

Teaching and Learning Methods Section (EMI)

A Qualitative Investigation into English Learners' Language Learning Strategies in an English-Medium Mainland-Hong Kong Cooperative University in China

Xueshan Zhang*, Guozhi Cai, Peter Xiao Luo, and Ji Ma
English Language Centre,
Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University

Abstract

The use and effectiveness of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) are thought to be shaped by personal variances as well as environmental and contextual factors. Given the intricate and dynamic characteristics of LLSs, a qualitative research approach is fitting for investigating this topic. This paper details the qualitative findings from a multiple-case study on English learning strategies among university students in the context of an English-medium university and complements earlier quantitative research on the topic (Luo et al., 2024). The data was gathered from semi-structured interviews. Findings show that the construction of students' LLRs is profoundly influenced by significant others and their individual interest. There is considerable diversity in the size of LLS repertoires among learners as well as significant variation in their preference for dominant LLSs and their usage. The transition to an English-medium university environment has transformed participants' perspective of the language from a distinct subject to a vital tool for acquiring professional knowledge. As a result, they place a greater emphasis on enhancing their speaking and writing skills. However, most learners lack affective strategies to manage their speaking anxiety. This study not only enhances understanding of students' LLSs but also yields some important pedagogical implications.

Keywords: language learning strategies (LLSs), English-medium instruction (EMI), pedagogy, cooperation between Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong, internationalization, diversity

*Corresponding author: Xueshan Zhang. Email: xueshanzhang@uic.edu.cn

Over the past forty years, there has been a significant increase in research activities focused on the strategies that second or foreign language (L2) learners employ either during the language learning process or during language use or both (Cohen, 1998). Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been defined as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1996, p. 8). Researchers classify LLSs differently based on various perspectives. One of the most commonly followed classifications of LLSs is provided by Oxford (1990), who claimed that two main categories of LLSs are direct strategy, including memory strategy, cognitive strategy, and composition strategy, and indirect strategy, including metacognitive, affective and social strategy. Although there are different definitions and classifications, most studies have reached a consensus that effective learning strategies improve not only learning efficiency but also learning effectiveness.

Under the influence of the latest research development in this area, it can be argued that LLSs are complex and dynamic (Duong & Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen & Terry, 2017), being influenced by individual differences and contextual factors.

Therefore, the effective use of LLSs is determined by the interaction between a “thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 215) and “the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro-and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220).

Literature Review

A notable study with wide scope and depth of analysis was conducted by Peacock and Ho (2003). They investigated the application of 50 common second language learning strategies among 1,006 students across eight disciplines at a university in Hong Kong. The study reported a positive correlation between proficiency and the use of 27 specific strategies, highlighting the potential benefits of strategic learning in enhancing language proficiency.

Another study within this field was undertaken by Ras (2013), aiming to investigate and provide a comprehensive understanding of the learning strategies employed by excellent students in reading. The study included 101 participants and reported differences in language learning strategies among students in terms of gender, ethnic group, parents' income, and