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A Study of Reading Strategy Use of Chinese College Students

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Abstract
Successful second language learners are generally believed to be active strategy users, and a high level of language proficiency has been found to correlate with frequent and complex strategy use. Based on a questionnaire, this study explores the reading strategy use of Chinese non-English majors, finds out the strategies of high frequency use as well as low frequency use, and discusses their implications for classroom teaching.

Key words: Learning strategies; Reading strategies; Metacognitive strategies; Cognitive strategies

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INTRODUCTION

I teach College English, Integrated Course, in a university in Shanghai, China. Integrated Course is supposed to integrate the basic skills of language learning—listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation—in class instruction. However, in practice, it is primarily an intensive reading course, which is the instruction of vocabulary, grammar, reading skills, cultural background etc., through texts of 1,000-1,500 words. My students come from all parts of China, whose English learning experience and proficiency levels are much varied. Some of them, based on their language learning practice in primary and middle schools, have many restricted or erroneous language learning beliefs. For example, they take English learning merely as memorizing words and doing grammar exercises. They view English reading as doing multiple choice comprehension questions, which might be the result of exam-oriented education tradition in China.

Research on good language learners and learning strategies in the past 40 years has shown that successful second language learners are, by necessity, active strategy users, and a high level of language proficiency has been found to correlate with frequent and complex strategy use.

As Anderson (2008) indicates, "Good readers use a wide variety of strategies. Poor readers use a limited number of strategies. Our role as teachers is to help readers select, develop, and use strategies for becoming better readers" (p.139).

Understanding the importance of strategies, I carried out the study which, based on a questionnaire, is intended to explore the reading strategy use of my students, find out the strategies of high frequency use as well as those of low frequency use, and discuss their implications for classroom teaching so as to improve students' reading proficiency.

1. BASIC ISSUES OF THE STUDY

1.1 Learning Strategies and Reading Strategies

The past 40 years have witnessed a great number of studies on general learning strategies as well as those in relation to specific skills such as reading and writing. Hence, the term learning strategies, reading strategies and a number of specific strategies in the reading processes have emerged. Like many other terms, there is no complete agreement on exactly what language learning strategies are. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define them as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p.1). According to Oxford (1990), strategies

are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). Cohen (2000), another researcher who has done a number of seminal studies in the field, defines strategies as "learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner" (p.4). Cohen recognizes the element of consciousness as a characteristic that distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategic.

In terms of reading strategies, Johnson & Johnson (2001) define them as "deliberate and conscious processes by which the reader attempts to overcome a problem" (p.333). Anderson (2008) also endorses the element of consciousness, believing they are "the conscious actions that readers take to improve their reading skills" (p.10). Afflerbach et al. (2008) summarizes reading strategies as "deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text" (p.368). Examining the definitions offered by leading researchers in the field, we can find the central features of reading strategies—being deliberate and conscious, goal-directed, facilitating learning etc.

1.2 Classification of Strategies

Along with their definitions, researchers have also suggested a variety of classification of learning strategies in second language acquisition. For example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify learning strategies into three categories based on a cognitive theory of learning: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies are "higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity" (p.44). Cognitive strategies "operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning" (Ibid.) and social/affective strategies represent "a broad grouping that involves either interaction with another person or ideational control over affect" (p.45).

Oxford (1990) classifies strategies into direct ones and indirect ones. The former includes memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, while the latter includes metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Oxford's taxonomy shares many features with the classification of O'Malley & Chamot: the direct strategies are similar to the cognitive strategies in O'Malley & Chamot's classification while the indirect strategies correspond with the metacognitive ones and social/affective strategies. Only, according to O'Malley & Chamot, metacognitive strategies are of "higher order" while in Oxford's taxonomy, there's no hierarchy among all the strategies.

Cohen (2000) divides strategies into language learning strategies and language using strategies, referring to "the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both" (p.5). As Wen (Cohen, 2000) points out, there are two problems with Cohen's classification. First, in practice, it is difficult to judge whether an action taken by the learner is for learning the language or using the language. Second, there's no mention of metacognitive strategies in his classification.

In this study, I adopted O'Malley & Chamot's classification. Based on a questionnaire, this study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

(a) What is the overall strategy use of my students when they read English?

(b) What are the strategies of high frequency use and low frequency use? What implications do they suggest for my classroom teaching?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 125 freshmen who I taught, majoring in computer science, fine chemistry, art, business administration, and automobile technology. I implemented the questionnaire in my regular English classes. Participants received oral instructions about how to complete the questionnaire, and were encouraged to seek clarification of any items they were not sure about. They were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire investigation and were asked to express their honest opinions freely. Because 9 students either did not finish the questionnaire or answered the items in an improper way, 116 questionnaire data entered for final analysis, with 71 males and 45 females.

2.2 Instrument

Based on a questionnaire, the study surveyed college students' use of reading strategies. The questionnaire items were generated from two sources: seminal inventories developed by western researchers as well as those developed by Chinese scholars. The former includes the well-known *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990), the *Survey of Reading Strategies* (SORS) by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). However, those which were developed by western researchers are sometimes criticized for not being sensitive to cultural differences. Given the study is China-situated, I also made reference to research by Chinese researchers Liu (2002) and Gu et al. (2011).

At last, the questionnaire in the study contained 45 Likert items on a five-point scale, asking participants to circle on the scale from Never (1) to Always (5) according to their situation. Based on the classification of O'Malley & Chamot (1990), 45 items can be divided into three types: 13 are about metacognitive strategies, 28 about cognitive ones, and 4 about social/affective strategies. The questionnaire was in Chinese and I translated the items into English for presentation in the following sections.

After the data of the questionnaire were collected and processed, ten students were randomly chosen for semi-structured interviews to add a qualitative research support to the study. The students were group interviewed in Chinese for 90 minutes to probe the questionnaire results. During the interview, I asked my students a set of questions based on the questionnaire items, and I made every attempt to let them take the lead while I asked for clarification and expansion of what they said.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected, put into computer and processed by SPSS. The mean and SD of every item were calculated as well as the average for each subscale, namely metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies. Items with the mean 3.5 or higher fall within the high range of use, while items with the mean 2.4 or lower fall within the low range of use. Those between the two are considered of medium range.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overall Strategy Use

Table 1 shows a general picture of the strategy use among my students. As is shown in the table, the average scores of all three types of strategies fall into the medium range of 2.5-3.4, which indicates my students sometimes use reading strategies. 13 metacognitive strategies are subdivided into three types according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), namely planning (including advance organizers, directed attention, functional planning, selective attention, self-management), monitoring and evaluation (p.119). Table 2 shows the mean for each subscale. Overall, my students are not active strategy users, especially in terms of the use of metacognitive strategies and social/affective strategies.

Table 1
Overall Strategy Use

Strategies	*M*
Metacognitive	2.85
Cognitive	3.12
Social/affective	2.89

Table 2
Subscale of Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies	*M*
Planning	2.82
Monitoring	3.20
Evaluation	2.63

3.2 Reading Strategy Use: Specific Items

Table 3 lists 12 strategies of high frequency use. Except item 4 and 29, which are of metacognitive strategy use, the rest are related to cognitive strategies. Table 4 lists 9 strategies of low frequency use, among which item 10, 25, 28, 41 and 45 are of metacognitive strategy use, while the rest are related to cognitive strategies.

Table 3
Strategy Use: High Frequency

Strategy	*M*	*SD*
4. Deal with unknown words in different ways relative to purpose of reading	3.65	1.15
8. Use context clues to understand the meaning of words	3.58	1.09
13. Use context clues to decide what pronouns refer to	3.54	1.23
14. Analyze the grammar of long complex sentences for better understanding	3.59	1.21
15. Use context clues to infer the implied meaning of a sentence	3.64	1.17
17. Read silently in mind	3.50	1.37
23. Think about what is already known for understanding	3.65	1.02
29. Adjust reading rate relative to the purpose of reading	3.50	1.28
30. Use graphs, tables, charts in text to increase understanding	3.69	1.04
34. Predict what a text is about according to its title	3.71	1.08
35. Adjust the prediction about the text while reading	3.82	1.00
37. Locate the topic sentence of a text while reading	3.72	1.04

Table 4
Strategy Use: Low Frequency

Strategy	*M*	*SD*
10. Regularly check the understanding of new words by self- test	2.26	1.21
16. Often read aloud	2.24	1.30
25. Critically evaluate the information presented in the text	1.87	1.10
26. Paraphrase to better understand the text	2.13	1.06
28. Have a reading plan	1.97	1.14
41. Regularly read English newspapers, magazines or books after class	2.33	1.14
43. Summarize the main idea of a text after reading	2.41	1.22
44. Draw graphs and tables to help understand the text	1.94	1.04
45. Self-test after reading, reflect on the reading process for future improvement	2.23	1.10

3.3 Discussion

From what is presented in the tables above, I can find three interesting points for discussion. First, the strategy use of my students is largely influenced by their past learning experience. As we can find from the figures, the most frequently used reading strategies are mainly cognitive ones. Table 3 shows students rely on context clues a lot for understanding while reading (Item 8, 13, 15). Item 13 and 14 are typically form-focused strategies, reflecting the tradition of reading instruction in Chinese EFL classes. Item 17 is reported by the students as of high frequency use, yet it is usually considered to be a strategy that may impede reading (Liu, 2002, p.27). The interview suggests the strategies that are found of high frequency use were acquired by the students in their past learning experience, primarily on the basis of classroom instruction, either explicitly or implicitly, by the teacher.

Second, examining the cognitive strategies listed in Tables 3 and 4, we can find students prefer using "receptive" strategies to "productive" ones—that's why they, on the one hand, often locate the topic sentence of a text while reading (Item 37) but seldom summarize the main idea of a text on the other (Item 43); often use graphs, tables and charts in the text for understanding (Item 30) but seldom draw graphs and tables themselves to understand a text (Item 44); often analyze the grammar of difficult sentences (Item 14) but seldom paraphrase for better understanding (Item 26). The follow-up interview suggests students generally take a passive role while reading. They recognize reading as getting information and learning new words. Seldom will they bother to carry out high-order cognitive processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Third, among the three categories of strategies, metacognitive strategy use is of the lowest frequency. For example, in terms of planning (M=2.82, Table 2), few students have their reading plan (Item 28, M=1.97) and seldom read English material after class on their own initiative (Item 41, M=2.33). The monitoring strategy use is of the highest frequency among the three subscales of metacognitive strategies (M=3.20, Table 2). Maybe it is because the monitoring strategies are usually used while reading is taking place (for example, Item 29, M=3.50), which are closely related to the cognitive strategies, the strategies students are more familiar with. Evaluation strategies are used least by the students (M=2.63, Table 2). For example, students seldom check their understanding of new words by self-test (M=2.26, Item 10), neither will they self-test their comprehension of a text after reading or reflect on their reading process for future improvement (M=2.23, Item 45).

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

In my classes, there are always students who seem to exert themselves to learn English, only to find that their efforts were in vain, that reading proficiency so difficult to improve. Since strategies are unanimously believed to facilitate learning and make learners learn more effectively, Erler, Grabe, Stoller, scholars who have specialized in teaching and researching second language reading, all list reading strategies and strategic reading among their priorities for reading teachers (Anderson, 2008).

According to Cohen (2000), the underlying premise of strategy-based instruction is that "language learning will be facilitated if students become more aware of the range of possible strategies that they can consciously select during language learning and language use" (p.65).

The questionnaire-based investigation provides a useful starting point to help me improve my classroom teaching through strategy instruction. The study finds that my students' overall use of reading strategies fall into the medium range—they are far from active strategy users and only use strategies occasionally. Both the questionnaire data and the follow-up interview suggest that the students lack an awareness of "strategies", especially the metacognitive ones. So it is necessary for me to integrate explicit strategy instruction into classroom teaching.

I can follow the model for class instruction proposed by Chamot et al. (1999) —preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion. First, I should activate students' background knowledge, increase their awareness of strategies, make them have a general idea of learning strategies and reading strategies and the way strategies can help them accomplish various language tasks. The next step is presentation. I should explain what the strategies are to be instructed in this lesson are and model how to use them in combination to effectively accomplish reading tasks. Then, students apply the strategies in specific new reading tasks with guidance and give feedback. Fourth, students evaluate their use of strategies through class discussion. At last, they are supposed to use the strategies independently in their future study and be able to transfer them to new tasks. In the process, teacher responsibility increasingly diminishes until at last students are supposed to be able to select and use strategies independently and on their own initiative. As Cohen (2000) proposes, the goal of strategy-based instruction is not only teach students how, when and why strategies can be used to facilitate their efforts at learning, but also "to promote learner autonomy and learner self-direction by allowing students to choose their own strategies and to do so spontaneously, without continued prompting from the language teacher" (p.70).

CONCLUSION

This study investigates Chinese college students' use of reading strategies. Though the sample of the study is not large and wide—only 116 college non-English majors from a university in Shanghai were involved

—the study does provide an insight into the general picture of strategy use among college students in average universities in China. The study finds students' overall strategy use fall into the medium range, which indicates they are far from active strategy users and only use strategies occasionally. Among the three categories of strategies, students use cognitive strategies more often than metacognitive ones and social/affective strategies. Both the questionnaire data and the interview suggest that the students lack an awareness of "strategies", especially the metacognitive ones, which point to the necessity of strategy-based instruction in class. In conclusion, I should integrate explicit strategy instruction into class teaching so as to raise students' awareness of strategies, facilitate learning, and enable them to select appropriate strategies to accomplish their learning goals and at last to be autonomous learners.

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