Gender and Language Learning Strategy Use—in the Case of Chinese High School Students

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between gender and learning strategy preferences of Chinese senior high school students. Analyses indicated that high school students under investigation used a variety of learning strategies to study English at a medium to low frequency. Female students used more learning strategies and at a greater frequency than male students. The findings of the study will cast some light on Chinese EFL teaching, learning and future studies.

Key words: Gender; English learning strategy; High school students

INTRODUCTION

The importance of language learning strategies as key factors in the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language is a topic that commanded the attention of researchers worldwide (Green & Oxford, 1995). Ever since the mid-1970s, numerous studies have been conducted in this area. The findings suggest that learning strategies play an important role in the process of language learning, and the appropriate use of learning strategies is an indispensable factor determining autonomous study effect.

Recently, some studies indicate that use of strategy vary significantly with factors such as socio-economic group, sex, and ethnicity (Ellis, 1994). For example, some studies found gender differences in the choice and adaptation of learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Bacon, 1992). In general, females, more often than not, tended to use greater numbers of strategies than males for language learning (Politzer, 1983; Ehram & Oxford, 1989; Green, 1991; Green & Oxford, 1995). Oxford and Nyikos (1989), for example, found that female learners use more strategies. In Puerto Rico their study in Puerto Rico (Green & Oxford, 1995), findings indicated more use of strategies by female students. According to Goh and Kwah's (1997), "175 Chinese students who learned English as a second language in Singapore also reported that strategy use was significantly related to gender".

Language learning strategy research emerged in China in the early 1980s. Sy (1994, cited from Green & Oxford, 1995) found that Chinese EFL learners showed significant gender differences and females reported using more cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies than males. Li (2002) investigated the relationship between gender and learning strategies adoption among 120 Chinese students in Nanjing, but no significant difference was found in all six strategy categories. She commented that this result was on account of high motivation the subjects had. Compared with the considerable research in learning strategies worldwide, relatively fewer studies have been conducted in the China context. Motivated by such research gaps, the current study tried to investigate and analyze the relationship between learning strategy preferences and gender of Chinese high school students learning English. It is the hope of the researcher that it may provide teachers with a better understanding of learning strategies use among high school students.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Questions

The current study is intended to answer the following

questions: What are the learning strategies commonly used by high school students under investigation? Is there any relationship between gender and strategy use? Is there any difference in gender and individual strategy use?

1.2 Participants

A total of 357 third-year high school students were randomly selected to participant in this study. They came from two schools in Dezhou, Shandong province. 221 from Qihe High School and 136 from Yucai Middle School – a key high school and an ordinary high school respectively. Among the 346 subjects, 209 were males and 137 were females, covering students for sciences and humanities. They aged from 16 to 20 with the average being 18.4.

1.3 Instruments

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 – developed by Rebecca Oxford – was used as a paper – and – pencil instrument to investigate language learning preferences. "As a 50-item self-report survey" (Rebecca Oxford, 1989), this questionnaire was intended to measure the frequency and patterns of learning strategies use of ESL/EFL learners. It is made up of fifty statements which are the descriptions of strategy use among English learners and a background part, which is incorporated to collect demographic information involving school, gender, age, etc.. Participants are required to check their choice towards each item. Each statement uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never or almost never true of me") to 5 ("Always or almost always true of me"). Reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the SILL is reported as 0.93-0.98, depending on whether the subjects who respond to the SILL in their own language or in a second language (Green & Oxford, 1995).

1.4 Data Collection Procedure

In April, 2011, the questionnaires were distributed to the subjects in regular class time with the help of their English teacher. All the participants were received the same guidance on how to complete the SILL in order to minimize confusion. Students were given 25 minutes, which was enough for the participants to finish it. Samples were narrowed down to 346 after a preliminary check of the questionnaires. 11 subjects were eliminated for providing unreliable responses.

1.5 Data Analysis

The questionnaire response were keyed into the computer and crosschecked for accuracy. The researchers used Package for Social Science 11.0 (SPSS 16.0) to identify whether there was any significant correlation between strategy use and gender.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Overall Use of Language Learning Strategies

Descriptive statistical analyses were used to investigate what kind of learning strategies used by the subjects and in what frequency. The SILL average value for each category summarized in Table 1 indicated that Chinese high school students under investigation used all the six types of learning strategies. According to Oxford's (1990) classification, the range of 3.5-5.0 (mean score) for each of the SILL item is thought to reflect the high level use of the strategy; a mean of all participants in the range of 2.5-3.4 is thought to be in medium use, and 1.0-2.4 belongs to low use. As displayed in Table 1, the mean value of the total strategy was 2.70, and 218 (63%) participants' mean scores were classified as the medium use.

Table 1
Mean Value of Overall Strategy Use

Strategy group	M	SD	Rank order of usage
Memory strategies	2.53	.48	5
Cognitive strategies	2.75	.63	3
Compensation strategies	3.09	.76	1
Metacognitive strategies	2.81	.46	2
Affective strategies	2.59	.46	4
Social strategies	2.38	.35	6
Overall SILL	2.70	.56	

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation

As Table 1 indicates, learning strategy use is at moderate level overall (M = 2.70, SD = .56). The most frequently used category of strategies were compensation strategies (M = 3.09, SD = .76), followed by metacognitive (M = 2.81, SD = .46), and cognitive strategies (M = 2.75, SD = .63). Social strategies (M = 2.38, SD = .35) were the least used category by participants in the study.

The findings indicated that instead of a high level, students used learning strategies at a medium frequency level. Somewhat similar results were found by Zhang (1999) in his study, which suggested that Chinese high school students used limited number and types of strategy at a medium frequency level. The frequencies seemed to be lower than those found with other samples of learners (Oxford *et al.*, 1989; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

A possible explanation is that frequency of use of language learning strategies may, to some extent, related to whether students are in an ESL or EFL setting (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The former SILL studies indicated that students in EFL situations may use language learning strategies at a higher level than those in foreign language classrooms (Green & Oxford, 1995). The SILL studies in Asia in an EFL setting indicated that nearly all the six strategy category were used at medium or low level (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

The findings suggest that it is important to incorporate language learning strategies into language courses since appropriate use of certain learning strategies make such a difference to learning success. Therefore, it is the mission of foreign language teachers, who can play a vital role in strategy training, to instruct language learners on how to apply learning strategies to varied language activities and how to adjust to new tasks in language teaching

and learning process (O'Malley *et al.*, 1985b). In this aspect, teachers are not only the ones who provide new information and monitor classroom activities, but the ones who can create opportunities for language learners to become acquainted with and put in practice the strategies that are appropriate for tasks in learning activities.

2.2 Gender and Language Learning Strategy Use

Table 2
Results of Use of the Six Categories of Strategies by Gender

Dependent variable: (SILL category)	Female		Male			
	M	SD	M	SD	T	Sig.
Memory	2.63	.43	2.38	.43	4.68*	.000
Cognitive	2.90	.44	2.60	.48	5.01*	.000
Compensation	3.10	.46	2.99	.49	1.95	.053
Metacognitive	2.96	.54	2.60	.55	5.27*	.000
Affective	2.72	.49	2.40	.53	4.30*	.000
Social	2.53	.58	2.19	.61	5.37*	.000
Overall SILL	2.76	.37	2.49	.41	5.63*	.000

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

As shown in Table 2, results of the independent-samples t-tests revealed that females under investigation used more learning strategies than males in the overall strategy use and five strategy categories in SILL, and the difference meet significantly level. The findings were consistent with other previous research studies, which repeatedly demonstrated that females tend to use greater numbers of strategies than do males (e.g. Ehram & Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green, 1991; Green & Oxford, 1993).

In the present study, the mean of compensation strategies between the two groups are close. Compensation strategies refer to such strategies as guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite their limitations in knowledge. The high school students under investigation reported using compensation strategies at a comparatively higher level. They were at the beginning or early intermediate level of English proficiency. Because of their limitations in knowledge of grammar and the poor command of vocabulary, they have to find ways to make up for it (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995). In addition, as

shown by interview results, guessing strategy was one of the strategies that had been introduced by their teachers in classroom. Eleven out of the 15 interviewees responded that teachers encouraged them to overcome their reading obstacles by the use of strategies like guessing from the context, and it was especially useful in reading English. There is no wonder that both female and male students reported using compensation strategy in a high level.

To explain why female students used greater numbers of strategies than males, a possible explanation for female's more use of learning strategy is that girls generally have more favourable attitudes and confidence toward language learning than boys. These attitudes might be influenced by social factors such as parental attitude, gender-related beliefs, and career choices. It is likely that they are more open to new linguistic form in a foreign language (Ellis, 1994). Therefore, females might be more active to employ some learning strategies to make learning easier and more effective.

A second possible explanation is that females are usually better language learner than males. The results was consistent with Wen and Johnson (1997), who found Chinese females learning English were more proficient than their male counterparts. As higher achievers, they seem to show more interest in language learning and have more confidence using more strategies to enhance language learning.

2.3 Gender and the Use of Individual Strategies

Independent-samples t-test indicated that 17 of 50 SILL items were used significantly more often by female students. These were listed in Table 3. On the contrary, in terms of item 24 and 26, the mean strategy use by males was a little higher than that of females, but the difference had any significant level.

Item 24 To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.

(F = 1.81, P = .071).

Item 26 I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.

(F = 1.72, P = .054).

Table 3
Items Showing Significant Variation by Gender

Item	Female		Male		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
8 MEM Review English lessons often	2.76	.93	2.40	.86	2.72**
11 COG Try to talk like native English speakers	2.42	.94	1.97	.83	4.06**
12 COG Practice the sounds of English	2.97	.85	2.64	.90	2.92**
13 COG Use known words in different ways	2.53	.73	2.30	.77	2.52**
16 COG Read for pleasure in English	3.14	.86	2.82	1.01	2.82**
21 COG Find meanings dividing words into parts	2.79	.95	2.53	.89	2.46*
23 COG Make summaries of information	2.76	.89	2.47	.94	2.54*
28 COM Try to guess what other person will say	3.07	.97	2.78	1.06	2.30*
29 COM Use circumlocutions or synonyms	4.09	.79	3.81	.92	2.65**
31 MET Notice mistakes / try to do better	3.40	.92	3.03	.95	3.16**
32 MET Pay attention when someone is speaking	3.37	.98	2.92	.93	3.80**
33 MET Try to find out about language learning	3.31	.93	3.00	.96	2.63**
34 MET Plan schedule to have enough time	3.05	.84	2.78	.93	2.44*
40 AFF Encourage self to speak when afraid	2.84	.78	2.56	.89	2.21*
44 AFF Talk to someone about feelings	2.57	.86	2.16	1.06	2.71**
45 SOC Ask other persons to slow down or repeat	3.08	.93	2.69	1.03	3.21**
46 SOC Ask to be corrected when talking	2.77	.90	2.36	.92	3.40 **

** p < .01, * p < .05

The 17 strategy items which showed significant relationship with gender covered all the six strategy categories on SILL. One items (item 8) belong to memory strategy categories. The significant difference on item 8, according to Green and Oxford (1995), might fit with females' documented desire to manage their leaning with metacognitive skills.

As far as cognitive strategies are concerned, 6 out of the 14 items were used more often by females. The 6 items almost all fall into two subsets – formal oral-practice strategies and functional practice strategies which require the learners to grab as many opportunities as they could to practice English functionally. Possibly females are superior in verbal aptitude (Ehram & Oxford, 1989) so they are more likely to pay more attention to their pronunciation and accent when speaking. Moreover, because of socially based motivation, females are more likely to create opportunities to learn English. Moreover, because of socially based motivation, females are more likely to create opportunities to learn English.

When mentioning significant differences in compensation strategy category, 2 items (28, 29) were involved. It seems easy to explain, for these two strategies reflect female's conversational behaviours that is typical – even in the native language – by rapport-seeking, sociability, and elicitation of comment by the speaker (Tannen, 1990).

As for matecognitve strategy category, four items were associated with significant differences by gender. Three strategies (item 31, 33, and 34) are introspective and females, as was shown in many research results, are always paying greater attention to such kind of learning (Oxford, 1993a; 1993b).

In affective strategy category, items 40 and 44 were used significantly more often by female than male. This can be explained by women's documented desire to manage their leaning with metacognitive skills and women's conversational style which is more "private", suitable for establishing rapport (Tannen, 1990). Another two items (item 45, 46), under the title of social strategies, showed significant relationships with gender. The more frequent use of them reflects females' conversational behavior that is typified by rapport-seeking (Tannen, 1990) and sociability.

In summary, the findings indicated that in general, high school students under investigation used a variety of learning strategies to study English at a medium to low frequency. The most frequently used strategies were compensation strategies while social strategies were reported the least used. As anticipated, females reported using more learning strategies with significantly greater frequency than males.

CONCLUSION

Findings in this study may suggest a number of implications in English teaching and learning. In China, English class as a whole is teacher-cantered and loaded with heavy cognitive tasks by educational requirements. The instruction and training of learning strategies in teaching is rare, especially in high schools (Liu, 2004). Therefore, awareness towards language learning strategies should be raised, on the part of both teachers and students.

What is more, it is important for teachers to recognize that gender difference is an important factor influence the application of a certain number of strategies in English learning. For example, some strategies may be more suited to some learners than to others. Males and females, as a result, might have different preferences in strategy use. Findings of the study also emphasize the importance of providing adequate opportunities for students to engage actively in authentic communicative tasks in the classroom. Chinese high school students are studying in a highly formal and structured system and their exposure to English are mainly through formal classroom. They should be encouraged to take risk and provided with enough opportunities to practice using the language in accomplishing communication-oriented tasks. The more a foreign language classroom becomes a "language experience" situation, the more likely the students may find more opportunities to use learning strategies at a high level and the more rapidly they will gain a very good command of English.

The present study is just a tentative study of learning strategy use among Chinese high school students. If we explore the subjects longitudinally in the future, the result will be more satisfying. More efforts are needed in the future, both from quantitative and qualitative perspectives, to investigate other factors that contribute to successful English language learners.

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