# Student Use of Language Learning Strategies in Second/Foreign Language (L2) Learning—Chinese English Majors as an Example

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*Abstract:* Language learning strategies (LLS) are deliberate behaviours adopted by language learners to facilitate the acquisition, storage, and application of new knowledge. This study investigated the overall and individual LLS used by Chinese who are English majors from all grades. A review of selected different literature briefly shows the background and basic information of LLS with several influencing factors. The data came from the questionnaire based on Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) by quantitative research. The findings showed that the respondents used almost all strategies in a high level. The results showed that social strategy was used most frequently by the group of students followed by metacogntive strategy. While the rest of the strategies followed by are cognitive, compensation, affective strategy, except for the memory strategy which was used with medium range. The results seem to indicate that respondents tend to use their preferred LLS in improving their language skills and would benefit greatly from the use of LLS to improve their language proficiency. Additional qualitative research could be required to comprehend the exact strategies chosen by students. These findings would have significant pedagogical and theoretical consequences.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the study

The process of learning a new language is a difficult one that typically takes much more time than expected. The process through which a person's linguistic ability improves is referred to as language learning. Strategies, procedures, and routines are all necessary components of language learning (Hashim & Hashim, 2018). In recent years, there has been a significant and noticeable shift away from a focus on the teaching process and toward a focus on the learning process. This transition has resulted in a rise in the study of language learning strategies, which has flourished as a result of the great importance of these aids on improving academic accomplishments (Bremner, 1998). The study of language learning strategies (LLS), in particular the study of English as a second language (ESL), has emerged as one of the most important topics in the studies on students'

efforts to acquire new languages (McDonough, 1995). There are a wide variety of approaches to gaining linguistic proficiency. Rubin and Wenden (1987) as the pioneers in the field of research on LLS, hypothesized that there are some strategies that can differentiate between students who are successful in their language acquisition and those who are not. Studies on LLS are then continued to be explored and developed by Oxford in a manner that is both more widespread and thorough (1990). The current developments in second language acquisition (SLA) education make it possible for students to test out several learning strategies and select the ones that are most effective for them[1-6].

## 1.2 Rationale for the study

Extensive research has demonstrated that learning strategies are crucial for second or foreign language (L2) acquisition success (Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2003). This study emphasizes the significance of fostering the usage or design of learning strategies. Due to developments in digital technology and its uses, English has become an indispensable tool in the twenty-first century. In many nations, English is currently taught as a second or foreign language for the purposes of seeking information and exchanging ideas. A number of academics have proposed several definitions because of the significance of LLS for English learners (Sukying, 2021). For instance, Oxford (1990) characterizes LLS as "the techniques and approaches learners use to facilitate the process of acquiring a second language." In addition, Griffiths (2008) contends that it is connected to the conscious activities that learners participate in to govern their own learning process.

Learners can also improve their self-confidence and ability to self-regulate by employing these strategies to learn the target language. LLS also comprises skills that allow learners to advance their language knowledge themselves (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to studies, learning strategies make a contribution to the acquisition of English language skills (Oxford, 2011). Several studies have been conducted with the goal of determining the strategies that second-language learners employ the most and the least frequently (Phonhan, 2016; Rardprakhon, 2016). Overall, language learners use a variety of ways to learn English, with LLS being one of the most popular (Habok & Magyar, 2018; Oxford, 2003). Understanding the methods employed by EFL learners provides a fuller understanding of the frequency with which LLS is employed and the specific strategies chosen for English acquisition.

## 1.3 Aims and objectives

This study aimed to identify the most and least commonly utilized LLS among Chinese college English majors, as well as the overall degree of learning strategy use. Discovering which LLS these students employ would perhaps give insight on some of the causes of their academic deficiencies, hence increasing students' knowledge of the benefits of employing these LLSs. This study aimed to determine the LLS of these students in order to comprehend their cognitive learning process. Therefore, English teachers can assist students in achieving greater learning success[7-15].

## 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Learning Strategies

In order to have a good influence on subsequent learning, students must recognize their individual learning strategies. It is essential that students understand the learning strategies that work best for them. This is due to the fact that the learning strategies people employ will significantly impact their learning outcomes (Chanderan & Harshim, 2022). Learning strategies are

commonly known as "learning techniques, behaviors or actions as well as learning-to-learn, problem-solving, and study abilities (Oxford & Crookall, 1989, p. 404) that learners use to make learning more independent, pleasant and successful (Oxford 1989, p. 235)." Whatever they are called, strategies can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of learning.

According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), there are a number of reasons why learning strategies are crucial for acquiring a second/ foreign language. First, effective language achievement is strongly connected with the use of effective learning strategies. Understanding how to effectively employ learning strategies is of considerable advantage to learners. Second, learners who employ effective ways for learning are more likely to "enhance learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction" in their academic pursuits (p. 291). Third, learning strategies can be taught. Therefore, it can be seen that there is a close relationship between learning strategies and language acquisition[16-22].

## 2.2 Definition and Characteristics of language learning strategies

LLS (language learning strategies) scholars have been preoccupied with precisely defining what truly defines a strategy, such as the consensus on the significance of learning strategies. Oxford (2017) has pointed out that there are at least 33 distinct definitions of LLS, the most of which are similar in character. The diversity of classifications demonstrates the reluctance of experts to agree on one single and common definition for this LLS structure.

Rubin (1981) defined three strategies that contribute directly or indirectly to language acquisition: learning, communication, and social strategies. O'Malley et al. (1990) defined LLS into three broad categories as metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. These definitions for language learning strategies shave certain similarities, and Oxford (1990a) produced the most well-known and comprehensive taxonomy of LLS. A distinction is made as two broad groupings: Direct strategies engage the target language in some way, whereas indirect strategies "do not directly involve and support the subject itself yet are fundamental to language learning" (Oxford 1990b, p. 71). Direct strategies consist of the memory strategies, compensation strategies and cognitive strategies, while indirect strategies contain metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

As for the direct LLS, memory strategies are procedures designed to aid learners in storing and retrieving new knowledge from memory. The cognitive strategies are abilities that directly manipulate or modify incoming language information. Compensation strategies are behaviors used to compensate for a lack of language knowledge, such as guessing unfamiliar words or using synonyms or detours.

For indirect LLS, metacognitive strategies are the actions used to focus, schedule, plan, and evaluate the learning of language learner. Affective strategies are "positive self-talk and self-enhancement approaches that help language learners achieve greater control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations" (Oxford & Crookall, 1989, p. 404). In contrast, social strategies incorporate the activities of others with the learner in the language learning process (Oxford, 1990a). In this research project, the Oxford's classification as direct and indirect LLS will be broadly discussed and used.

Based on the current definition of LLS, learning strategies have recently described as procedures taken to make learning tasks easier (Chamot, 2005). In such studies, LLS indicates the learner's capacity to employ techniques to comprehend, store, retrieve, and access relevant second language learning and use knowledge (Sukying, 2021). As a result, this definition is distinguished by an endeavor to incorporate all of the several ways in which the LLS concept can be interpreted (Cohen, 2021). Due to the all-encompassing nature of the definition of LLS, scholars will need to approach

the LLS in a more constrained manner than in the past[23-29].

## 2.3 Research of Language Learning Strategy and influencing factors

Regardless of how experts describe LLS, the major objective of LLS since its inception has been to enhance language learning and usage for learners. Early research on LLS was primarily much more concerned with identifying the techniques employed by proficient language learners (Rubin, 1981). Many studies demonstrated that LLS can help students learn a language more efficiently and enhance their command (Macaro, 2006). There was a correlation between language proficiency, frequency and intensity of the application of LLS. Proficient learners are more likely than their less-skilled counterparts to actively engage in LLS, use a greater variety of strategies and select more appropriate ones. (Habok and Magyar, 2018; Rao, 2016; Sukying, 2021). Besides, the choice of LLS are also influenced by course content and the cultural background of the learner (Chamot, 2005; Granger, 2012).

In the topic of LLS, there have been a lot of studies that try to investigate the relationship between different language learning abilities, levels of proficiency, and distinct cultural characteristics. A significant portion concentrate on Asian countries. For instance, Zhao (2007) found in her research that students were moderate users of overall strategies, with compensation strategies being the most common and memory strategies being the least. While Wu (2008) discovered that cognitive strategies had the biggest impact on English competency and compensation strategies are most commonly used by EFL students. Besides, Saitakham (2010) investigated that the most commonly used strategies were compensatory strategies and the least were affective strategies at the School of NENU. Furthermore, qualitative data from the interview showed that students subjectively rated social strategies as the most important while compensation strategies as the least important. From the above studies, it can be seen that even under the same Asian cultural background, the most and least used LLS are still different between the researches.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), gaining insight into how students learn and the role that learning strategies play in that process is of great significance to both practitioners and academics[30-37].

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research question

The research questions of this study are below:
1) What is the level of the six LLS by English-majors college students in China?
2) What are the most and least used LLS employed by English majors objectively and why?
3) What are the preferred and disliked LLS employed by English majors subjectively and are there any differences in strategy use among students subjectively and objectively. Why?

### 3.2 Theoretical approach

In order to answer the research questions which have been mentioned above in this research project, this study adopted a quantitative method approach to investigate Chinese English majors' usage of language learning strategies in their English (as a foreign language) learning process. The project started using quantitative research method employing the questionnaire as the main instrument.

Quantitative research methods centre on the process of obtaining results through the quantification and examination of many factors. "It involves the collection of data so that

information may be quantified and statistically analyses to support or disprove or verify particular statements" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Quantitative analysis was chosen for this research project due to the number of respondents from various universities in different academic levels. Participating in this study as a sample were 52 Chinese students majoring in English from a variety of universities, including undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD students.

In order to make data of the research project more sufficient, four questions were added into the end of the original questionnaire (from SILL), two of which were multiple choices for participants to select which LLS they think are used most and least, while the other two were open-ended questions to ask them for their abbreviated reason of choosing the most and least use of LLS[38-44].

## 3.3 Research design

### 3.3.1 Participants

Participating in this survey were a total of 52 Chinese students studying English-related majors at various universities throughout the world. The sample included 42 (80.77%) female students and 10 (19.23%) male students. In addition, the postgraduate students had the highest response rate, with 38 respondents (73.08%), followed by the undergraduate students with 11 (21.15%), whereas PhD students were only 3 (5.77%). In terms of responses to age questions, the top three ages are 23, 24, and 22 (a total of 69.2%), which also validates the data that the majority in this study are postgraduate students, as most Chinese as postgraduate students are mainly between 22 to 24. Besides, the participants included in this study generally have studied English for 12 years or more (80.77%), a minor number for 10 to 12 years (19.23%), and none for less than 10 years. It can be seen that most of the respondents possess a certain level of English proficiency in a formal context.

### 3.3.2 Research instruments

This study adopts, expands, and develops the Strategies for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire version 7.0 by Oxford's (1990), and adds several questions to collect more detailed data. Questionnaire, a survey technique used to design market research and understand consumer preferences and interests, is used to collect data (Fowler, 2014). In addition, the questionnaire is suitable when there are a specific number of sample sizes and a broad dispersion. Since neither the researcher nor the respondents have a very close personal relationship, questionnaires are an efficient approach for collecting information from respondents (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2007).

The most well-known strategy scale was called the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning Scale (SILL), and it has been utilized around the world over the past three decades (Oxford, 1990a, pp. 294-296). The SILL version 7.0 has been upgraded and is tailored to the needs of those who speak English as a second or foreign language. According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), SILL is a structured survey that was obtained from an exhaustive literature study.

In this study, all SL in the original SILL version 7.0 questionnaire was replaced with the word "English" to better fit the theme. In the first section, personal data were gathered asking the participants general questions concerning their gender, age, grade and English proficiency level. The second part consists of 49 closed-ended questions. What needs to be mentioned is that the original SILL questionnaire contains of 50 questions; however, when the researcher adding Chinese translations into the questionnaire, one of the questions " I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in SL" from the metacognitive strategies approach is missing. Due to the fact that the questionnaire data had been obtained prior to the discovery, it could only be reported in this study. The structures of the main content of Part 2 has been shown in Table 1. The last section contained

two multiple choice question and two open-ended question to further find out about brief reasons for the choice of students.

Table 1: Distribution of strategy items according to the six strategy types.

| Strategy Type | Items | Total |
|---|---|---|
| Memory | 5-13 | 9 |
| Cognitive | 14-27 | 14 |
| Compensation | 28-33 | 6 |
| Metacognitive | 34-41 | 8 |
| Affective | 42-47 | 6 |
| Social | 48-53 | 6 |
| | | 49 |

The respondents' opinions were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale , each of which corresponds to a distinct level of priority that the respondents assigned to one of the LLS (Oxford, 1990b). The items were in the form of statements and the participants graded them from 1) to 5) where:

1) strongly disagree means never true of me.
2) disagree means rarely true of me.
3) neither agree nor disagree means sometimes true of me.
4) agree means usually true of me.
5) strongly agree means always true of me.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Analysis of the all LLSs

Table 2. LLS Use by the Chinese EFL college English-related major students (N=52)

| Strategy Group | Mean | Standard Deviation | Rank Order of Usage | Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A Memory | 3.38 | 0.623 | 6 | Medium |
| B Cognitive | 3.77 | 0.418 | 3 | High |
| C Compensation | 3.73 | 0.382 | 4 | High |
| D Metacognitive | 3.79 | 0.271 | 2 | High |
| E Affective | 3.56 | 0.639 | 5 | High |
| F Social | 3.87 | 0.265 | 1 | High |
| Overall | 3.68 | 0.433 | | High |

The result in Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the six mean LLS used by Chinese EFL students across the entire SILL. Although the mean values for the strategy categories varied, 5 of the strategy categories had all mean values in the range 3.5 and above which ranks the high level, with only one memory strategy range between 2.5-3.5 as medium level. The overall mean value between strategies are in a range of 3.68 which ranks a high level of use. This indicates that participants used each LLS with high frequency.

Among the six LLS that have been analyzed, it is found that the most preferred strategy used by Chinese EFL students is social strategy, while the least preferred one by the students is memory strategy.

Using social strategy (M=3.87) heavily with the highest frequency indicated that the students, especially Chinese students studying English majors, had the required positive attitude to improve their English, by contrast memory strategy used with low range by the students (M=3.38). Students

focused primarily on social strategies, which showed that students plan to communicate and socialize with others to practice their English skills anytime and anywhere. Students' eagerness can be gained from their use of high-range metacognitive strategies, which also demonstrates that they are looking for a variety of ways to become more proficient in English. The average level of strategies is high overall, which may be due to their awareness of the importance of using the LLS. A large part of the reason should be the fact that the participants of this research are English-related majors. These Students have some experience in improving their English learning ability. Memory strategies are the low- and least-used strategies by students, probably because many students are unfamiliar with some items in this category, such as physically acting out new English words or using flashcards or rhymes to memorize new words (this section will described in detail later). This clearly shows that these EFL learners still lack a part of the awareness of using LLS or that their knowledge of LLS is still insufficient.

## 4.2 The most and least used strategies of overall

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of 10% most used strategies (N = 52).

| Item No | Strategy | Mean | Strategy Category | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 53 | I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. | 4.15 | Social | High |
| 37 | I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. | 4.09 | Metacognitive | High |
| 48 | If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to show down or say it again. | 4.09 | Social | High |
| 25 | I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand. | 4.07 | Cognitive | High |
| 28 | To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses. | 4.07 | Compensation | High |

Table *3* explains the top 5 of the most frequently used items. It can be seen that a total of two social strategies, one cognitive strategy, one metacognitive strategy and one compensation strategy were at a high level of use which fit the data of the rank of usage of LLS analyzed in Table 3 above.

Chinese college students who study English are eager to enhance their English proficiency through hearing and communication. Their desire to learn language is manifested in several aspects, one of which is the significance they place on English-speaking countries' culture. They are not afraid to express their confusion or ask questions when they do not comprehend. In the process of language learning such as word learning, they can draw flexible conclusions about information that do not fully comprehend and use prior knowledge to draw conclusions about information that have not yet learned. In addition, as students majoring in English, having more opportunities to learn and practice English also makes students more confident to use English for communication. Therefore, students are more organized.

Table 4 demonstrates the top 5 of the least used items. Given that these respondents were adult learners, they rarely need to use flashcards and rhymes to memorize new words at their age. Respondents may find it foolish to use these materials and many Chinese students may be unfamiliar with flashcards and English word rhymes due to the culture background. Furthermore, in this new era of digitization, respondents lacked the ability to write down memories or feelings in a journal. Students are more likely to share their feelings or memories on social media.

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of 10% least used strategies
(N = 52).

| Item | | Strategy Mean | Strategy | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | I use flashcards to remember new English words. | 2.34 | Memory | Low |
| 46 | I write down my feelings in a language learning diary. | 2.34 | Affective | Low |
| 20 | I read for pleasure in English. | 2.42 | Cognitive | Low |
| 9 | I use rhymes to remember new words. | 2.44 | Memory | Low |
| 30 | I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English. | 3.00 | Compensation | Medium |

## 4.4 The contrast of the subjective and objective LLS data

Table 5. The LLS that students subjectively believe they could used the most and least (from multiple-choice question 54 and 56)

| Strategy Group | Percentage | Rank Order of Usage (most) | percentage | Rank Order of Usage (least) | Rank Order of Usage (Table 2) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A Memory | 0.238 | 5 | 0.75 | 1 | 6 |
| B Cognitive | 0.326 | 3 | 0.019 | 5 | 3 |
| C Compensation | 0.75 | 1 | 0.076 | 4 | 4 |
| D Metacognitive | 0.307 | 4 | 0.019 | 5 | 2 |
| E Affective | 0.134 | 6 | 0.096 | 3 | 5 |
| F Social | 0.346 | 2 | 0.17 | 2 | 1 |

Table 5 illustrates the rank order of usage of LLS that students subjectively believe they could used the most and least. Different from the data obtained in the previous table 2, as a multiple-choice question, 75% of the people thought they would be inclined to use the compensation strategy. However, the statistics of the entire SILL questionnaire show that the compensation strategy only ranks fourth in use. In the subjective part, some students pointed out that it is because "the reward mechanism of the compensation strategy can motivate oneself effectively." While social strategies occupy a high ranking in both subjective and objective data. Many students believe that "exercising oral English in the social process is very effective." "I can get immediate feedback and learn from good language users" and "I love positive feedback from others." Interestingly, there are also several students who subjectively think that they do not like social strategies. One student pointed out that he or she has a certain social phobia and another thought that he or she will not force oneself to learn language by socializing because of the personality. It can be seen that social strategy is a controversial strategy among others. Memory strategies and affective strategies, which are not controversial in both subjective and objective terms, are classified as rarely used strategies. Some students think that memory is boring and that emotional strategies are more like strategies that teachers would use.

Overall, respondents from China who were English major learners used all strategies in their language learning process. The use of social strategies and metacognitive strategies was high, and other strategies were also at a high level, while the use of memory strategies was the lowest, at a medium level. Various factors may have influenced the usage of LLS. The attitudes of students toward language are one point that contribute to the general use of LLS. Students' attitudes towards language learning become a factor in their choice of learning strategies (Kuntz, 1996). According to MacIntyre and Noels (1996), the seriousness with which students approach language acquisition is

one of the reasons leading to increased use of LLS. The test-oriented learning system in China also affects the level of LLS used by students. Moreover, because the respondents are English majors, they will pay greater attention to language creation. Consequently, this circumstance influences the selection and utilization of LLS by respondents.

## 5. Discussion

The mean overall use of LLS in this study is 3.68, which is in the high level use of category. Interestingly, this finding differs somewhat from most studies conducted in EFL settings (Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 1992), where overall strategy use was medium. Studies (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oh, 1992; Phillips, 1991) have demonstrated that learners who have more choices to practise and use English more frequently tend to report a high frequency of strategy use (i.e., M>3.5) on the SILL. These findings can consistent with Gardner's socio-educational model, according to which the L2 learning environment is thought to have a significant impact on students' learning behaviors in second/foreign language.

The reasons why English language learners in this study used higher-level overall strategies can be explained from three perspectives. First, the respondents in this study were all college students majoring in English, and thus were more motivated to master the language through LLS. Second, in the context of this study, Chinese English majors have access to a huge quantity of authentic materials that are difficult to get for others in ordinary environments. Finally, learning English in as many English-speaking environments as possible provided the respondents with numerous interactive opportunities to practice their language.

One characteristic of students' use of the strategy category was that they used social strategies the most frequently. This result is quite similar to that of Wharton (2000), who found that the social strategy is used most frequently, while the affective strategy is the least. In Wharton's study, more than 90% were also Chinese. These social strategies, as described by Oxford (2011, 2017), have the potential to improve the learning of a second or foreign language, particularly when applied in language classrooms. This may also reflect that English majors from China pay more attention to social skills and the practicality of learning English.

The current study demonstrates that memory is the least utilised approach which is consistent with the widely held conception of the learning processes employed by Asian students. In fact, previous research has shown that many language learners from Asia tend to use memory as a study skill. For instance, Kunasaraphan (2015) found that although college students were less likely to use memory strategies, their teachers frequently pushed them to memorize and repeat texts. Therefore, it is clear from the the current study that learners from Asia rarely use specific memory-enhancing skills or mnemonic devices. Obviously, this could also be related to the fact that students in this research do not comprehend certain memory strategies, such as using flashcards or rhymes. In addition, because they have acquired English expertise as college students, some memory strategies may look simplistic and boring. Since LLS is a skill that requires continuous practise and reinforcement, it is unreasonable to expect these students to employ strategies they have not been exposed to. Therefore, the infrequent usage of strategies may be a result of the infrequent occurrence of strategies in learners' language learning. (Rao, 2016).

## 6. Conclusion

The results use the quantitative research analysis to indicate that these Chinese students with better English proficiency who major in English are users of high level of the language learning strategies. Moreover, objective data analysis revealed that social and metacognitive strategies had the largest utilization, whilst emotional and memory strategies had the lowest usage; nonetheless,

memory strategies were the least favoured, whereas compensation strategies interestingly were subjectively believed that students will enjoy it. This shows that the usage of these strategies may be related to cultural and educational variations in background and comprehension. Therefore, it is important to find out the suitable language-learning strategies due to one's own personal traits and try to use a variety of LLS to address certain English-learning situations.

There are certain limitations of this research. First of all, a data sample of 52 individuals was obtained, which is indeed not a very large-scale study, therefore the data may be biased or limited. Besides, It was outside the scope of the study to include all the data analysis that the researchers had envisioned, such as whether the usage of LLS is associated with students' gender, age, or academic level.

Research in the future is required in order to verify whether or not these strategies are truly utilized during the language acquisition process. It is recommended that mixed methods would be used in research that is more in-depth and investigates actual mental processes. In addition, qualitative research is essential in order to comprehend the reasons behind the learners' choices of strategies within each category. It would be very valuable to conduct additional research on the reasons why English language learners' choices of different methods differ from one another. This would assist in finding the strategies that could enhance language learning but are not fully exploited by learners. Together with findings from other similar research, the current findings could be utilized to enhance the quality of language learning and get a better understanding of the implementation of LLS.

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