Language Learning Strategies and English Language Proficiency: An Investigation of Chinese ESL Students at NUS

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This paper reports on the findings of a study conducted to investigate the language learning strategies used by the PRC pre-matriculation students in the SM3 intensive English programme run by CELC. The study examined the relationship between the PRC students' use of learning strategies and their English proficiency. The study found that (1) there was a strong relationship between strategy use and English proficiency, (2) the more a student used a variety of language learning strategies, the more proficient a student became in language learning, and (3) the use of some specific strategies was positively correlated to improvement of sub-language skills such as oral communication and composition.

Introduction

Given the same learning environment, the same learning material, and the same teaching staff, ESL students vary greatly in the speed with which they learn the language (Ellis, 1997). Individual differences have been identified as variables influencing language learning outcomes (Altman, 1980; Skehan, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Of the individual differences identified, use of language learning strategy is a key factor affecting learners' rate of language acquisition and the ultimate level of language proficiency (Ellis, 1997).

Politzer and McGroarty (1985) examined the relationship between a range of "good learning behaviours" by using a questionnaire and gained scores on an intensive course. They reported that certain individual strategies showed significant associations with their proficiency measures. They also found some differences in the reported strategy use between the two main groups, Asians and Hispanics. Green and Oxford (1995) reported that students who were better in their language performance generally reported higher levels of overall strategy use and frequent use of a greater number of strategy categories. Grainger (1997)

investigated the use of language learning strategies by learners of Japanese as a foreign language at a tertiary institution. A major finding was that students from European backgrounds and students from Asian backgrounds preferred different learning strategies.

However, there is little study done on the relationship between Chinese ESL students' language learning strategies and their English proficiency. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between Chinese ESL learners' language learning strategies and their English proficiency so as to explore more effective means of English language teaching to Chinese ESL students.

Issues Related to Language Learning Strategies

To answer the question as to why some learners do better, researchers such as Rubin and Stern started the research on *What good learners can teach us?* (Rubin, 1975) and W*hat can we learn from good language learners* (Stern, 1975). The studies started with the purpose of finding what the successful students did and ended up forming the concept of learning strategies. Their studies have led to numerous researches and discussions of the concept. The recognition of the existence of learning strategies has provided new insights for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of language learning and teaching. However, there has been a heated debate on the appropriate ways of defining and categorising language learning strategies. There has been no strong consensus over these issues as yet after decades of debating.

After reviewing the definitions of learning strategies by Chamot (1987), Oxford (1989), Rubin (1987), Stern (1983), and Weistein and Mayer (1986), Rod Ellis (1997) defined language learning strategies as consisting of mental or behavioural activities related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use.

The problem with the definition of language learning strategies arises from the classification of language learning strategies. There are many ways to classify language learning strategies (Skehan, 1989; Rubin, 1981; Wong-Fillmore, 1976, 1979; Naiman et al., 1978). Two main ways are reported here. The first was proposed by Oxford and her colleagues (1987). Using a

factor analytic investigation of language learning strategies, Oxford, Nyikos, and Crookall (1987) identified five factors underlying language learning strategies: (a) General Study Habits, (b) Functional Practice, (c) Speaking and Communicating Meaning, (d) Studying and Practising Independently, and (e) Mnemonic Devices.

The second way was proposed by Chamot (1990). Chamot presented three major classes of strategies: (a) Metacognitive, (b) Cognitive, and (c) Socio-Affective. Regardless of how language learning strategies are classified, research indicates that language learning may involve the use of several independent learning strategies that may have different effects on proficiency. Despite the problems in classifying strategies, researchers acknowledge that there are positive relationships between the frequent use of learning strategies and achievement in the language (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993).

Research Design

Participants

The participants (98 male and 32 female) were all pre-matriculation students participating in a six-month intensive English programme at the National University of Singapore before they became matriculated students at this university. All participants, 18 years old on average, were from the People's Republic of China. They were all recruited by various universities in China and scored well in the National University Entrance Examination conducted by China's Ministry of Education. They were chosen to study in Singapore as part of the academic exchange programme between the two countries. All participants had studied English as a subject for at least six years in junior and senior middle schools in China.

Instruments

Oxford (1986) provides a comprehensive classification of learning strategies based on her definition of language learning strategies. They are, according to Oxford, techniques that individuals use to help them learn L2 material and improve their

skills either consciously or subconsciously. Oxford (1986) developed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), a self-report assessment designed to determine the extent to which individuals use various strategies to promote L2 learning. The instrument measures language learning strategies in six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

In SILL, the strategies are grouped into two types: direct (that is, strategies which directly involve the target language) and indirect. The direct strategies include memory, cognitive, and compensation while the indirect ones include metacognitive, affective, and social.

In direct strategies, memory strategies pertain to the storing and retrieval of information; for example, "I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them". Cognitive strategies, although controversial in their definitions, are about manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner; for example, "I use the English words I know in different ways". Compensation strategies help ESL learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge; for example, "To understand unfamiliar English words I make guesses".

In indirect strategies, metacognitive strategies let learners control their own cognition; for example, "I look for people to talk to in English". Affective strategies relate to the regulation of feelings and attitudes; for example, "I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English". Social strategies are the ones that take account of the fact that language is a form of social behaviour, involving communication with other people; for example, "I practise English with other students".

Students in this study, according to the requirements of the SILL inventory, responded to each item by circling on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("Always or almost always true of me").

A proficiency test was used to determine students' L2 proficiency in terms of vocabulary and grammar, composition, and oral communication. The same test was administered at the

beginning and the end of the programme to collect two sets of data for comparison.

Procedures and Design

All participants took the English proficiency test as a pre-test in the first week of the programme. In the midst of the programme, students completed a questionnaire on their use of language learning strategies (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). At the end of the programme, they took the same proficiency test as a post-test.

In the 1995 study by Green and Oxford on the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency, they used proficiency as an independent variable and strategy use as a dependent variable. However, Bremner (1998) stated that if one assumes that the goal of learning strategy research is to establish whether strategy use has a positive effect on the enhancement of proficiency, it would seem to be more logical to set strategy use as an independent variable.

In the current study, strategy use was used as an independent variable and proficiency as a dependent variable. The following questions were addressed:

1. How often do the Chinese students use different language learning strategies?
2. What is the relationship between the general use of language learning strategies and the overall increase of language proficiency?
3. What is the relationship between the use of specific language learning strategies and the sub-skills of language proficiency?

Findings

The findings are presented based on the three questions addressed in the study. In the first part, the findings on students' general application of language learning strategies are reported. In the second part, the findings on students' application of language learning strategies and their relationship with the overall English proficiency are examined. In the third part, the findings on students' application of specific strategies and their relationship

with the proficiency in sub-skills such as vocabulary and grammar, composition, and oral communication are shown.

Application of All Language Learning Strategies

Student's ranking of each strategy in the questionnaire was computed to reach the mean scores, representing the frequency of each strategy used by the students in this study. The calculated result indicates that the frequency the students used different strategies follows this order (from the highest to the lowest): compensation, metacognition, cognition, social factors, affective factors, and memory (see Fig.1). Out of a maximum 5-point scale, the compensation strategy was the highest (3.45) while the memory strategy was the lowest (2.93).

This finding seems to suggest that due to a weak foundation in learning and using the language, the students have to resort to all means available to compensate for their weaknesses. It also may indicate that students have not learned a variety of ways to memorise language related information yet. This finding could be significant in providing guidelines for choosing particular strategies and designing relevant activities for training students to use specific strategies to solve language learning problems.
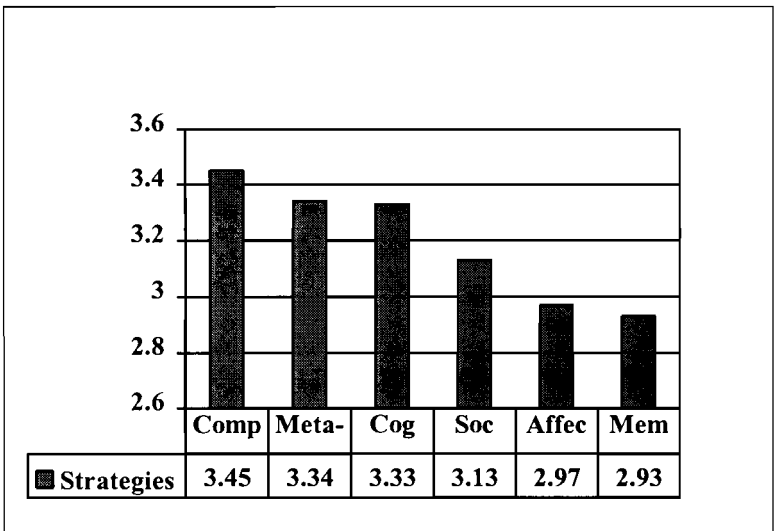
	Comp	Meta-	Cog	Soc	Affec	Mem
Strategies	3.45	3.34	3.33	3.13	2.97	2.93

Fig. 1 Use of language learning strategies

In a study (Stephen Bremner, 1998) to survey the language learning strategies used by a group of Hong Kong learners, the same instrument, the questionnaire, Strategies Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford, was used. Here is a comparison of the results from Bremner' study and the present study (see Fig. 2 and Table 1). The results of both studies showed that compensation and metacognitive strategies were the most used, while affective and memory strategies were the least used. The only obvious difference between these two studies is that the strategy used by the students from the present study is consistently higher than that of the study by Bremner. The results from the present study and Bremner's support the research findings by Grainger (1997) and Politzer and McGroarty (1985) that L2 learners from the same background tend to prefer the same language learning strategies, considering the fact the students from both studies have Chinese as their mother tongue.
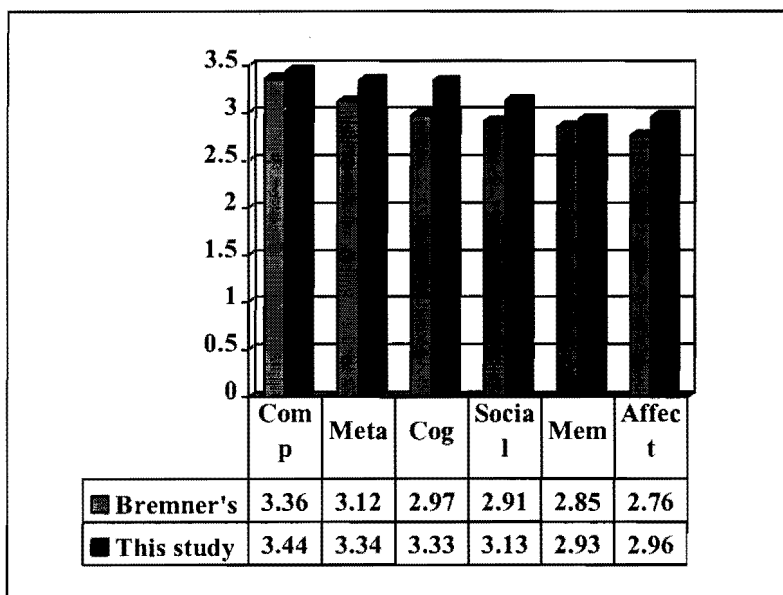

	Comp	Meta	Cog	Social	Mem	Affect
Bremner's	3.36	3.12	2.97	2.91	2.85	2.76
This study	3.44	3.34	3.33	3.13	2.93	2.96

Fig. 2 A comparison of the results of Bremner's study and the present study

Table 1. A Comparison of the results of Bremner's study and the present study

	This Study		The Study by Bremner (1998)	
1	Compensation	(3.45)	Compensation	(3.36)
2	Metacognitive	(3.34)	Metacognitive	(3.12)
3	Cognitive	(3.13)	Cognitive	(2.97)
4	Social	(3.13)	Social	(2.91)
5	Affective	(2.96)	Affective	(2.85)
6	Memory	(2.93)	Memory	(2.73)

Language Learning Strategies and Language Proficiency

In order to test the relationship between the overall increase in the language proficiency and language learning strategy use as a whole, we divided our participants into three groups based on their use of all the strategies. Those using the least strategies were put into the low group, those using the medium strategies were put into the medium group, and those using the most strategies were put into the high group.

A one-way analysis of variance statistical procedure was used to test the differences in the overall increase in language proficiency as a function of overall strategy use. The analysis yielded a significant F ratio of 3.62, which indicated that there was a significant difference among the groups on the overall gain in language proficiency ($p < .029$) (see Table 2). Follow-up analyses indicated that the high group (M=16.45) had a significantly greater increase in proficiency than did the low group (M=12.62). The medium group had a mean of 14.96 (see Fig. 3).

Table 2. Analysis of variance for increase in overall proficiency by overall strategy use

Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	362.9	181.5	3.62	.029
Within Groups	127	636	50.1		
Total	129	6728.3			

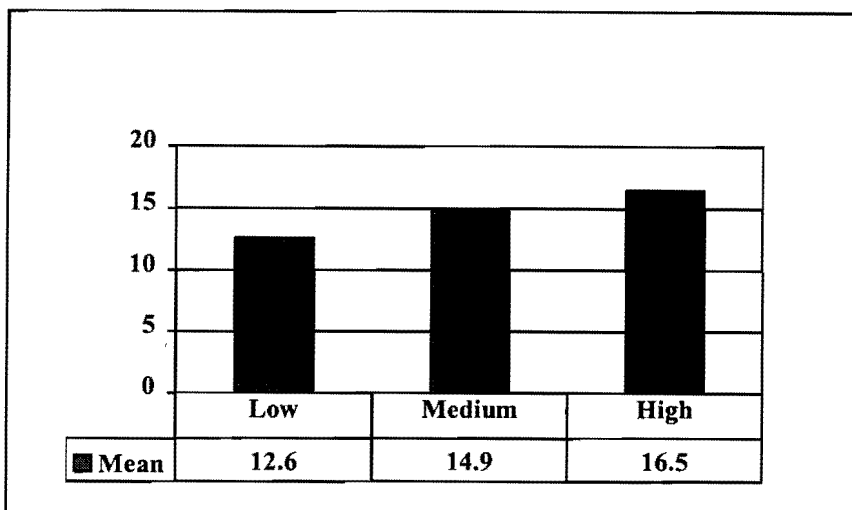| Mean	Low	Medium	High
	12.6	14.9	16.5

Fig. 3 Overall increase in proficiency by all six strategies

Language Proficiency and Metacognitive Strategy

In order to test the relationship between the overall increase in language proficiency and the use of metacognitive strategy, we divided our participants into three groups according to their use of metacognitive strategies. Those using the least metacognitive strategies were put into the low group, those using the medium amount of metacognitive strategies were put into the medium group, and those using the most metacognitive strategies were put into the high group. A one-way analysis of variance statistical procedure was used to test the differences in the overall gain in language proficiency as a function of metacognitive strategy use. The analysis yielded a significant F ratio of 3.16, which indicated that there was a significant difference among the groups on the increased overall proficiency ($p < .05$) (see Table 3). Follow-up analyses did not indicate any significant difference among the groups while the low group had a mean of 12.54, the medium group had a mean of 12.5, and the high group had a mean of 16.06. It seems that the more the students applied the metacognitive strategy, the greater the overall increase they achieved between the pre-test and the post-test (see Fig. 4).

Table 3. Analysis of variance for increase in overall progress by Metacognitive strategy use

Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	319.02	159.51	3.16	.05
Within Groups	127	6409.31	50.47		
Total	129	6728.33			

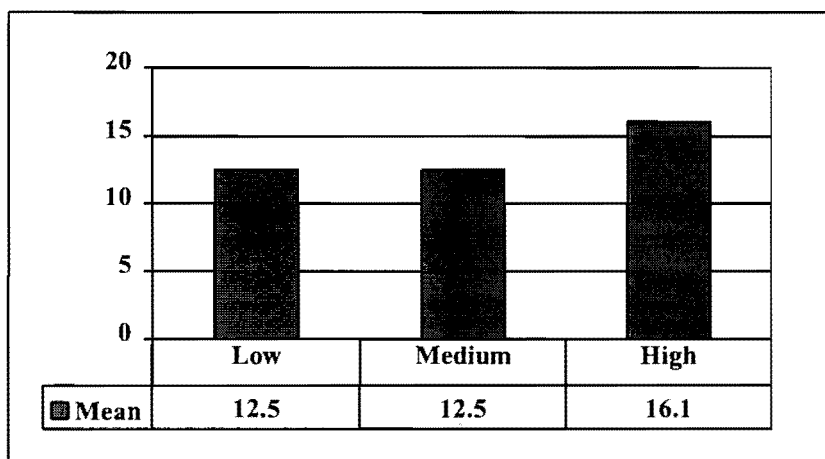|	Low	Medium	High
▦ Mean	12.5	12.5	16.1

Fig. 4. Overall increase in proficiency by metacognitive strategy

Composition Proficiency and Memory Strategy

In order to test the relationship between the overall increase in the composition proficiency and the use of memory strategy, we divided our participants into three groups according to their use of memory strategies. Those using the least memory strategies were put into the low group, those using the medium memory strategies were put into the medium group, and those using the most memory strategies were put into the high group. A one-way analysis of variance statistical procedure was used to test the differences in the increase in composition proficiency as a function of memory strategy use. The analysis yielded a significant F ratio of 3.35, which indicated that there was a significant difference among the groups on the increased overall proficiency ($p < .038$) (see Table 4). Follow-up analyses indicated that the

medium group (M=12.46) had a significantly greater increase in composition proficiency than did the low group (M=7.81). The high group had a mean of 10.8 (see Fig.5)

Table 4. Analysis of variance for increase in composition by memory strategy use

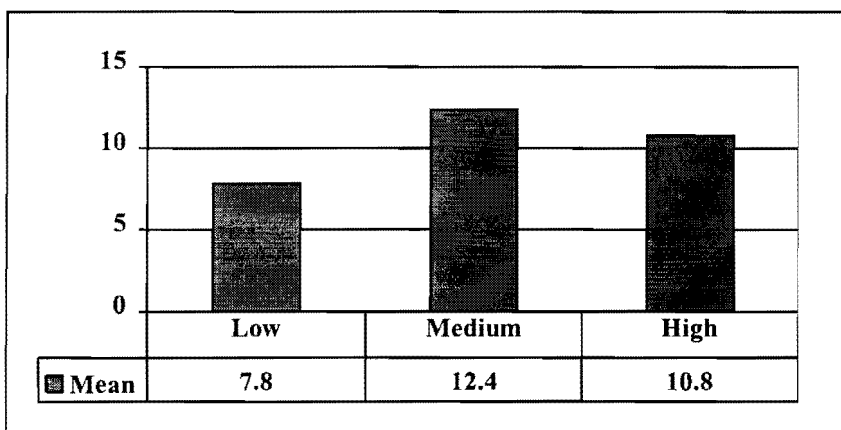| Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	476.99	238.49	3.35	.038
Within Groups	127	9034.40	71.14		
Total	129	9511.39			

Fig. 5. Increase in composition by use of memory strategy

Oral Proficiency and Cognitive Strategy

In order to test the relationship between the overall increase in oral English proficiency and cognitive strategy use, we divided our participants into three groups based on their use of cognitive strategies. Those using the least cognitive strategies were put into low group, those using the medium amount of cognitive strategies were put into the medium group, and those using the most cognitive strategies were put in the high group. A one-way analysis of variance statistical procedure was used to test for differences in the increase in oral English proficiency as a function of cognitive strategy use. The analysis yielded a significant F ratio of 5.1, which indicated that there was a significant difference

among the groups on the increase in oral English proficiency ($p <$ .007) (see Table 5). Follow-up analyses indicated that the high group (M=12.47) had a significantly greater increase in oral English proficiency than did the low group (M= 8.14). The medium group had a mean of 10.17 (see Figure 6).

Table 5. Analysis of variance for increase in oral English scores by cognitive strategy

Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	469.1	234.5	5.1	.007
Within Groups	127	5746.4	45.2		
Total	129	6215.6			

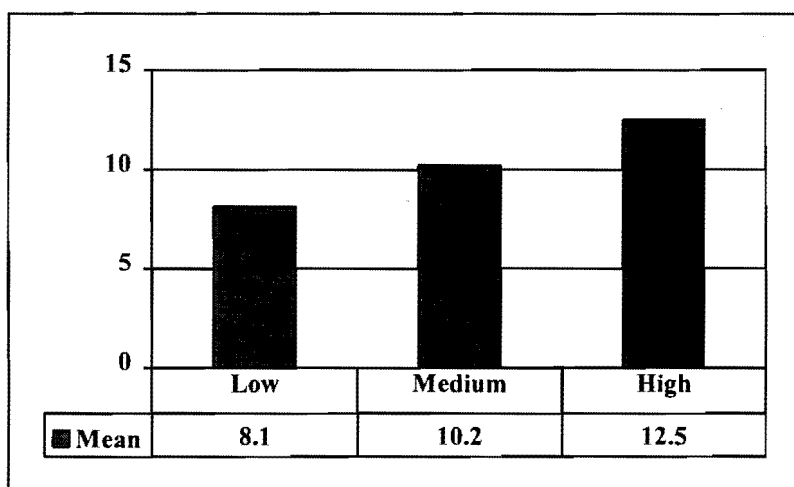|	Low	Medium	High
■ Mean	8.1	10.2	12.5

Fig. 6. Increase in oral English by use of cognitive strategy

Composition Proficiency and Affective Strategy

In order to test the relationship between the overall increase in composition proficiency and affective strategy use, we divided our participants into three groups according to their use of affective strategies. Those using the least affective strategies were put into the low group, those using the medium affective strategies were put into the medium group, and those using most affective strategies were put into the high group. A one-way analysis of

variance statistical procedure was used to test for differences in the increase of composition proficiency as a function of affective strategy use. The analysis yielded a significant F ratio of 3.19, which indicated that there was a significant difference among the groups on the increase in composition proficiency ($p < .04$) (see Table 6). Follow-up analyses indicated that the high group (M=12.) had a more significant increase in composition proficiency than did the medium group (M=10.1). The low group had a mean of 7.8 (see Fig. 7).

Table 6. Analysis of variance for increase in composition scores by affective strategies

Source	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	2	455.7	227.8	3.19	.04
Within Groups	127	9055.7	71.3		
Total	129	9511.3923			

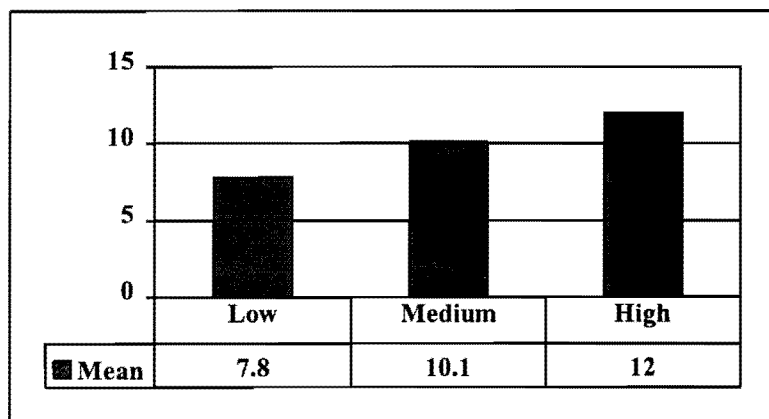|	Low	Medium	High
▨ Mean	7.8	10.1	12

Fig. 7. Increase in composition proficiency by use of affective strategy

Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study will be discussed first, and the implications then drawn. The major purpose of this investigation was to determine the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and gain in English proficiency.

General Use of Language Learning Strategies

The present study found that PRC students used compensation strategies most, followed by metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, social strategies, affective strategies, and memory strategies. Using the same instrument, Stephen Bremner (1998) surveyed the language learning strategies used by a group of Hong Kong learners and came to a similar conclusion, that is, compensation and metacognitive strategies were the most often used, while affective and memory strategies were the least used. The finding from the present study is also in support of the findings by Grainger (1997) and by Politzer and McGroarty (1985), that students from the same backgrounds tend to prefer the same strategies.

This finding and findings from similar studies have pedagogical implications. The findings overtly indicate that when ESL teachers provide learning strategies to their students, particularly students from the same background, they should be aware that these students tend to prefer identical strategies. Therefore, they should pay more attention to these strategies that are less frequently used. This can be done by drawing students' attention to such strategies and getting them to apply them in language learning.

Language Proficiency and Use of Six Strategies

When all six categories were combined and used as an independent variable, the results indicated that the more students used all the strategies, the more progress they made in their language proficiency. This finding shows that the general level of use of language strategies is a significant predictor for students' progress in this intensive English programme.

Language Proficiency and Metacognitive Strategy

When metacognitive strategy was used as an independent variable, the result indicated that the more the students used this particular strategy, the more progress they made in their overall language proficiency. This finding supported the observation of O'Malley and Chamot (1990) that "not all strategies are equivalent." Metacognitive strategy, including strategies such as goal setting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating is one of the most effective language learning strategies. This finding provides some pedagogical implication in designing the training programme on using language learning strategies.

Composition Proficiency and Memory and Affective Strategies

When memory and affective strategies were used as individual variables respectively, they both showed significant impact on the progress students made in writing compositions. It indicates that training on how to use memory and affective strategies might increase students' progress in composition since memory strategy will enhance students' use of authentic language rather than creating non-standard English or *Chinglish* and the use of affective strategy makes students feel less ill at ease, more confident and self-assured when writing.

Oral Proficiency and Cognitive Strategy

When cognitive strategy was used as an independent variable, the finding indicated that the more students used this strategy, the more progress they made in their proficiency in oral English. This finding shows that the use of cognitive strategies is a significant predictor of a student's progress in oral English in this intensive English programme. Since cognitive strategy is more concerned with the direct activities that promote learning, the strategy represents what students actually do in oral communication. This is also different from indirect strategies that have more to do with affective feelings.

The results of this study indicated a relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency. However, the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency in this study should be

interpreted with caution. One obvious question is whether such findings should be interpreted as being a correlational or causal relationship.

Interpretation of Findings

There are three possible ways of looking at strategies and their relationship with proficiency. The first is to see the use of strategies as an outcome of proficiency and this being the case, there is seemingly no necessity to further investigate them but to focus on what helps students acquire proficiency. The second is to see them as having a uni-directional causal role in increasing proficiency, but there is no strong evidence for this as yet. The third is to accept the view of McIntyre (1994), and Green and Oxford (1995) that the relationship between the two is mutual, and that causality is bi-directional.

Green and Oxford (1995), in examining the relationship between proficiency and language learning strategy use, reported "students who were better in their language performance generally reported higher levels of overall strategy use and greater use of a greater number of strategy categories" (p. 265). Regarding the association between reported strategy use and proficiency, particularly the issue of causality, Skehen (1989) and Rees-Miller (1993) pointed out that the existence of causality is a subject of debate and the correlation between the two may not necessarily suggest the causality in a particular direction. When reporting that more proficient students make better use of strategies, McIntyre's interpretation is that "either proficiency influences the choice of strategies or that strategy choice is simply a sign of proficiency level" (McIntyre 1994:188).

Our interpretation is that there is a causality relationship between proficiency and strategy use. It may not be a one-way causality. To be more exact, it is an interactive causality relationship. While active use of strategies helps students attain higher proficiency, the high proficiency, in turn, makes it more likely that students will select more active use of strategies.

Recommendations for ESL Teachers

As is indicated in this study, there is a strong relationship between the use of language learning strategies and language proficiency. However, if we accept the assumption that strategy use and language proficiency are mutual and bi-directional, we could draw some pedagogical implications. Park (1997) reported a significant relationship between language learning strategies and TOEFL scores and also found that all six categories of language learning strategies were correlated with TOEFL scores. He suggested that strategy training should be conducted in classrooms to help students become autonomous L2 learners outside the classrooms where much L2 learning occurs. Therefore, one way to increase the Chinese students' language proficiency is to provide training on the use of language learning strategies.

Three different methods for training the Chinese students' use of language strategies are recommended.

Training on Raising Awareness of Learning Strategies

This training is for the purpose of raising learners' consciousness of the existence of language strategies. Participants become aware of and familiar with the general idea of language learning strategies. They are exposed to situations where strategies are applied in helping L2 learners solve a variety of language tasks. In this training, however, the students actually do not engage themselves in any application of language learning strategies.

The training on raising the awareness is an important step leading students to becoming conscious users of various strategies. Most likely, it is the first time these Chinese students come to know about the concept of learning strategies. Therefore, its introduction and instruction should be fun and motivating so that participants will be encouraged to construct and expand their knowledge of strategies at a later time. For this reason, it is best not to use the lecturing format for this training.

Intensive Language Learning Strategy Training

Intensive language learning strategy training is best conducted in the format of a workshop where students will be

involved in the learning and practice of a number of strategies that are suitable for the particular language level of the students. The teaching should be done with actual learning tasks, usually those found in the language learning programmes. The advantage of this training is that the teacher has total control of time and students will get intensive training and be able to associate the strategies with their learning at hand immediately. The disadvantage is that the workshop might not have adequate long-term effect on enhancing students' use of the learning strategies due to the time constraint.

Strategy Training Incorporated into Regular Teaching

The incorporated training is probably the most effective of all training methods mentioned here. This method, like intensive strategy training, involves learning and practising with actual language tasks. The main difference is the time; it is not a one-time workshop. The teachers combine the training with regular class teaching, that is, the training is incorporated into the learning and teaching activities.

Sometimes, however, students may feel that this approach appears to be haphazard because the teacher may not be able to introduce all the materials and provide training in all strategies systematically. To solve this problem, the teacher needs to design activities, choose appropriate material and provide training in all learning strategies systematically. This approach may leave a good impression on students and should work well with most students due to the consistency and wide coverage of the strategies.

Whichever type of training a teacher chooses, a practical procedure will usually consist of four steps. Here is a description of these four steps.

1. Determine the needs. The teacher should find out if there is such a need in the students. To begin with, the teacher can introduce some real examples L2 learners face in their learning and ask students how they will solve them. Then the teacher can show the students how the problems could be solved by applying certain types of strategies. Students may develop a great interest in such strategies and ask for training on language learning strategies.

2. Select a strategy or various types of strategies. The choice of strategies should depend largely on the ESL students' language proficiency or the emphasis of the course (oral or written communication). Those strategies that are easy to apply can be taught first. Difficult ones will be introduced later.

3. Prepare teaching material and learning activities. This is a key step that should lead to the success of the training. Painstaking care and planning have to be made. Sometimes a well-planned activity might not work as well as expected, but teachers could gradually build up their expertise so as to train the students more successfully.

4. Conduct and evaluate the training. Students will be given plenty of opportunities to practise the strategies being taught. Teachers' evaluation and reflection on implementation of various strategies are crucial. The evaluation needs to be carried out at different stages of the planning and training process. This will enable further modification for future instruction.

Conclusion

Despite the problems in defining and classifying language learning strategies, research continues to support the theory that learning strategies help learners take control of their learning and become more proficient learners. The findings from the present study confirm the conclusions by other researchers (Green and Oxford, 1995; McIntyre, 1994) that language learning strategies are related to language proficiency and that the use of different strategies might lead to an improvement in different areas of language development.

The pitfalls in interpreting the relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency notwithstanding, the findings from the present study appear to be in accordance with the suggestion by other researchers (McIntyre, 1994; Skehen, 1989; Rees-Miller, 1993) that there is a causality relationship between proficiency and strategy use. However, the general disposition is that such a causal relationship is not a one-

way direction but rather an interactive causality relationship. While active use of strategies helps students attain higher proficiency, the high proficiency, in turn, makes students more active users of different strategies. Therefore, language teachers should not only depend on teaching language *per se* but also engage students in a variety of activities by various methods to make students better and more autonomous language learners. Training on strategy use may be one of the answers.

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