Adapting the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to suit EFL students in a Chinese Context

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Abstract

This study attempted to adapt the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to suit EFL students in the Chinese context. Using diaries and interviews, the researcher investigated the language learning strategies (LLS) used by a group of EFL students in a Chinese university and discovered a mismatch between strategies that the students really employed and strategies that were included in the SILL. Of the 80 items in the SILL, 17 had been reported as used infrequently by these students, and therefore replaced by their preferred learning strategies. The findings revealed that the Chinese EFL students’ use of LLS might be related to some factors in their cultural and educational background: high motivation in EFL learning, self-encouragement, teacher authority, detailed analysis, repetition and reviewing. Though there exist some limitations in the present study, the findings from this study shed light for future research on LLS and provide some practical implications for EFL teaching and learning in China as well as in other countries with a similar situation worldwide.

Introduction

For the past two decades, questionnaires or inventories have been used increasingly as an instrument to collect data on the strategies used in learning a second or foreign language. One of the most widely employed strategy scales is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Two versions of the SILL, one for foreign language learners whose native language is English (80 items) and the other for learners of English as Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL, 50 items), were published in Oxford’s (1990:283-300) learning strategy book for language teachers. This article deals with how to adapt the 80-item SILL to suit EFL learners in the Chinese context, because its length provides more data than the shorter version.

The SILL is a self-scoring survey where each item is a statement “I do … ” (e.g., I look for patterns in English) and the participants are asked to report the frequency of use of LLS using a Likert-scale.
response for each strategy described: never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and always or almost always true of me. These self-report scales are quick and easy to administer, may be the most cost-effective mode of strategy assessment, and are almost completely unthreatening when administered using paper and pencil under conditions of confidentiality. Green and Oxford (1995:264) quote reliability of various forms of SILL, using Cronbach’s alpha for internal consistency, as .93 – .98.

Some researchers, however, argue that the SILL is susceptible to the influence of cultural and educational differences. Bedell (1993) presented the SILL frequency data from a number of studies on a graph, indicating low to high frequencies. The main message found in Bedell’s graph is that different cultural groups use particular kinds of strategies at different levels of frequency. Watanabe (1990) investigated the strategies of 316 EFL students in Japan and used a principal components analysis to create strategy categories. He found that one of his samples, which came from a prestigious university, used the LLS more frequently than the other sample, which came from a less prestigious college. Takeuchi (1998) found that the SILL was prone to influence by the difference between the ESL and the EFL learning environments. He compared the SILL scores of Japanese learners of English studying in the US (ESL) and those of the same subjects after returning to Japan (EFL). Once students came back to Japan after a three-week stay in the US, Takeuchi found that the frequency of the use of seven LLS had dropped significantly, while the use of three LLS increased dramatically. Also, Kimura and Oda (1997), applying the fuzzy-set concurrent rating (FCR) method to the SILL, found that several LLS listed in the inventory were not suitable for Japanese EFL students.

In order to gain a clearer and more accurate picture of how students from different cultural backgrounds use LLS, Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p.18) called for the creation of country-by-country SILL norms based on an analysis of particular features in a cultural and educational context. For this reason, I undertook a case study of EFL students’ use of LLS in a Chinese university. First, I briefly introduce the cultural and educational background on which this study was conducted. Then, by using diaries and interviews, I elicit the data concerning what items from the original SILL were unpopular for this group of students and what items, though exclusive from the original
SILL, were frequently used by them. An important part of the data analysis addresses the likely relationship between the students’ use of LLS and their cultural/educational background. Finally, I discuss the limitations and implication of this study for English teachers in the EFL contexts.

Cultural and educational background in the Chinese context

Three aspects of Chinese culture are often claimed to have an important effect on attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners (Brislin, 1993). The first one is collectivism and interdependent self in the Chinese culture. Chinese society is marked by a strong tradition of filial piety and familism which encompass a non-individual collectivistic orientation among the Chinese (Brislin, 1993). Such a social orientation has resulted in socialization for achievement. In the Chinese cultural context, achievement orientation is based firmly on collectivist rather than individual values. This can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure in a collectivist culture affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. In general, Chinese students are highly motivated in their EFL learning, and strongly believe in hard work and effort. The final well-recognized source of influence on attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners originates from people’s attitudes to power and authority. In China, people in lower positions are expected to obey those who are in high positions and humble people should show respect to those who are superior in society. When this is applied to language learning, it is apparent that teachers are authorities and students are passive learners.

As regards Chinese traditional education, we can identify some features by reviewing the sayings and maxims of Confucius, who laid a strong foundation for the development of education in China. “How pleasant it is to repeat constantly what we are learning” is a saying that almost every student in China learns by heart. Repetition is regarded by Confucius as an efficient way to consolidate what one has just learnt. In Confucius’ opinion, learning is considered as an accumulation of knowledge and the reading of books. This is evidenced by his saying: “It’s always useful to open a book”. With regard to the correct way of learning, Confucius summed up: “Learning without thought brings entanglement. Thought without learning totters”. To put it simply, it runs as follows: In the process of learning one has to use one’s mind to establish logic, but on the other hand, logic cannot come out of a mind devoid of learning; learning
and thinking are the two indispensable factors in the process of learning. Another way of learning advocated by Confucius was to make a constant review of what one had learnt. “By reviewing the old, one learns the new”. According to Confucius, there is no limit to things and knowledge. As one goes over the old knowledge again and again, thinking it over and over, one will come to a new understanding and thus acquire new knowledge.

It is obvious, from this brief historical review of Chinese culture and education, that Chinese culture is characterized by collectivism, socialization for achievement and high acceptance of power and authority. Chinese students are more accustomed to teacher-centered classroom activities, and are likely to emphasize detailed analysis, repetition, and reviewing.

The study

Subjects

The participants in the present study were twenty end-of-2\textsuperscript{nd} year non-English major students in Jiangxi Normal University, China. They were selected from ten departments, five of which were social science departments, the other five being science departments. Two students from each department were chosen, representing two levels of English proficiency (high, low) based on their scores in their most recent English tests. Among the twenty subjects, twelve were female and eight were male. The ages ranged from 18 to 20, with the average being 19.2. I deliberately set these criteria for selecting the subjects in the study because I intended to ensure that the data for adapting the SILL were comprehensive and representative of EFL students’ use of LLS in Chinese universities.

Instruments

The instruments used in this qualitative study were diary studies and semi-constructed interviews.

Diaries The selected 20 students were asked to write a diary for one week showing the types of LLS they employed both in and out of class and why, how, and for how long the LLS were used. To guide the students’ diary, I asked each of them to record all the activities that brought them into contact with the English language, and which they thought might help them improve their English. The students were told
to describe only those events which they thought were of interest. Also to be included in the diary were the problems the students had encountered with English, and what they planned to do about them. To encourage cooperation, no requirements were made as to how many entries they should include and how long they should write in each diary. The language in which these records had to be kept was not specified, but all the subjects opted for Chinese.

**Interviews** Following the diary writing, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the students’ use of LLS. In these interviews, I posed a few predetermined questions but had considerable flexibility concerning follow-up questions pertinent to their learning strategy use. Most of the questions in the interview were concerned with their English learning experience, covering English learning history, language learning plans, language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), language knowledge (phonetics, grammar and vocabulary) and the relationship between strategy use and learning outcomes. Since the purpose of this interview was to adapt the SILL, I constantly prompted the interviewees to elicit information about the items in the SILL to clarify their use among these students. Each interview, which lasted approximately one hour, was conducted in the students’ native language (Chinese) so that they were able to express their ideas fully. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis**

A naturalistic, inductive approach was adopted in this study, in which interpretation was based on systematic observation of the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Analysis of this qualitative data involved three linked stages based on the recommendations of Walsh (1994). First, the two transcribers and I read all the diary entries and interview transcripts over and over again, and then independently noted down the learning strategies. Descriptions of the LLS and its use were thoroughly recorded to assure that later classification of the strategy would be accurate. Each new mention of a strategy or its application was noted. When a student referred to a strategy again after it had been recorded, the comment was highlighted on the text but was not counted as a new report. If, however, a student used the same strategy with a different learning activity, it was then recorded as a new strategy application. Those noted by all three were kept for future analysis.
The second stage focused on categorizing the LLS mentioned by the subjects. Two steps were involved. First, all the items of LLS noted by all the readers above were content analyzed (Stempel, 1989). Those of similar type were put together according to the SILL category. This was initially done independently by the three of us who then met to discuss and agree on the final categories. Then, a single word or phrase was selected as a representative label for each strategy. For example, a student’s comment, “When practicing pronunciation, I’d like to follow the teacher”, was summarized as “imitation”. Other descriptions reflecting the same strategy were summarized likewise.

The final stage focused on interpreting meaning from the data and this I carried out by myself. In this stage, I deliberately linked all the recurrent themes and salient comments to the students’ cultural and educational context.

**Results and discussion**

The results of the data analysis revealed a complex picture of strategy use for this group of students. Some items in the SILL were rather infrequently mentioned or never mentioned at all by these students, despite my prompting. Other items, absent from the SILL, were frequently mentioned by the subjects. Considering the relatively small number of the students in this sample group, I was very cautious in adapting the SILL. Several resources were used to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data obtained and to help decide what items should be deleted from or added to the SILL. First of all, being an English teacher in Chinese university for more than 10 years, I applied my accumulated knowledge about English learners in China. Next, after drafting the adapted SILL, I held several discussions with my colleagues at the university, seeking their advice on the appropriateness of the adaptation. Then, the revised version of the SILL was sent to the 20 interviewed students, who were asked to make further comments on it. Eventually, I made a final version of the adapted SILL by synthesizing all suggestions and opinions from the different sources. The following two subsections expound the items deleted from and added to the SILL. To protect the students’ identity, I assigned a number for each student from 1 – 20 when his or her data were referred to.
The items deleted from the original SILL

All those items mentioned by 6 or fewer of the 20 students and confirmed as minimally important by myself and my colleagues were excluded from the adapted SILL. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Items deleted from the original SILL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>No. of mention*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. MEM</td>
<td>I visualize the spelling of the new word in my mind.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. MEM</td>
<td>I physically act out the new word.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. MEM</td>
<td>I remember where the new word is located on the page, or where I first saw or heard it.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MEM</td>
<td>I use rhyming to remember it.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. MEM</td>
<td>I remember the word by making a clear mental image of it or by drawing a picture.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. MEM</td>
<td>I use a combination of sounds and images to remember the new word.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. COG</td>
<td>I try to think in English.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. COG</td>
<td>I initiate conversations in English.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. COG</td>
<td>I attend and participate in out-of-class events where English is spoken.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. COM</td>
<td>I direct the conversation to a topic for which I know the words.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. META</td>
<td>I arrange my physical environment to promote learning; for instance, I find a quiet, comfortable place to review.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61. META</td>
<td>I actively look for people with whom I can speak English.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68. AFF</td>
<td>I give myself a tangible reward when I have done something well in English learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69. AFF</td>
<td>I pay attention to physical signs of stress that might affect English learning.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70. AFF</td>
<td>I keep a private diary or journal where I write my feelings about English learning.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77. SOC</td>
<td>When I am talking with a native speaker, I try to let him or her know when I need help.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80. SOC</td>
<td>I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number of times the research subjects referred to an item in the original SILL. The maximum number of mentions possible for each item is 20.

The results suggest that the students did not often use a variety of learning strategies in the original SILL, but one third of the deleted items (items 23, 26, 48, 61, 77, 80) were related to the use of LLS leading to the improvement of communicative competence. This reflected to a certain degree the current English teaching situation in Chinese universities. Although communicative competence was gradually emphasized from the early 1980s, it has still not attracted
enough attention. Most students felt, on the other hand, that some of the traditional LLS were still effective ways to facilitate their English learning. The following comment was typical.

“We are Chinese students learning English in China. Though we do need to adopt some LLS from the Western countries to improve our communicative competence, we should not discontinue the use of our traditional learning activities. In addition, it is not all the LLS from the West that we should use, but those which have proved to be very efficient for our English learning nowadays.” (Diary writer 7, 10/03/01)

Indeed, the students’ comments here reflected their attitude towards some items in the original SILL. For example, one third of the deleted items from the original SILL (items 7, 12, 10, 5, 6, 8) are memory strategies. Most of the students reported in the interviews that they did not know about the specific techniques in the SILL, such as using rhymes or connecting the sounds of new words to an image or picture.

“I have never heard of those strategies you mentioned just now. Even if I had been informed about these strategies, I would not have accepted them. We are Chinese students learning English in the Chinese context. I don’t think those Westernized ways of memorization suit us in China.” (Interviewee 2, 21/03/01)

The same attitude was also expressed with regard to the use of item 12 (I physically act out the new word). In many learning contexts outside China where the number of students in a language classroom is 15-20, it is seen as a positive form of learning. But in a Chinese classroom that is normally filled up with 60-70 students, there would be chaos if such a strategy was used.

“There are 65 students in my class. It is all right for us to organize group discussion or pair work. But there is chaos when we are asked to act out the new word by moving around the classroom, which is only spacious enough to hold all of us. I will feel quite frustrated if such an activity is going around.” (Interviewee 16, 20/03/01)

The same is true for item 54 (I arrange my physical environment to promote learning; for instance, I find a quiet, comfortable place to review). In China, all university students live on campus where the only places they can go for study are the library or a classroom.
“I have to hunt for a seat in our library or classroom every day. How could I find a quiet and comfortable place to study?” (Interviewee 4, 26/03/04)

The results support LoCastro’s (1994) study, in which respondents criticized “the lack of contextualization of some items…. Overwhelmingly, they suggested it depended on the situation and the people” (p. 412).

What surprised me even more from the study was the students’ responses to the use of item 68 in the original SILL. None of the 20 students reported that they would give themselves a tangible reward when they had done something well in English learning.

“Instead of giving myself a tangible reward for any kind of good work I have done in my English learning, I summarize my experience in English learning, find out my shortcomings and see how I can do better in the future study.” (Interviewee 18, 24/03/01)

This finding is consistent with the literature reviewed in the previous section. In China, students are supposed, from the very beginning of their education, to do well in their schooling. If they fail to do so, they are often accused of being lazy, or not following their teachers’ instructions (Brislim, 1993).

Similarly, the students’ English proficiency level and their academic major also prevented them from making a constant use of some items in the original SILL. Of the 20 subjects, only 3 of them said they would try to think in English (item 25). If this group of students were third or fourth year English majors in a Chinese university, it would be reasonable to assume that they were capable of using such a strategy. But these subjects were only second-year non-English majors whose main focus of university study was their professional areas. Even respondents whose English proficiency was high insisted that they were unable to think in English.

“As a student majoring in physics in university, I cannot spend too much time learning English every day. Although I have been exposed to the English language for 8 years, I am far from being able to think in English.” (Interviewee 15, 26/03/01)

The students’ use of item 69 (I pay attention to physical signs of stress that might affect English learning) and item 70 (I keep a private
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...diary or journal where I write my feelings about English learning) further confirmed the above statement. When prompted whether they had ever used these two strategies, one interviewee complained:

“I am fully engaged in my major study every day and do not have time to care about those affective trifles. Although I am sometimes aware of such physical signs of stress and feelings in English learning, I do not pay much attention to them and never write about them in the diary.” (Interviewee 5, 28/03/01).

**Items added to the adapted SILL**

All the items mentioned by 14 or more of the 20 subjects were included in the adapted SILL. In order to keep the balance with the original SILL, I decided to add the same number of items as had been deleted, and to try to have the number of added items in each strategy category more or less the same as the number of deleted items in the corresponding category.

**Table 2: Items added to the adapted SILL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>No. of mention*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. MEM</td>
<td>I read the new word repeatedly to remember it.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. MEM</td>
<td>I remember the new word by analyzing its root.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. MEM</td>
<td>I write the word repeatedly to remember it.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. MEM</td>
<td>I remember the new word by analyzing its synonym or antonym, and then group them together.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. MEM</td>
<td>I review the English lesson often.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. COG</td>
<td>I strengthen the words or phrases I remembered by reviewing.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. COG</td>
<td>I try to understand the complex English sentences by analyzing their grammatical structures.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. COG</td>
<td>I read English texts repeatedly out of class.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. COG</td>
<td>I rely on the teacher to correct my mistakes.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. COG</td>
<td>I say answers to myself even if I am not called on to answer it by the teacher.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61. META</td>
<td>I analyze my characteristics to find out those which may facilitate my English learning and those which may prohibit my English learning.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65. META</td>
<td>I do a lot of exam-oriented exercises before exams.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64. META</td>
<td>I systematically review vocabulary, texts and notes before exams.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70. AFF</td>
<td>I always encourage myself not to be discouraged by poor exam results.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72. AFF</td>
<td>I continue reading even when I meet difficult language points in English reading.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75. SOC</td>
<td>I actively ask and answer questions in English and participate in various kinds of classroom activities in English classes.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78. SOC</td>
<td>I ask help from the teacher when I meet difficulties in English learning.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number of times the research subjects referred to an item in the adapted SILL. The maximum number of mentions possible for each item is 20.*
It is interesting to note that some common patterns in the students’ use of LLS emerge when we look at the added items. Each pattern of strategy use seems to be connected with a typical feature in Chinese culture and education. Table 3 presents these features, their descriptions and the related items to each feature.

Table 3: Features in Chinese culture and education and their related learning strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High motivation in EFL learning</td>
<td>Set a high goal in EFL learning and do whatever one can to achieve that goal</td>
<td>42, 61, 75, 65, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-encouragement</td>
<td>Encourage oneself when s/he meets difficulties in English learning</td>
<td>70, 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher authority</td>
<td>Teachers tell students what to do and students just listen</td>
<td>41, 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed analysis</td>
<td>Meticulous attention to linguistic details and grammatical structures</td>
<td>3, 4, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Acquire one’s knowledge or skills by doing something repeatedly</td>
<td>11, 10, 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing</td>
<td>Go over what one has learnt again and again for the purpose of reinforcement</td>
<td>13, 28, 64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*High motivation in English learning*

The students’ high motivation in English learning was reflected in their frequent use of some strategies concerned with hard work or effort making. More than two thirds of the students reported that they would say answers to themselves even if they were not called on to answer a question (item 42), analyze their characteristics to find out how to be a good language learner (item 61) and actively participate in various kinds of classroom activities in English classes (item 75).

“As a non-English major student, I have only four hours for English classes each week. To make the best use of this limited time of classroom teaching, I actively involve myself in all kinds of classroom activities. Only by doing this can I experience what I am learning so that the perceptions and meanings are my own.” (Diary writer 10, 09/03/01)
The students were also highly motivated to achieve high scores in their English examinations. Seventeen of the subjects reported that they would do a lot of exam-oriented exercises before examinations (item 65), and 18 said that they would systematically review vocabulary, texts, and notes before examinations (item 64). Some interviewees were aware of the drawbacks in using these exam-oriented strategies, but they added that,

“As examination results are the only criteria to judge a students’ achievement in school, I will try whatever I can to improve my examination outcome”. (Diary writer 15, 12/03/01)

**Self-encouragement**

Seventeen subjects found it important to continue reading even when they came across difficulties (item 72), and all 20 subjects considered it essential not to be discouraged by poor examination results (item 70). Such an attitude to difficulties is characteristic of Chinese traditional culture. As reviewed in the previous section, Chinese students have a strong drive for success and high motivation in their education. Whenever they are in a difficult situation, they would encourage themselves not to give in.

“When I first attended English lectures in university, I could neither understand what the teacher said in English nor speak a word of English. But I have never lost my confidence in English learning for the past two years. I have been trying hard to improve my English proficiency. So far, I am satisfied with the progress I have made in English learning.” (Diary writer 9, 14/03/01)

Since all the students had been learning English in an EFL situation, it was inevitable for them to meet more obstacles than those learning English in ESL contexts. Therefore, self-encouragement became crucial for these EFL learners.

**Teacher’s authority**

Eighteen subjects reported that they would rely on the teacher to correct the mistakes they had made (item 41) and all the subjects reported that they would ask help from the teacher to solve difficulties in English learning (item 78). These results are in line with most findings regarding the relationship between the teacher and students in China. On the whole, Chinese students rely more on the teacher than
on themselves in their learning process. Teachers are considered the authorities, who will tell the students the meaning of a word and how the English language works (Liu and Littlewood, 1997). Therefore, it leaves little room for the students to develop their own autonomy. One student wrote in her diary,

“I was taught to listen to the teacher in school the first day I went to school. Since then, I have started forming my own learning habits, which have brought me more or less success so far. I feel it awkward to change my classroom behaviors at my age in the English class.” (Diary writer 11, 22/03/01)

Being deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural and educational background, most of the students believe that,

“the teacher will tell me what I should learn and how I should learn. What I need to do is to follow the teacher’s instruction”. (Diary writer 8, 13/03/01)

**Detailed analysis**

For a long time, EFL teaching in China has been dominated by a teacher-centered, book centered, grammar-translation method, which has nurtured students’ interest in paying meticulous attention to an analysis of the materials they are learning. This is evidenced in the present study by the subjects’ preference for such strategies as item 3 (I remember the new word by analyzing its root), item 4 (I remember the new word by analyzing its synonym or antonym, and then grouping them together) and item 25 (I try to understand the complex English sentences by analyzing their grammatical structures). The following experience was not uncommon among these students:

“Whenever I come across a difficult word or a long and complicated English sentence, I tend to analyze its formation or its grammatical structure. I think analyzing linguistic details and grammatical rules can help familiarize us with the structures of the English language.” (Diary writer 2, 12/03/01)

Once again, the findings confirm that Chinese people tend to dissect and logically analyze the given material, search for contrasts, and find cause-and-effect relationships (Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). To them, there are patterns and rules in the English language
and it is important for them to detect them through thinking and analyzing in either deductive or inductive modes.

**Repetition**

Repetition strategies were preferred by most of the participants. Item 11 (I read the new word repeatedly to remember it) was used by 15 subjects, item 10 (I write the word repeatedly to remember it) by 16, and item 34 (I read English texts repeatedly out of class) by 15. These findings coincide with the behavior of Chinese learners, who regard repetition as one of the best ways for improving their learning efficiency,

“Since there is no other way for me to remember the new words effectively, I can only do so through reading or writing them repeatedly.” (Interviewee 15, 29/03/01)

Perhaps Chinese students’ preference for using repetition strategies for memorizing vocabulary originates from learning to write Chinese characters. In acquiring the thousands of characters in common usage, one must keep practicing them until they are kept in mind. Traditionally, the sequence is to learn to shape them first before learning what they mean, so in that sense and at that stage there is obviously a good deal of repetitive learning. Chinese characters are usually learnt by using the five organs: eyes to see the shape, ears to hear the sound, hand to write, mouth to speak the sound, mind to think about the meaning. This corresponds to the three repetitive strategies mentioned above. Thus, in this Chinese environment repetition plays a key role in the sequence remarked by Biggs (1996): repetitive skill development comes first, followed by meaning and interpretation, with repetition being used as the tool for creating meaning.

**Reviewing**

There are three added items (item 13, 28 and 64) connected with reviewing strategies in the adapted SILL. More than two thirds of the students reported that they would review the English lesson often (item 13), strengthen the words or phrases they had remembered by reviewing (item 28), and systematically review vocabulary, texts and notes before exams (item 64). Two of the interviewees stated why they favored the use of these reviewing strategies.
“Just as we cannot eat the food of a week for a meal, we should not expect to learn English well within one month or two. I like to average my review work in the daily study. In every month or so, I tend to have a review of what I have learnt in the past. When we come to the middle of a semester, I usually have a mid-semester review. And then I will have a final review before the semester English test comes.” (Interviewee 8, 25/03/01)

“Generally speaking, I intend to review every new word I have memorized three times. The first review of a new word occurs in 3 days after it is memorized, the second review in 7 days, and the third review in 15 days. I find it ideal to schedule my review work like this, because a constant review reinforces my memorization of new words.” (Interviewee 19, 30/03/01)

Situated in this particular education environment, these Chinese students had their own ways of learning. They firmly regarded reviewing as one of the best ways to achieve real mastery of anything.

**Limitations and implications**

While the SILL was adapted to meet the specific requirements of the EFL students in the Chinese context, it had the following limitations:

- The number of the subjects in this study was small (n = 20). This limited source of data could not completely represent the learning strategies used by non-English majors in Chinese universities. It was probable that some frequently-used strategies were not included in this adapted SILL questionnaire.
- Most of the questions in the semi-structured interviews were preset by me. Although there were opportunities to raise further questions, the students did not have flexibility to describe their learning experience as they liked.
- Subjects’ responses to the interview questions might not be always reliable due to the following reasons. First, discrepancies might exist between what the subjects thought they had done and what they had actually done. Second, the subjects tended to flatter the researcher or show themselves in a good light.
- As the adapted SILL included some items which were completely different from those in the original one, it might generate some data different from those in other SILL studies. As a result, the
use of the adapted SILL would reduce exact comparability between this study and other SILL studies.

Despite these limitations, the data collected in the present study and confirmed by many previous studies indicate that there exist identifiable learning strategies for this group of Chinese students. Of the 80 items in the original SILL, 17 items were not employed frequently by these students. Instead, they favored a variety of strategies related to meticulous attention to analysis, repetition, and reviewing. They also preferred learning strategies that involve high motivation in EFL learning, self-encouragement and a great degree of teacher direction of classroom activities. An in-depth analysis made here shows that there is a likely relationship between the students’ strategy use and their cultural/educational background.

Since this study revealed a mismatch between strategies that the students really employed and strategies that were included in the original SILL, it is therefore of vital importance for EFL teachers to work out questionnaires or inventories that suit their students in their specific contexts. At least three approaches could be taken in this area.

1. While preparing a questionnaire, EFL teachers must take into consideration their students’ cultural values and beliefs. In his well-developed social-educational model, Gardner (1985) highlights the crucial role of culture, proposing that the cultural values and beliefs in the community concerning the importance and meaningfulness of learning the language will influence the way each individual learns the language. Oxford et al. (1992) emphasize that although culture is not the single determinant role, and although many other influences intervene, culture often does play a significant role in the shape of learning strategies.

2. When developing a questionnaire for assessing LLS, recognize the importance of the environments — second language versus foreign language settings — in which L2 learning takes place. In the present study, for instance, strategy item 12, “I physically act out the new word,” would be more feasible for a small class than for a large class because the use of this strategy entails a spacious place for students to move around. As Garner (1990) theorized, “A theory of settings reminds us that when context varies, the nature of strategic activity often varies as well” (p. 26).
3. Create a task-based strategy survey. As a general learning strategy instrument, the SILL has the advantage of eliciting responses to a wide variety of strategies that students use to deal with different learning tasks. However, it is impossible for researchers to use a generic strategy assessment tool to tackle specific tasks. Chamot et al. (1988) reported that types of learning tasks had an important impact on strategy use. Cohen (1998) and Oxford (1999) also called for the development of task-based strategy surveys. A recent study by Oxford et al. (2004) demonstrated that the performance of a reading task as the basis for responding to a strategy questionnaire did cause some of the strategies to be reported with a different frequency, as compared with an earlier administration of the same survey with the same respondents when no reading task was required.

Finally, I would stress that, no matter how appropriate or accurate a questionnaire might be, we should use the technique of data triangulation to provide stabilization of the data and interpretive clarity. Such triangulation is essential, since no one source of data can be regarded as sufficient or as fully reliable. Each instrument, though imperfect, is used to complement each other and accuracy of the data concerning students’ individual strategic differences and the common features in their strategy use can be expected to be achievable through the data triangulation.

References


Adapting the SILL to suit EFL students in a Chinese Context


