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EMPIRICAL STUDIES IN MAINLAND CHINA OVER THE PAST DECADE ON
CORRELATIONS WITH ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the empirical studies (investigations by means of questionnaire or experiment) in mainland China over the past decade on correlations with English learning strategies employed by Chinese EFL learners. The correlations in this review mainly include the correlations between the learners' strategies and their gender differences, between their strategies and their English achievement or proficiency, and between their strategies and strategies-based instruction.

Key Words: English learning strategy; empirical study; correlation; Chinese EFL learner

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INTRODUCTION

The past 30 years has seen in China a gradual shift within the field of foreign language learning and teaching with great emphasis being put on EFL learners and learning rather than teachers and teaching. With this gradual shift of interest in EFL learning and teaching, EFL researchers have showed great interest in how EFL learners process new information in their input materials (i.e. how they understand, learn, remember and use what they have learned from their reading and listening materials), and how they approach the tasks or problems they encounter in their EFL learning (i.e. what strategies they employ).

It is Rubin (1975) that drew the public attention to the customary learning behavior of the "good language learner". With the movement in the field of education, where emphasis had been placed on the learner's autonomous or independent learning, the field of second language acquisition and foreign language learning has seen a thriving branch of research on language learning strategies. Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot

(1990), Macaro (2001) and many others systematically explored strategies in learning and using a second language.

With the development of the theories and empirical research in the field of foreign language learning strategies, scholars in mainland China began to investigate Chinese EFL learners' strategies in all the areas of English learning and explore effective and efficient English learning strategies in the circumstances of EFL teaching and learning in China. Ten years ago, Wen and Wang (2004) reviewed empirical studies on English learning strategies in China over the past two decades (from 1984 to 2003). In their review, they identified two distinct stages of empirical studies in China: the beginning stage (1984-1992) and the developmental stage (1993-2003). They observed that in the beginning stage empirical studies on English learning strategies were few and far between. This means that empirical studies began in the 1990s and their review actually covers only about a decade.

Another decade has passed. In this paper we would like to follow their framework of review to observe the empirical studies on strategies that Chinese EFL learners employ, but focus on the part of the macro-perspective in their review due to space limitation. It aims at projecting an overall picture of the empirical studies on the correlations with Chinese EFL learners' strategies in the last ten years (from 2004 to 2014), and attempts to find out if there is any significant tendency in this area of research in mainland China.

In the present paper, empirical studies refer to the studies based on experiments or questionnaires, and correlations with English learning strategies concern the relations between the learners English learning strategies and their gender differences, their English achievement or English proficiency, and the strategies-based instruction (SBI) that they receive.

1. An Overview of the Collected Papers

The authors of the present paper searched, by key words of "English learning strategy", China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), one of the largest databases of academic papers published in mainland China, collected papers of empirical studies published over the past 10 years from 2004 to 2014, and selected papers from important journals, most of them from the so-called core journals of foreign languages listed in the Catalog of Core Journals in China, published by Peking University. Through careful examination, we finally selected about 20 papers which can be considered as empirical studies on correlations with English learning strategies. The journals we reviewed include *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Foreign Languages in China*, *Foreign Language World*, *Foreign Language Education*, *Foreign Language and Their Teaching*, *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal*, *Foreign Language Research*, *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, and *Computer-Assisted Foreign Language Education*.

When Wen and Wang (2004) reviewed their collected papers, they roughly grouped them into two main categories: the macro-perspective category and the micro-perspective category. The former refers to studies on the learner's conception, beliefs, ideas, preferences, etc. and relations of the learning strategies to other relevant variables of the learners, such as their English achievement, their English proficiency, their learning environment and their personal differences. The latter refers to studies on strategies of one area of language knowledge or skills, e.g. listening strategy, reading strategy, vocabulary strategy. In the present paper, we focus on the former macro-perspective category, particularly the relations of the learning strategies to other relevant variables of the learner.

The subjects under study also vary, including English major undergraduates, non-English major undergraduates, non-English major postgraduates, students in vocational schools or colleges, and junior or senior high school students. Some researchers have mixed subjects in their studies.

2. Strategies and Gender Differences

Individuals differ in their strategies of English learning, and different age or gender groups also demonstrate different preferences for their English learning strategies. Some researchers in this review direct their investigation to the gender differences of the learners so as to discover any distinct features about them. Gender is one important aspect of individual differences. Individuals of different sexes behave differently. Does gender affect the use of English learning strategies?

Bocheng Zhang (2005) investigated 56 students (18 male students and 38 female students) majoring Business English and English for Tourism, and examined gender differences among the subjects under study. The result of his investigation shows that female students make more frequent and better use of English learning strategies than male students, but this gender difference is statistically significant only in the use of social strategies. Fenfang Yao et al. (2010) studied 90 college students (45 male students and 45 female students), and concluded that gender differences do exist in the direct strategies (which include cognitive, memory and compensation strategies), but the differences are insignificant. With the indirect strategies (which include metacognitive, affective and social strategies), they found significant difference only in affective strategies. Compared with male students, female students show more interest, stronger determination and higher motivation in learning English. Female students in general are more aware of using learning strategies than male students. They found no significant difference in social strategies.

This result differs from that of Bocheng Zhang's (2005), and also from that of Zhixia Hou (2004). Hou studied 488 freshmen (311 male students and 177 female students), who had entered a university a week before. The result of her investigation shows that female students make more frequent use of all strategies than male students except the compensation strategies. Significant differences exist in memory, cognitive and affective strategies, but there is no significant difference in social strategies.

Both Hou and Yao et al. highlighted their findings of no gender difference in social strategies, but it is in social strategies that B. Zhang found significant gender difference. Another point that is worth mentioning is that Fenfang Yao et al. found significant gender difference only in affective strategies, which rank the third in Hou's findings. The first two groups of strategies are memory and cognitive strategies.

3. Strategies and English Achievement

There are generally two opposite opinions as to the correlation between the strategies that learners employ and their English achievement. Some researchers (e.g. Zhang, 2005; Hou, 2005; Zhu, 2006; Wang, 2008; Shang & Wang, 2010) are of the opinion that English learners' learning strategies correlate with their achievement; others (e.g. Dong, 2009) contend that the strategies that learners employ do not necessarily relate or contribute to their achievement.

Bocheng Zhang (2005) discovered in his investigation that good students make better use of meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies than poor students. No significant difference can be seen with cognitive strategies. Zhixia Hou (2005) selected 50 high-score students and 50 low-score students from the 451 freshmen respondents, based on the scores the students got in their nation-wide official college entrance examination. Hou found that the students in the high-score group make more frequent use of all the six groups of strategies than those in the low-score group. There are significant differences in memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies, but no significant differences show in compensation and affective strategies. Zhongyan Zhu (2006) studied some third-year students in normal colleges, and he found positive correlation between the CET-4 scores and three learning strategies (formal, social and regulation strategies). Limei Wang (2008) divided her students into the high-score group and the low-score group, investigated the correlations between their strategies and their English achievement, and concluded that positive correlations exist between metacognitive strategies and achievement. Students of the high-score group use more associative strategies when they learn vocabulary. Xiaohua Shang and Haihua Wang (2010) investigated 424 non-English majors. They divided the subjects into three groups according to their CET-4 scores: the higher-score group (25%), the intermediate group (50%) and the lower-score group (25%). They observed that the students of the higher-score group make more frequent use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies. They found no significant differences in social and formal strategies. The students in the lower-score group make more use of native language strategies.

All of the above studies on correlation between learners' English learning strategies and their English achievement report weak or strong positive correlations. Metacognitive strategies are found in all the reports if regulation strategies in Zhu's research can be seen as metacognitive strategies. Another group of strategies are social strategies, which are discovered in all the reports except Wang's (2008).

Hui Dong (2009) is the only one researcher who did not find any correlation between the strategies the learners use and their achievement. He chose 140 non-English majors as the subjects of his research and conducted a three-term experiment of integrated language learning strategies instruction. A questionnaire was designed to collect data about the students' English scores of their national college entrance examination, their English learning strategies and their CET-4 scores. The result of his investigation shows no differences in the high and low scores of the college entrance examination and no correlation between the English learning strategies and the CET-4 scores. Nevertheless, he found a correlation between the English scores of the college entrance examination and the CET-4 scores and claimed that the English scores of the college entrance examination can serve as an indicator of the CET-4 scores.

4. Strategies and SBI

It is generally assumed that English learning strategies instruction of any kind contributes to the learner's better use of learning strategies in his English learning activities, and hence improvement of his English achievement and English proficiency. By SBI, teachers can assist students in becoming more effective English learners. SBI can be woven into the regular routine English teaching activities, or conducted explicitly and extensively to the teaching of one particular group of strategies or the teaching of strategies that are required for particular or specific tasks of English learning.

Jianhua Qin and Yingjie Wang (2007) made a case study of a female undergraduate. The student wrote a journal every Friday, for 7 weeks, about her English learning in the week and got feedbacks from the researchers with advice and suggestions on further improvement of her English learning strategies. Towards the end of the study, the student demonstrated improvement in the use of learning strategies for the daily tasks of English learning.

Gang Ma and Jun Wang (2010) designed a teaching experiment and examined the impact of SBI on non-English majors with an attempt to construct an effective model of instruction. The one-year-and-a-half experimental instruction consists of training both across tasks and across such language skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing. With SBI, they hoped to increase the students' strategy repertoire and assist learners in becoming more responsible for their efforts in learning and using the language. The experiment shows that the students can raise their awareness of using the strategies taught to them when they approach different learning tasks.

Yu Li (2008) carried out a one-year experiment of SBI in 8 classes (4 experimental classes and 4 control classes), 520 freshmen, with an attempt to develop their strategy awareness and their ability to approach specific tasks of language learning with specific strategies. The result of the experiment shows that the students in the experiment improved significantly in the use of cognitive, compensation, and metacognitive strategies. Affective strategies are the most infrequently used, and social strategies are the next.

The above two studies are two representative examples. The first one is a typical example of case study, and the second one a typical example of teaching experiment. Both studies prove the effectiveness of SBI.

Most of the SBI experiments were conducted to test the impact of SBI on the development of one group of strategies for the improvement or development of one particular skill, speaking, listening, reading, writing, translating, or interpreting. For instance, Qinmei Yu, et al. (2013) conducted a teaching experiment in order to examine the effectiveness of a teaching mode called "Inquiry Visual-audio-oral Teaching Mode" in the development of the learner's listening strategies. The result of the experiment shows that the application of this teaching mode in listening teaching have a positive effect on the learners' strategy use and autonomous listening. Hence it contributes to the improvement of the learner's English listening and linguistic competence. Xiaoshen Zhu and Juntao Deng (2011) also did experimental research on listening strategies. The aim of the research is to improve college English autonomous listening strategies in the web environment. Listening resources are abundant in the Internet, but the students need to be told where to go, what materials are suitable to them, and how they use them. They realized that the students' lack of listening strategies was the main bottleneck in autonomous learning from the Internet, and that listening strategy training can boost students' autonomous learning ability. Ling et al. (2012) also conducted an experiment with 60 non-English majors in order to examine the effectiveness of listening strategies instruction with multimedia resources.

Their study shows a positive correlation between listening strategies and listening comprehension, but the correlation is low.

It is interesting to find that there are far more papers experimenting with listening strategies than with other strategies. We have only one researcher, Meng Yue (2004), who conducted a twelve-week experiment on the training of reading strategies to two classes of non-English majors. The result of the experiment shows that the instruction has an appositive effect on the reading strategies of the experiment class. The students improved their overall reading comprehension ability as well as reading speed. Few researchers experiment with speaking or writing strategies.

CONCLUSION

This review of the empirical studies on correlations with English learning strategies of Chinese EFL learners enables us to catch a glimpse of the research area of EFL learners' English learning strategies in China. Comparison with corresponding research abroad and in-depth analysis of the reports also enable us to draw the following conclusion.

- 1) Different researchers come to different conclusions as to the correlations between gender differences and English learning strategies. Some even have contradictory findings. For instance, Yao et al. (2010) found significant differences only in affective strategies, and no significant difference in social strategies, but Zhang (2005) concluded that it was in the social strategies that they detected significant difference. Another point is that Zhang (2005) found significant difference only in social strategies, Yao et al. (2010) only in affective strategies, but Hou (2004) in memory, cognitive and affective strategies. Further research is needed to confirm these findings and account for the causes of the contradictions in the reports.
- 2) Different or even opposing findings are also seen in the correlation studies between the learners' English learning strategies and their English achievement or proficiency. All researchers except Dong (2009) found appositive correlations, week or strong, between the English learning strategies the students use and their English achievement or proficiency. Also, those who found appositive correlations reported different findings. Metacognitive strategies are found in all the reports. Other groups of strategies include social, memory, cognitive strategies, but B. Zhang (2005) found no appositive correlation with cognitive strategies. The learners' English achievement or proficiency can be affected by many factors, e.g. the time and effort devoted to English learning, the language aptitude, the teacher's influence, etc. It is even problematic to single out and examine English learning strategies as a variable in teaching experiments, because different individuals have different personality and learning styles and some learning strategies may work well with some learners, but not others. Further explanatory theories are desired to account for the working mechanisms of the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning strategies.
- 3) SBI has become increasingly popular in recent years. The underlying belief of SBI experiments is that SBI can contribute to the development of the learners' English learning strategies and that the desired learning strategies lead to improvement in English achievement or proficiency. There are two questions we have to answer as to the SBI experiments. First, do the English learning strategies really bring about improvement in the learners' achievement or proficiency? In the SBI experiments, learners are involved in the new activities of applying new learning strategies to their learning tasks. If their English achievement is used to evaluate the learning strategies, then the first thing to do is to assess the strength of the activity and the degree of the students' interest in the new learning strategies. The second question is, how should teachers assist the learners in the development of learning strategies? SBI can be conducted in an explicit or implicit way, as a course or as specific approaches to the real routine learning tasks, or as case study or class teaching experiment. More experiments are expected to systematically test the effectiveness of SBI.

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