



Language Learning Strategy Use of Chinese ESL Learners of Hong Kong - Findings from a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Qualitative data on the use of language learning strategies (LLSs) from 10 Chinese ESL learners studying at a vocational institute were gathered. Results reveal that research participants used a wide variety of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective LLSs. Social/affective LLSs were found to be more popular than metacognitive and cognitive LLSs among the participants. The more popular LLSs found were: the metacognitive LLSs of advance organization, advance preparation, organizational planning and self-management; the cognitive LLSs of resourcing, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, and translation; and finally the social/affective LLSs of questioning for clarification, co-operation, and positive self-talk. Besides, research participants were found to use different LLSs for different tasks and in different situations. Three contextual factors, namely the role of English in Hong Kong, the education system, and Confucianism, in addition to some learner characteristics, are suggested as possible influences on LLS use. This paper will also discuss the implications of these findings for classroom teaching to Chinese ESL learners. It is recommended that, in promoting the use of LLSs and providing LLS instruction to learners, teachers should take into considerations the influence of contextual factors.

1 Introduction

Past research on the learning of Chinese learners has shown the importance of taking into considerations contextual influences (e.g. Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1996). Asian students were found to use language learning strategies (LLSs) which are different from those of other cultural backgrounds (Griffiths, 2003; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Oxford (1996) points out that culture is one of the factors which influence LLS use. Among the various reasons for the cultural differences in LLS use, Confucianism has been the most widely suggested (e.g. Marton, Dall'Alba, & Tse, 1996). However, recently, there have been warnings that the influences of culture on language learning might be over-represented in past research (Shi, 2006). In addition to culture, other contextual factors such as the role of English in society and the education system might influence the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners. Thus the first purpose of this paper is to identify the contextual influences on the LLS use of local Chinese ESL learners.

LLS research to date is characterized by the use of quantitative data collection methods, mainly self-report survey questionnaires such as the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning). In LLS research, it is common to use numerical data gathered from standardized instrument to establish relationships between LLSs and learner characteristics such as L2 proficiency, gender, and personality. There have been doubts about the use of standardized scales because of possible contextual influences (Woodrow, 2005). There is a need to gather qualitative data in LLS research as quantitative data can only provide us with a restricted account of the phenomena under study.

The second purpose of this study is to gather qualitative data on LLS use in the Hong Kong context.

There has been an over-emphasis on establishing the relationships between LLS use and language achievement of tertiary students in past research in the Chinese context (e.g. Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005). Zhang (2003) calls more research in middle schools. The third purpose of this study is to correct the over-emphasis in past research on the LLS use of tertiary students, and on the relationships between their LLS use and language achievement. The participants of this study were adolescents studying at a vocational institute who had just completed their 5 years of secondary education. This study aims at identifying the pattern of LLS use of local Chinese ESL learners rather than establishing relationships between LLS use and language achievement.

In sum, the aims of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the possible contextual factors influencing the use of LLSs of adolescent Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong; and
2. To identify the patterns of LLS use of adolescent Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong through gathering qualitative data.

This paper contains eight parts. After a review of the relevant studies conducted in the Chinese context and a presentation of the contextual background of this study, the methodology of this study will be introduced. These will be followed by a presentation of the findings and a discussion. Finally, in conclusion, the implications of the findings for teaching will be discussed.

2 Literature review

As mentioned at the outset, past research has repeatedly shown that the LLS use pattern of Chinese ESL learners is different from those of other contexts. This section summarizes the major characteristics of LLS use of Chinese ESL learners.

Findings of past research on the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners have contributed to the stereotype of Chinese learners as rote-learners who tended to use a limited range of LLSs in their learning. For example, Biggs (1996) as well as Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1996) suggest repetition and memory-based strategies are important in facilitating understanding because of the high value placed on effort and perseverance in Confucianism. Other research findings and observations (e.g. Harvey, 1985; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985) also suggest that Confucianism is a prominent factor which contributes to the stereotype of Chinese learners as rote learners. However, with the proliferation of research, Chinese ESL learners were found to use a variety of learning strategies (e.g. Goh & Foong, 1997). Besides, more and more research seems to provide evidence which is contrary to the earlier conclusion that Chinese learners are rote learners. In Goh and Foong's (1997) study of ESL students from PRC, the following metacognitive LLSs were found to be popular among the respondents: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Among other studies on the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners, Bedell and Oxford (1996) found that compensation strategies were the most frequently used LLSs among 353 secondary and tertiary students in China. Surprisingly, memory strategies were found to be the least frequently used LLSs.

While earlier studies on LLS use focused more on integrated use of LLSs, more recent studies focus on the use of LLSs in specific language tasks. Asian students were found to have high resistance to using the cognitive LLS of grouping in learning vocabulary (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper & Russo, 1985) and imagery in learning vocabulary (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Gu and Johnson (1996) reported that in learning vocabulary Chinese ESL learners used selective attention and self-monitoring frequently. In listening, Goh (2002) found that Chinese ESL learners used inferencing, directed attention, elaboration, contextualization, and self-encouragement more frequently. More proficient Chinese ESL listeners were found to use planning, monitoring, self-evaluating more frequently than other cognitive and social LLSs (Wang, 2002). In reading, Chinese-speaking university students in Canada were found to use a number of LLSs, namely using background knowledge, translation, self-questioning, summarizing, prediction

to plan, monitor, evaluate and remedy their comprehension (Li & Munby, 1996). There has been a lack of research in the LLS use of Chinese ESL in speaking and writing (Zhang, 2003).

In the Hong Kong context, Peacock and Ho (2003) investigated the LLS use of tertiary students across eight disciplines. They found that compensation strategies were the most frequently employed LLSs. They were followed by cognitive, metacognitive, social, memory and affective LLSs.

As mentioned earlier, in some studies of the above review (e.g. Biggs, 1996), there is a tendency of over-emphasizing the role of Confucianism in influencing the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners. We should remember that culture is only one among many contextual factors which determine the learning behaviors of learners. As we will see from the findings of this study, in addition to Confucianism, the role of English in the Hong Kong context, and the education system are suggested to be factors influencing the LLS use of Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong. Another observation from the above review is that there is a lack of common pattern of LLS use found among Chinese ESL learners. There is a need to identify the LLS use patterns of local ESL learners.

In order for us to see how context affects the LLS use of research participants of this study, the socio-linguistic context of Hong Kong will be briefly introduced in the next section.

3 Contextual background

Since colonial times, English has been the dominant language in the government, education, business and the law courts in Hong Kong. English has traditionally been an important medium for communication, the media, tourism, and the arts in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is an international centre of trade, finance and commerce with a population of over six million, 98% of whom are Chinese with Cantonese as the predominant language. The use of Cantonese is common in the daily lives of Hongkongers. Hong Kong people seldom have the need to use English, except in the workplace. English is typically considered as having a 'value-added' role in the Hong Kong society (Li, 1999), meaning that knowledge of English can increase one's competitiveness in the labour market.

English has always played a crucial role within the education system. English is first introduced in primary school almost as a foreign language. At secondary school level, schools have the choice of using English or Chinese as the medium of instruction. In the recognition of the economic and educational potential knowledge of English makes available, most parents opt for English-medium secondary education for their children.

There are two main public examinations at the secondary level in Hong Kong. The first is the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE). Most candidates take the HKCEE after their five-year study at a secondary school at the age of about 17. Those who have satisfactory results in their HKCEE are offered places to continue their studies in secondary school for two more years (Form Six and Seven). The HKALE is normally taken by a student at the end of his/her two-year sixth-form courses. Among those who decide not to prepare for their HKALE, some start their careers. Some continue their studies abroad, while others continue their studies locally in other institutions. Vocational education is one of their choices.

In sum, the present study is located in a sociolinguistic context which has the following characteristics. First of all, English has the tradition of being a prestige language which is regarded as providing access to good education and furthering career prospects. Secondly, English is seldom used in the daily life of the majority of the local population, and the local dialect, Cantonese, is the vehicle for maintaining the cultural identity of the society. Secondary school students have to face two major public examinations, in which the English language results are crucial to their further studies and future careers.

4 The study

One-to-one semi-structured interview was employed as the data collection method in this study. Five pilots were conducted before data collection, and 10 interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The 10 participants were selected randomly from 16 classes of about 22 students each in the foundation year of diploma courses at a vocational education institute. The students completed their HKCEE in the same year. In this foundation year, English is a compulsory subject. The approximate duration of instruction is about 200 hours, and the curriculum is heavily vocationally biased.

In the pilot interviews, participants were asked general questions on their use of LLSs. However, participants' responses showed that they had a very limited understanding of LLSs, and most participants just focused their accounts on a few LLSs such as memorizing. Pilot participants also had difficulties in judging what were regarded as LLSs. An example is that upon further probing some participants expressed they did not know asking teachers can be regarded as a LLS. In view of these difficulties, it was decided that the researcher introduced to participants the meanings of the different types of LLSs based on O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy at the beginning of each interview. The purpose was to facilitate participants' responses and to avoid participants focusing their discussion to a few LLSs. The explanations made were kept to a minimum in order to avoid possible biases. The researcher then asked research participants their views of these LLSs, how often and under what situations they used them. The outline of the interview is given in Appendix 1.

The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of both the participants and interviewer. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes and was taped-recorded with the consent of participants. Recordings were transcribed and translated, and qualitative data were classified and analyzed based on O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy. In O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy, the numbers of specific LLSs in the categories of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective LLSs are 7, 10 and 3 respectively. Altogether there are 20 LLSs, and they were used for the coding of strategies. The researcher was the coder in analyzing data. There were four steps in the data analysis. The researcher read the transcriptions of the ten interviews one by one and identified participants' use of LLSs based on the 20 strategies. Then the total numbers of participants mentioning the use of each LLSs were compiled and put into tables. Data which could not be coded were checked, and their differences and similarities were identified.

5 Findings

Among the 10 participants, 6 of them were females and 4 of them were males. Their mean age was 17.

5.1 Metacognitive LLS

Table 1 summarizes the use of metacognitive LLSs as reported by research participants.

	Metacognitive LLSs	No. of participants
1	Advance organization	2
2	Advance preparation	3
3	Organizational planning	3
4	Selective attention	2
5	Self-monitoring	1
6	Self-evaluation	1
7	Self-management	4

Table 1: Metacognitive LLSs used by participants

Most participants said they used quite a wide variety of metacognitive LLSs. Participant 1 said that he used metacognitive LLSs such as advance organization, advance preparation and organizational planning in learning English:

I use my own methods to think about what I am going to learn first, then I compare what I have thought with what teachers say, and look for differences and similarities between them. In this way I can learn how to 'think in English' ... (Participant 1)

Participants 3 and 5 also used quite a number of metacognitive LLSs:

Previewing materials to be learned and preparing and planning before you write and speak are very useful because as in doing anything, better preparation usually produces better results. (Participant 3)

When I write and speak, I'll plan in advance what I am going to write and speak. (Participant 5)

Participants 9 and 10 said that they did mental rehearsal (i.e. advance preparation) before they spoke, but they did not prepare for any lessons:

I usually practice in my mind before I speak English, for example, when I do role-playings and presentations. However, I do not prepare for what I am going to learn. (Participant 9)

I sometimes take a look at what I am going to learn, but I don't always do so ... you know ... sometimes you are just lazy. However, when I need to speak, I think about what I am going to speak. (Participant 10)

Interestingly, Participant 2 did not think the 3 LLSs of advance organization, advance preparation and organizational planning were useful at all, but he would sometimes pay attention to key words (used selective attention) when he watched television and listened to English songs.

Selective attention was also frequently used by other participants:

... I also just pay attention to key words when I do reading and listening ... (Participant 3)

Of course you need to choose words you need to pay attention to ... (in listening) speakers always speak very fast and it is not possible to get everything. (Participant 10)

Participant 4 expressed a similar view:

I'll underline key words or sentences when I read. (Participant 4)

However, Participant 9 would only do so when he did his examinations on reading.

Two observations can be made from the above findings. First, advance preparation, organizational planning and self-management were more popular among research participants. Another observation of the responses of Participants 9 and 10, which will be further discussed below, is that LLS use are always skill and situation specific.

Participant 5 raised an issue which is highly related to LLS instruction. She mentioned that there were some LLSs which she thought would be useful. She did not use them because she did not know how to use them, for example:

I do not use methods such as previewing, planning and preparing although I think these methods are useful. It is because I don't know how to use them ... I don't select key words, sentences, etc. not because I think these methods are not useful, but rather I don't know how to use these methods. (Participant 5)

Participant 10 expressed his difficulty in using the LLS of selective attention too:

However, most of the time I cannot get the words which I need for my answers. (Participant 10)

This issue deserves more discussion and provides some important implications for teaching, and they will be dealt with in later sections of this paper.

One LLS which merits special mention is self-monitoring. Five out of 10 participants mentioned that it was not a good LLS because it was cognitively too demanding for them, as they needed to process what they were going to read, listen, speak and write:

I do not check my own performance because I don't have the time to do so. For example, when I am speaking, I need to think about what I need to say next. You can't do so many things at the same time. This is also true of reading, listening and writing. (Participant 1)

I think it's too much when I have to check my progress when I do listening, reading, speaking and writing. (Participant 2)

The same view was expressed by Participants 8, 9 and 10.

Participants 1, 9, and 10 would compare their English against certain standards (self-evaluation), especially the HKCEE. Participants 2 and 3, however, did not do so because:

Being able to pass examinations does not mean a person is able to use English in their daily lives. (Participant 2).

Being able to pass examinations does not mean a person's English is good. (Participant 3)

Almost all of the participants (8 out of 10) agreed that looking for more exposure to learn English (or self-management) was a good LLS in learning English, and they tried to do it whenever they could. However, their consensus was based on different reasons. For example, Participant 1 was quite instrumental in that he would only look for more exposure to learn English when he found that his English was not good enough to pass the HKCEE, while Participant 3 wanted to learn something which she could not learn in the classroom, that is, how to use English practically for daily communication.

As pointed out earlier in this section, the responses of some participants reflect that the use of LLSs is always skill specific. Participants 5, 8, 9, and 10 said they only used certain LLSs in certain skill aspects. For example, Participant 9 did mental rehearsal (i.e. advance preparation) in speaking but not in writing, while Participant 10 did it both in speaking and writing, but not in other skills. Some other examples are given below:

I'll pay attention to how I speak when I speak but I don't do it when I write ... (Participant 5)

When I read, I'll underline the key words and sentences, but I find it too difficult to do so when I listen, because the speakers usually speak too fast. (Participant 8)

I don't always select words or information to attend to ... you know, when you don't have the time during examinations, you need to do that ... I only do this when I do reading comprehension in examinations. (Participant 9)

These responses show the inadequacy of previous research, particularly survey research, in capturing information on LLS use.

5.2 Cognitive LLS

A summary of the cognitive LLSs used by participants is given in Table 2.

	Cognitive LLSs	No. of participants
1	Resourcing	6
2	Grouping	4
3	Note-taking	4
4	Summarizing	4
5	Deduction	0
6	Imagery	3
7	Auditory representation	3
8	Elaboration	3
9	Transfer	2
10	Inferencing	0
11	Practicing	2

Table 2: Cognitive LLSs used by participants

All the 10 participants except Participant 2 agreed that cognitive LLSs were useful and they used them quite often. Participant 2 thought cognitive LLSs were not useful for the following reason:

I think you know means you know. It's a waste of time to use these methods as they are useless.
(Participant 2)

Participant 9 also thought some methods were not useful:

Although I know sometimes there are rules in English, for example, in grammar, I don't think this strategy of looking for rules is useful because the rules are always changing. You'll make yourself more confused if you look for rules ... I don't know whether I use the things I've learned to learn new things, but I think these methods are too complicated and are therefore not useful.
(Participant 9)

LLSs such as resourcing and transfer were popular among participants:

I use dictionaries. I use the things I know, for example, simple present tense to learn the passive form of simple present tense. (Participant 5)

I check dictionaries for the words I don't know. (Participant 6)

I check the dictionary and reference books for the things I don't know. I guess everybody does the same thing. (Participant 9)

In learning vocabulary, Participant 1 usually divided words into different parts, grouped them according to their characteristics, meanings etc. Participant 5 also classified vocabulary so that she could remember them more easily. We can see that these two participants used the LLS of grouping.

The LLS of note-taking was popular among the participants, for example:

I often make summaries and jot down notes so that I can remember new information more easily. I use these methods when I feel like using them, and I use these methods in reading, speaking, writing or listening tasks. (Participant 7)

LLSs such as summarizing, using visual image (i.e. imagery) and sounds (auditory representation) as well as using the relationships between information (i.e. elaboration) were also popular among participants:

'Summarizing is useful because it helps me remember the main ideas more easily. Using visual images and sounds are also helpful in remembering new information ... when I learn new knowledge, I write it down first. If it is still difficult for me to remember, I'll use pictures to help me to remember the information. I also look at how different words are related. It's much easier to remember new words when you know how they're related to each other.' (Participant 3)

Auditory representation was popular among the interview participants. However, as with their use of some metacognitive LLSs, some of them just limit their use of this LLS to the learning of vocabulary only:

One method I usually use is using pictures to remember new words. I remember the sounds of new words too. (Participant 8)

I use pictures and sounds to help me remember new words. (Participant 9)

It's good to learn vocabulary by remembering pictures related to the words. I use this method very often. (Participant 10)

At the same time, participants also did not ignore the importance of practicing:

In learning speaking, practicing is very important because practice makes perfect. (Participant 3)

I do a lot of exercises because I think this is a good way to improve my English. (Participant 5)

Participants 8 and 10 expressed the same view that practicing was a good way of perfecting English skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading.

In addition to the cognitive LLSs in O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy described above, the use of translation was found among participants. Participant 7 mentioned:

When I need to speak or write, I'll think in Chinese first, and then translate the meanings into English. I use this method very often. (Participant 7)

Participant 10 mentioned he took notes in Chinese when he learned English:

When I take notes, most of the time I write down my notes in Chinese so that I can remember the notes more easily. (Participant 10)

Participant 3 pointed out the reason for the popularity of copying, which again is not included in O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy:

However, in Hong Kong, we are very used to using copying as the method for remembering new knowledge. (Participant 3)

The above response again shows that LLS use and context are highly related, and this will be further discussed in 6.1.

As one may recall from the beginning of this section, the reason Participant 9 did not use certain cognitive LLSs was that they were too complicated. Participant 5 was more direct in admitting that she did not know how to use them:

I haven't heard of the method of using the knowledge I already know to guess the meaning of new information ... (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 8 said that:

Looking for relationships between different parts of new information is too difficult ... it is also difficult to guess something I don't know ... I don't know how to do it. (Participant 8)

Participant 7 expressed a similar view too:

I don't look for rules and apply rules when I learn English, because these methods are too difficult for me. There are too many rules and the rules are always changing. Using pictures and sounds to help me to learn is also very difficult. (Participant 7)

This is the same situation of not having the knowledge to use LLSs as previously mentioned. This lack of knowledge may also be the possible reason for participants not using deduction and inferencing.

5.3 Social/Affective LLS

Table 3 summarizes the use of social/affective LLSs as reported by participants.

	Social/affective LLSs	No. of participants
1	Questioning for clarification	8
2	Co-operation	7
3	Positive self-talk	6

Table 3: Social/affective LLSs used by participants

Asking teachers and peers was what most participants always did. Thus the LLS of questioning for clarification was popular among the participants. All of the participants said that working with peers (i.e. co-operation) was an effective means to improve their English and most of them used this LLS very often. However, Participants 1, 6 and 9 said that they seldom worked with classmates or peers in learning English because it was difficult to find time together. Participant 3 saw an advantage in working with peers in that it was a good way of encouraging herself. By working with peers, she could know more about her English standard as compared to others.

Participant 8 mentioned one issue which is worth pointing out:

However, we seldom do things such as role-playing, presentation, or talk to each other in English because it's too embarrassing ... you know, it's okay if you do these types of things during lessons, when you are forced to do them. (Participant 8)

Participant 3 mentioned that she did not use positive self-talk as a means to reduce her anxiety because encouraging herself too much would make her too proud of herself. The result was that she would not work hard anymore to improve her English. These views about the use of co-operation and positive self-talk are highly related to certain elements of Confucianism, and they will be further discussed in 6.1.

A comparison of Table 3 with Tables 1 and 2 indicates that social/affective LLSs were more popular than metacognitive and cognitive LLSs among participants. Despite the reluctance of two participants in using co-operation and positive self-talk, participants' responses show that Chinese L2 learners in the present study were more receptive towards social/affective LLSs.

6 Discussion

Two aspects of this study's findings deserve greater discussion: the role of context in influencing the LLS use patterns of participants; and the patterns of LLS use as indicated by the qualitative data. They are discussed below.

6.1 *The role of context in influencing LLS use*

The first contextual factor which limited participants' use of some LLSs is the Hong Kong education system. We recall that a reason commonly reported by participants for not using certain metacognitive and cognitive LLSs was the lack of knowledge about the LLSs and the perception that they were difficult to use. For example, Participant 5 reported that her reason for not using previewing, planning and preparing was her lack of knowledge despite her belief that these LLSs were useful. The same reason was given by Participants 8 and 7 for not using elaboration and deduction respectively, and by Participants 5, 7 and 9 for not using certain cognitive LLSs. The lack of knowledge about the LLSs might also have caused half of the participants to perceive self-monitoring as being cognitively too demanding. There is a lack of emphasis on LLSs in the education system. Most learners in Hong Kong, like the participants of study, have a limited understanding of LLSs and how these can facilitate their language learning.

The instrumental reasons for using self-evaluation and self-management reflect the 'value-added' role of English in the Hong Kong context. Participants 1, 9, and 10 mentioned they used HKCEE as the standard in self-evaluation. Participants 1 and 3 mentioned they would improve their English to pass the HKCEE and for daily communication respectively. The use of selective attention only in examinations mentioned by Participant 9 also reflects the emphasis given by local learners to passing examinations. This shows the influence of context on the use of LLSs. The perception of a number of participants that some metacognitive and cognitive LLSs are not useful may also be a manifestation of the 'value-added' role of English in the Hong Kong society, in addition to ESL learners' lack of knowledge. This is because there might be a perception that LLS use does not contribute directly to language achievement.

The importance attached to practicing as reported by Participants 3, 5, 8 and 10 echoes the high value placed on effort (as opposed to ability) and perseverance in Confucianism (Lee, 1996). In Confucianism, failure is usually attributed to a lack of effort rather than ability. Therefore, children are taught to work hard even for tasks in which they have little interest. On the other hand, effort is a pre-requisite not only for academic success but to wealth and career success. This might explain the popularity of this LLS among the participants.

As far as the popularity of translation is concerned, it is common among learners who are not fluent in their non-native language to translate the target language into their own language (Biggs, 1989). Gow, Kember and Chow (1991) also explain that translation is needed before information is processed for L2 users who are not fluent in the target language (as Participant 10). In addition, if a written or spoken response is required, the response must be composed in the first language and then translated into the new language (as Participant 7 did). In fact, the use of translation might be a strategy employed by low proficiency ESL learners as suggested by Gow, Kember and Chow (1991). In addition to the learner characteristic of limited English proficiency, another possible reason for the popularity of translation among the participants is context. As we remember, most students in Hong Kong have very limited exposure to English in their daily life. This lack of opportunity to use English as a result of the local socio-linguistic context might cause the participants to have the tendency of translating Chinese into English when they need to use English.

The use of copying as a strategy, as pointed out by Participant 3, raises one issue which is particularly related to the local context. She mentioned that in Hong Kong students were too used to using copying as a means to remember new information. The phenomenon of employing copying to remember new information, as mentioned by Participant 3, echoes earlier observations of the prevalence of rote-learning in language learning. This phenomenon might also reflect the lack of attention given to LLS instruction in classroom teaching, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. However, as we can see from the results of the present study, many students use a lot of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective LLSs in addition to copying. This appears to be in line with the suggestion by Biggs (1996) and Marton et al. (1996) that repetition and memory-based strategies are important in facilitating understanding because of the Confucian emphasis of effort and perseverance.

The reasons for the reluctance to use LLSs such as role-playing, presentation or talk to each other in English as given by Participant 8 may be a manifestation of self-effacement, a collectivistic value which emphasizes group harmony. In a collectivistic culture, individuals attach particular importance to maintaining a harmonious relationship with others (Tang, 1996). Speaking in front of a lot of people or asking questions in a big class might be interpreted as out-doing others and creating tensions within a group. Facing this group pressure, this type of behavior is usually avoided. Flowerdew, Miller and Li (2000) contend that self-effacing people are better liked because their behaviors maintain harmonious relationships. Participant 3 pointed out she was reluctant to use self-talk to encourage herself. We can see that in addition to being humble, Participant 3 was not so easily satisfied with her performance. Some earlier studies have found that humility is a core virtue in the Confucian tradition (Wang, 2001) and that the Chinese are not so easily satisfied with their attainment and feel that they should work harder (Tachibana, Matsukawa & Qu, 1996). These findings clearly show that there might be conflicts between LLS instruction models based on western culture, and certain elements of Chinese culture.

From the above analyses, we can see that LLS use as reported by the participants is affected by a number of contextual factors: the role of English in the society, education system, and Confucianism, in addition to some learner characteristics such the lower English proficiency of some participants.

6.2 *Patterns of LLS use as indicated by qualitative data*

The qualitative findings of this study allow us to have a more detailed and in-depth insight into the LLS use pattern of Hong Kong ESL learners. More important findings are described in this section.

Qualitative findings allow us to identify additional information on the LLS use of local ESL learners. First of all, they allow us to know the participants' 'mini-theories' regarding their use of LLSs. For example, Participant 1 used advance preparation to learn to 'think in English' by comparing what he had prepared and what the teachers said. These 'mini-theories' can be useful insights for future research. In addition to these 'mini-theories,' semi-structured interviews also identified the use of LLSs not included in O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy. For example, participants pointed out the popularity of translation and copying as well as their close relationships with the local context. This type of information cannot be gathered from survey questionnaires containing a set of prescribed LLSs.

Qualitative findings also allow us to know the reasons for using and not using LLSs, apart from the lack of knowledge mentioned above. For example, Participant 2 mentioned he did not use advance preparation because he was lazy. Participant 9 did not use some cognitive LLSs because looking for grammar rules made him more confused. Participant 10 used selective attention because speakers usually spoke very fast. This type of information is valuable for language teaching and conducting LLS instruction.

What is worth mentioning too is that the findings of this study show that LLS use is often skill- and situation-specific. For example, Participant 9 used selective attention in reading and advance preparation in speaking; Participants 8, 9 and 10 used auditory representation in vocabulary learning. One possible reason for the skill- and situation-specific use of LLSs can be context. For example, the lack of knowledge about the use of certain LLSs in some situations or the situation-specific use of LLSs may be due to instrumental reasons for learning English.

The implications for teaching of these findings will be presented in section 8.

7 Summary

In sum, the results of this study reveal that research participants used a wide variety of metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective LLSs. Social/affective LLSs were found to be more popular than metacognitive and cognitive LLSs among the participants. The more popular LLSs

found were: the metacognitive LLSs of advance organization, advance preparation, organizational planning and self-management; the cognitive LLSs of resourcing, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, and translation; and finally the social/affective LLSs of questioning for clarification, co-operation, and positive self-talk. Besides, research participants were found to use different LLSs for different tasks and in different situations. Three contextual factors, namely the role of English in Hong Kong, the education system, and Confucianism, in addition to some learner characteristics, are suggested as possible influences on LLS use.

The 'value-added' role of English in the local context and the over-emphasis of examination results are suggested as possible reasons for learners not being able to see the value of LLSs to their ESL learning and thus the lack of interest in learning LLSs. The contextual factor of limited exposure to English is suggested as a possible reason for the popularity of translation in the local context. The lack of emphasis on LLSs in the local education system is suggested as a possible source of ESL learners' lack of opportunities in learning and practicing LLSs. The Confucian emphasis of putting effort in learning, on the other hand, is suggested as a possible reason for the popularity of practicing, copying, repetition and other memory-based strategies. Finally, the Confucian emphasis of self-effacement and humility are suggested as a reason for learners' reluctance in using the social LLS of talking to others in English and the affective LLS of positive self-talk, respectively.

The findings of this study provide us with details of the use patterns of LLSs, for example, participants' 'mini-theories' about their LLS use, the reasons for using and not using certain LLSs, and the situations in which they use LLSs.

The overall conclusion of this study is that in promoting the use of LLSs and providing LLS instruction to learners, teachers should pay attention to the LLS use pattern of local learners and take into considerations the influence of contextual factors.

8 Implications for teaching

Two broad issues, namely how the Hong Kong socio-linguistic context and the education system exert influences on the LLS use of local ESL learners, and the patterns of LLS use of local ESL learners identified in this study lead us to some useful implications for teaching in the Hong Kong and other Chinese contexts. These are discussed below.

8.1 The role of context and education system in influencing LLS use

The 'value-added' role of English in the Hong Kong society might have contributed to the instrumental goals of Chinese ESL learners in Hong Kong in their English learning. This results in the perception that LLS use does not contribute directly to examination results (particularly those of public examinations). There is a need to let learners appreciate the value of LLS use in their language achievement.

The lack of opportunities to learn and the lack of knowledge about LLSs have important implications for English teaching in Hong Kong. In most primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, LLS instruction is not part of the curriculum and students hardly have the chance to get to know, much less to learn LLSs. After raising learners' awareness, direct LLS instruction should be given, as studies have found explicit LLS instruction program to be effective (e.g. Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

As we know, another possible reason for participants not using metacognitive and cognitive LLSs in listening, speaking and reading is that using LLSs for such tasks is cognitively too demanding for them. This reflects the lack of systematic training in LLS use given to ESL learners in Hong Kong. In addition to making sure that learners have a good understanding of these LLSs, teachers should try to relieve learners' cognitive burdens in listening, speaking, and reading, especially at the beginning of LLS training. In listening, teachers can spend more time on preparing learners to become accustomed to the speaking speed and the vocabulary included in a specific task. In speaking, more time can be spent on practicing and learning relevant vocabulary.

Similarly, in reading, teachers can better prepare learners with regard to the information, vocabulary and sentence structures of a particular text. Only through such methods can Chinese L2 learners apply LLSs effectively after instruction. Otherwise, it would be futile even if learners have learnt the LLSs successfully.

Certain Confucian elements are suggested as the possible reasons for the popularity of the LLSs of practicing, translation and copying. Given the lack of evidence to date on the usefulness of these LLSs, we are still not sure whether these LLSs should be encouraged. However, what is clear is that, given the Chinese ESL learners' preference for these LLSs due to the influence of Confucianism, they should not be discouraged.

Participants of this study were found to favor social/affective LLSs more. This means that social LLSs like working with peers and asking them questions might be more applicable in the Chinese context. Co-operative learning, like the 'big-brother/big-sister scheme,' which already exists in a lot of secondary schools in Hong Kong, should be further promoted and organized in a more systematic manner. At present, individual schools organize this scheme according to their available resources and activities. Activities in the scheme might range from senior form students helping junior form students in their homework to the organization of outings. A systematic review should be conducted on how to improve the effectiveness of this scheme so that resources can be better utilized. More resources should also be put into the development of this type of scheme so that Chinese students can benefit more from this type of program which is more receptive to them. An example is Tang's (1996) collaborative learning program, which is characterized by students' self-initiation and self-structure. Her findings were that since the program was effected through both Chinese cultural characteristics, students' perception of the learning context and the nature of the tasks, the learning outcomes of the collaborative group were superior to that of the self-study control group. The program offers the advantage of stimulating students' thinking and thus facilitates the use of deeper learning strategies.

8.2 *The patterns of LLS use of Chinese ESL learners*

Results of the present study show that not all LLSs are popular in the local Chinese context, and some LLSs not included in the instruction models (e.g. CALLA; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) developed in the Western context are more popular among local ESL learners. LLSs such as self-monitoring, deduction and inferencing are not popular among the participants of this study, and some LLSs such as translation and copying frequently used by participants are not included in O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) taxonomy. Language teachers should be selective in their choice of LLSs for instruction to suit the needs of Chinese learners. Some adaptation is necessary in implementing Western models. More effort should be put into developing culture-specific LLS instruction programs.

This study has identified the reasons for using or not using certain LLSs. Teachers should try to understand learners' reasons for using or not using LLSs, and to identify the factors which are facilitative to LLS use and to rectify misconceptions which ESL learners may have and which may lead them to use or not to use certain LLSs.

As one may recall, in addition to the pattern of LLS use found among the participants of this study, another useful finding gathered from the qualitative interview is the skill- and situation-specific use of LLSs. The first implication of this finding for teaching is that LLS instruction should be skill- and situation-specific. Results of this study also indicate that the LLSs participants used in examinations were different from those they used in their classroom learning. In LLS instruction, in addition to introducing the LLSs to learners, teachers have to inform learners about the skills and situations in which the LLSs can be used.

As we can see from the reported LLS use of the participants of this study, the use of LLSs can also be different for different individual learners. Some learners may have a stronger inclination towards using certain LLSs, but other learners can be less adept at or more resistant towards some LLSs. An example from the findings of this study is that while the cognitive LLS of grouping can

be applied to words, terminology or concepts, participants of this study used it only for learning vocabulary. Another example is that 3 participants used auditory representation to learn vocabulary rather than phrases or longer language sequences. Teachers should be aware of individual differences and give learners sufficient choice in their LLS instructions.

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Appendix

Introduction

Interviewer introduces himself and the purpose of the interview. He also mentions confidentiality, asks participants' permission to set up the tape recording machine, mentions how long the interview will take, and how the data will be analyzed and presented.

1. (Warming up) Interviewer prompts participant's background of studying English, for example, how long he/she has been studying English, his/her interests and difficulties.
2. Some people use cognitive LLSs when they learn English (Interviewer explains briefly what cognitive LLSs mean and gives examples).
 - a. What do you think of these strategies?
 - b. (If participant uses them) Could you give me some examples of how you use them?
 - c. (If participant uses them) How often do you use them?
3. Some people use social/affective LLSs when they learn English (Interviewer explains briefly what social/affective LLSs mean and gives examples).
 - a. What do you think of these strategies?
 - b. (If participant uses them) Could you give me some examples of how you use them?
 - c. (If participant uses them) How often do you use them?
4. Some people use metacognitive LLSs when they learn English (Interviewer explains briefly what metacognitive LLSs mean and gives examples).
 - a. What do you think of these strategies?
 - b. (If participant uses them) Could you give me some examples of how you use them?
 - c. (If participant uses them) How frequently do you use them?

(If participant mentions he/she seldom or never uses the three types of strategies, interviewer will ask him/her to describe how he/she learns specific aspects of English, e.g. vocabulary, grammar, speaking, reading etc.)

Closure

Interviewer thanks the participant and mentions he'll let the participant know when he has the summary of findings.