Student 2 did not preview the lesson which was highly recommended by the teachers. He spent almost no time on note taking, which was another highly valued strategy by the teachers. However, this student was most active in class. His student talk in class was almost double of the other two.

5. Conclusion

According to Abraham and Vann’s (1987) [4] model of second language learning, learners have, at some level of consciousness, a philosophy of how language is learned. This philosophy guides the approach they take in language learning situations, which in turn is manifested in observable or unobservable strategies used in learning and communication. All the three subjects were mature and autonomous language learners who had established reliable LLS and was conscious of their learning style and needs. They were very selective with the LLS offered and suggested by their teachers. When their LLS conflicted with the teachers’, the subjects were not easily influenced by the teachers. In college-level language classrooms, teachers need to pay attention to the students’ diverse learning styles and need to respect for the students’ preference. Imposing one particular LLS without the learners’ consent would result in negative impact. Instead, it is the teachers’ responsibility to provide LLS-related training based on analysis of their students’ learning style and prior learning experience. Second, according to Oxford (1990) [2], the formation of learning strategies is related to many cultural factors. In Chinese language classrooms in the US, most teachers are native Chinese speakers who were born and educated in their home countries. Students and teachers may hold different opinions in terms of adopting learning strategies due to their distinctive educational and cultural experiences. For instance, the teachers may insist on “teaching” the students one particular “effective” way of learning while the students are reluctant to accept it because it is not one of the typical ways used in the American culture and educational environment. More importantly, as adult language learners, students have already established their learning strategies, effective or not, for a significant time, making them



too difficult to alter at this stage. As a result, American students may experience the difficulty of adapting their learning strategies to the Chinese language learning environment because their strategies are so deeply rooted in the American culture.

It is critical to recognize the conflicts between students' perception of LLS and teachers' beliefs due to cultural differences. To survive in an unfamiliar language and culture learning environment, adult second language learners need to adapt their learning strategies. Horwitz (1988) [5] raised the problem of the mismatches of beliefs between students and teachers cross cultural settings. However, currently, there does not exist a study focusing on the mismatches of Chinese teachers' and American students' beliefs in LLS due to cultural differences as well as their impact on language learning.

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