

A Study on English Learning Strategies Used by Mongolian University Students

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Abstract: This paper uses the questionnaire designed by Wen qifang (2001b:384-385) to conduct the investigation and study. Based on a detailed analysis of the use of strategies utilized by Mongolian university students of non-English majors in Inner Mongolia Agricultural University, using the quantitative method, the paper tries to identify and develop insights into the general characteristics of their uses of language learning strategies . Using SPSS13.0 software, the paper indicates that Mongolian university students' beliefs on how to use strategies and the choice of learning strategies is significantly related. There are some conflicts between using mother-tongue beliefs and using mother-tongue strategies. Mongolian students rejected the importance of using mother tongue, on the other hand, they used more mother-tongue strategies.The findings are expected to provide empirical data and pedagogical implication for promoting the further reform of English instructions.

1. Introduction

The study of learning strategy in the second language acquisition is an influential issue in the overlapping field of applied linguistics and psychology. Since the 1960's, it has been valued and noticed by many scholars. In the recent 10 years, the domestic scholars have done a lot of researches in this field. However, the domestic scholars in this domain research mostly took non-English majors, English majors and graduates in universities as their research subjects. Most of the research subjects are Han university students. Little concern has been shown as to English learning strategies used by Mongolian university students. The present study is intended to investigate the application of English learning strategies employed by Mongolian university students. Its findings are expected to provide empirical data and pedagogical implication for promoting the further reform of English instructions.

2. Literature Review

With regard to fruitful achievements of studies on ELSs, chronologically, these studies can be roughly divided into three stages. The studies of the first stage were chiefly conducted in the 1970s, concerning characteristics of good language learners. During this period, one of these characteristics is the beliefs that learners hold about language learning. A number of researchers have written about the impact of beliefs on learners' behavior (Cotterall 1999; McDonough 1995; Victori & Lockhart 1995). Evidence indicates that beliefs play a central role in learning experience and achievements. In a study, Ehrman and Oxford (1995:79) reported that "believing that one can learn languages well was significantly correlated with proficiency in both speaking and reading." Riley (1996:155) claimed that beliefs about language learning "may directly influence or even determine (a learner's) attitude or motivation or behavior when learning the language in question." In the area of Mongolian learner's English(L3) learning, some researchers have discussed Mongolian learner's mother tongue influence on their L3 acquisition.

This investigation of ELSs employed by Mongolian university students will confirm and enrich the existing relevant theory in this field .

3. Research methodology

This section consists of research questions and designs, involving participants, the instruments, data collections and data analyses.

3.1 Research questions

The present study is intended to address the following research questions:

- 1) What is the current overall situation in the application of English learning strategies by Mongolian students in Chinese settings ?
- 2) What is the relationship between learners' beliefs and their use of language learning strategies ?

3.2 Participants

Participants in this study were 118 second-year non-English major Mongolian students from three colleges in Inner Mongolia Agricultural University. They have studied English for three years on the average and only six students passed College English Band 3. Their age ranges from 18 to 22, with the average age of 21.47.(five students didn't fill in personal information)

3.3 Instruments

The instrument used in the study was one questionnaire. The questionnaire contained two parts. Part one concerned personal information, which was intended to help the researcher better understand the results of the survey in the context. Part two was the inventory worked out by Wen qifang. The items of the inventory were generated mainly on the basis of the questionnaire designed by professor Wen qifang with minor alterations. Three items of the inventory was revised in accordance with the actual situation of the Mongolian university students. In extrinsic learning purposes, the original item 5 "I need English for graduate study" was revised into "I need English in order to pass CET Band 3 and CET Band 4". In functional practice strategies, "or visit some English websites" was added to the original item 43 "I read English newspapers,magazines or novels on my own initiative "; "I try to use English if I communicate with others online or send emails (50)" was added to the last item of this part in order that the items can reflect the role Internet plays in English learning. The Inventory consists of 54 items which were divided into three categories. The first category includes six items which are about the motivation of learning English. The second category includes 22 items which are beliefs about learning English. Specifically, they can be called management beliefs (6 items), beliefs about formal practice (6 items), beliefs about functional practice (6 items), mother-tongue beliefs (4 items).The students indicated their opinions in terms of a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The third category includes 26 items. The participants were required to rate each item on 5-point Likert scale: never or almost never true of me 1,usually not true of me 2, somewhat true of me 3, usually true of me 4, always or almost always true of me 5.

3.4 Data Collection

The questionnaire was conducted by the writer at the interval of classes at the end of their second semester. There were 118 copies of the questionnaire administered and 118 were collected. After careful examination of the copies handed back, there were five copies with some missed items (the students didn't fill in some personal details). For the 54-items, 113 copies were identified as valid for further investigation, with 100 percent of the response rate. After that, the raw data was processed by the means of SPSS13.0. The statistical analysis had the following steps: (1) to calculate the frequency of the participants' use of language learning strategies with mean and standard deviation through descriptive statistical analysis, (2) to figure out the correlation between the participants' use of learning strategies and their beliefs of learning English.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 The current overall situation of beliefs and strategies

Descriptive statistic was conducted to see the current overall situation of beliefs and strategies by Mongolian students involved in the questionnaire.

4.1.1 The current overall situation of belief

Table 1. The current overall situation of beliefs

Belief	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
management	113	2.17	5.00	4.0286	.5772
formal practice	113	1.67	5.00	4.2383	.6425
functional practice	113	1.33	5.00	4.0609	.6477
mother tongue	113	1.00	5.00	3.5214	.9238

As shown in Table 1, the mean of the responses to beliefs about formal practice by all the participants is the highest among the 22 beliefs, while that of responses to mother-tongue beliefs is just the opposite, the lowest one, with the mean of beliefs about management and functional practice in between. That means all the participants agree formal practice beliefs is the most important, mother-tongue beliefs the least one, in the sequence of management beliefs and formal practice beliefs. The majority of the Mongolian students held strong beliefs about formal practice. About ninety-three percent of the students agreed that “Learning sentence patterns is very important for learning English”. Eighty-eight percent of the students considered memorizing words to be very important for learning English, and only 7% of the students rejected that statement. Eighty-three percent of the students felt that “Reciting texts and dialogues is very important for learning English”. Over half of the students (78%) agreed that “Repeating a text aloud is very important for learning English”, while only 6% of students disagreed with that.

This result is not consistent with the findings of Wen's (1996). She found the mean of functional practice beliefs ranked the first with formal practice beliefs as the second. That suggests that though formal practice beliefs remained popular among Chinese students , the importance of functional practice beliefs has already been realized. While in our study, we found formal practice beliefs ranked before functional practice beliefs . Likewise, the result is not in support of her other findings. In Wen's investigation of the changing of college students' English learning strategies, she found the mean of management beliefs is the highest, while the mean of mother-tongue beliefs is the lowest. We found the mean of management is medium. Many Han students strongly agreed that management and functional practice are more important than formal practice,whereas Mongolians focus on rote memorization in beliefs. This may reflect that the degree of beliefs Mongolian students held is quite different from that of Han students. Since they have learned English only three years, it is natural that they focus on form rather than function and management. Mongolian students' English level stays low. They can't attach more attention to planning, monitoring , reflecting and evaluating in their English learning. Naturally, beliefs about functional practice like “Reading English magazines and articles is very important for learning English in order to learn English” are not effective for them.

4.1.2 The current overall situation of strategy

Table 2. General tendencies in strategies use

strategy	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
management	113	1.00	4.88	3.3660	.8087
formal practice	113	1.17	4.83	3.3303	.8455
functional practice	113	1.00	4.88	2.5318	.8986
using-mother-tongue	113	1.00	5.00	3.3975	.9570

According to table 2, the mean of mother-tongue strategies is the highest. That means all the

participants used this strategy the most frequently, functional practice strategies the least frequently, in the sequence of management strategies and formal practice strategies. From the table, we may see that there are slight differences between the means of management strategies and mother-tongue strategies. This result is the opposite to Wen's. According to her study, Chinese students used management strategies most frequently, mother-tongue strategies the least frequently with formal practice strategies and functional practice strategies between.

Table 2 reveals that Mongolian students depend on their native language to learn English more than other means. They are frequently influenced by their mother tongue in learning English. When mother-tongue strategies were examined closely, we found that more than half of the students think "When speaking English, I put it into Chinese first, then translate it into English; When writing in English, I organize it in Chinese first, then translate it into English; When listening, I learn its meaning by heart in Chinese" are usually true of them or completely true of them. Among these three strategies, more than twenty percent of students agree that the cases are somewhat true of them. Considering the level of the proficiency of three languages, Mongolian learners of English participated in the present study have very high level in their mother tongue. They have already possessed the ability of Chinese to communicate, although their level is varied. With regard to the English level, most of them have learned English systematically for more than one year at university, which is lower than their L1 and L2. It is natural that their choice of strategies is different from the choice of Chinese students.

The analysis in this section concerns the relationship between the learners' beliefs for learning English and their language learning strategies.

Table 3. Correlation between beliefs and strategies use

	<i>Management</i>	<i>formal-practice</i>	<i>functional-practice</i>	<i>mother-tongue</i>
<i>Management</i>	.371/.000**			
<i>Formal-practice</i>		.324/.000**		
<i>Functional-practice</i>			.267/.004**	
<i>Mother-tongue</i>				.483/.000**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The data in Table 3 show that beliefs Mongolian students hold in learning English are positively and significantly correlated with their use of strategies in learning English. This finding accords with the findings by Wen and Wang (1996:65-66). They found a similar result in their study of the relationship between students' three kinds of language learning beliefs and their strategies use. She found that the stronger students held a certain belief, the more likely they would use the strategy, but they found that though students lay importance on beliefs about functional practice, in practice, they reported the least frequent use of functional practice strategies. This result is also supported by Horwitz's (1988:557-576) argument that certain students' beliefs would likely restrict the range of language learning strategy use.

Further examination of their relationship between using mother-tongue beliefs and using mother-tongue strategies shows that students' beliefs about using mother-tongue had a strong positive connection with their use of the same strategy. More than half of Mongolian students approve of the three using mother-tongue beliefs(26,27,28). Similarly, more than half of students think that they frequently use the three mother-tongue strategies(52,53,54). It is out of our expectation that the mean of using mother-tongue beliefs is the lowest in four beliefs, while the mean of using mother-tongue strategies is the highest. This indicates that Mongolian students don't hold mother-tongue beliefs, but in practice, they rely on mother-tongue strategies in learning English. We can see the native language transference to English learning.

5. Conclusion

The major findings presented in this paper are as follows:

(1) The mean of the responses to deep motivation is higher than surface motivation. Mongolian students had strong desire to learn English and their English learning is oriented by multiple purposes particularly by some short-term purposes. A majority of Mongolian students held much stronger beliefs concerning the importance of formal practice in learning English, while using-mother-tongue beliefs is just the opposite, the lowest one. As for English learning strategies, Mongolian students reported more frequent use of using-mother-tongue strategy and management strategy. The less frequently used strategies were formal practice strategies and functional practice strategies.

(2) With regard to the relationship between Mongolian students' beliefs and their strategy use, the study found that students' beliefs about English learning had a strong positive connection with their use of relevant strategies. There are some conflicts between using-mother-tongue belief and using-mother-tongue strategy. Mongolian students rejected the importance of using mother tongue, but on the other hand, they used more using-mother-tongue strategy.

The findings of the present study have strong pedagogical implications:

(1) As suggested by this study, learners' beliefs are important determinants of their behavior, therefore, English teachers should try to foster positive beliefs that lead to effective learning strategy use and minimize negative beliefs that inhibit learning. Teachers need to devise tasks, roles and materials which will challenge those beliefs. Teachers need to allocate class time and attention to raising awareness of strategies as well as to providing learners with opportunities to practice these strategies.

(2) Since the materials Mongolian learners were using and the instructional classroom languages the teachers were using seemed to provide a lot of input in Chinese, considering minority student's Chinese language ability, it is better for Mongolian teachers to teach in the learner's L1(Mongolian) as a main media language for classroom instruction and material development. Teachers should encourage students to make full use of their previously learned knowledge by pointing out the similarities and differences both between their Mongolian and English, and between their Chinese and English.

The present study also has some limitations. First, the samples who are only restricted in Inner Mongolia Agricultural University are not enough, not well representing the population of Mongolian University students in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Second, some of students' responses to the questionnaire are not really true of their actual application of the strategies in the daily learning experiences. Third, using the questionnaire alone does not provide enough information in the use of strategies. The questionnaire along with proficiency scores may measure the effect of one factor on the other over a short period of time.

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