How to Facilitate Chinese EFL Learners to Achieve SLA in an Emerging Context
A Qualitative Analysis of Language Learning Strategies

Xinye Yang[✉]

School of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney, Sydney 999029, Australia
xyan6619@uni.sydney.edu.au

Abstract. This paper explores Language Learning Strategies (LLS) for Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' language acquisition in specific cases of an emerging context. This study aims to provide insights into the implications and effectiveness of LLS in Chinese EFL classrooms in the post-epidemic period by analysing the teaching experiences of four subjects. A qualitative analysis was conducted including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. It is expected that this research may be helpful for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers to improve their teaching efficacy. Definitions and relevant research are presented followed by data statistics, analysis and discussion of four specific Chinese contexts. The results revealed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were most frequently adopted and compensatory strategies were least utilized. The factors influencing the implementation of LLS are highlighted as the learning environment changing, individual differences of learners and teachers' personal preferences. Furthermore, the successful application of LLS can not only facilitate the acquisition of the target language, but can also foster students' learning skills and awareness, which may potentially have a positive transfer effect to other subjects.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies · Chinese EFL learners · Emerging Context

1 Introduction

Language learning strategies have been attracting significant interest since the late last century. This theory provides an instrumental improvement of how to improve EFL students acquire their target language for both teachers and the learners [1–4]. However, the global epidemic during recent years has caused a shifting learning environment and mode in the majority of the world including China, in which traditional classrooms migrated to online education. Therefore, the implementation of LLS in the Chinese EFL classrooms in the emerging context is worth exploring. Previous studies are insufficient to mention this because they do not provide a specific analysis of the characteristics of Chinese students and their changing environment. As a result, this paper provides online interviews with four experienced ESOL teachers through qualitative methods to present a limited picture of authentic Chinese EFL classrooms in the post-epidemic period.

This paper aims to analyse the frequency, factors, and effects of LLS employed in their classrooms. It begins with a brief overview of the research history of LLS, followed by a description of the research subjects and methods, and finally offers an analysis and discussion of the findings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Origins and Definitions

The concept of learning strategies was first proposed by Joan Rubin in 1975 [1]. Joan suggested that learning strategies consist of the skills or tools that learners should use to access knowledge [1]. Based on this notion, language researchers developed the theory of LLS and inspired a growing number of educational practitioners to be aware of the significance of LLS in facilitating the internalization, retention, extraction, usage and acquisition of the targeted language [2]. Other studies are also in line with this that the implementation of LLS supports the establishment and advancement of learners' interlanguage and allows them to access the higher levels of new language acquisition [3, 4].

Oxford proposes a definition that LLS as a sophisticated and dynamic combination of reflective and behavioural practices that learners intentionally employ to manage themselves for achieving the acquisition and improvement of their language proficiency in the target language [5]. In 1990, Oxford suggests that the implementations of LLS are often closely related to individuals' preferences in terms of learning style, goals, and activities adoption [4]. Therefore, she classifies LLS into direct language learning strategies (which are related to mental processing) and indirect language learning strategies (which emphasize learning support) [3, 4]. The former contains cognitive, mnemonic and compensatory strategies, while the latter is categorized into metacognitive, affective and social strategies [4].

Specifically, cognitive strategies can help students understand and process crucial information about language production through practice, summarization and analysis, thereby enhancing the learning process [4]. Mnemonic strategies relate to how students remember language [4]. Compensatory strategies may support language learners in surmounting their limitations to language knowledge [4]. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to engage in individualized self-cognitive processes [4]. Affective strategies aim to improve learners' performance by contributing to their regulations of emotions, motivation and attitude during the study [4]. Social strategies consist of 'questions', 'cooperation' and 'empathy,' helping students to promote their language acquisition, communicative skills and intercultural competence through interaction [4, 5].

2.2 Related Work

The use of language learning strategies is usually based on a combination of activities developing in accordance with the teaching objectives and the teaching outcomes. Previous research indicates that the amount of LLS categories that students adopt that are suitable for them is positively correlated with their academic performance [6]. The

combination of cognitive and metacognitive strategies is highly frequent used in EFL classrooms [6, 7]. In a survey conducted by Vahdany et al., it was found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were most frequently used by the university students participated [6]. The data showed that these two strategies can highly enhance students' test performance [6]. It is because high levels of cognitive ability allow students to achieve self-monitoring and thus know the priorities of the information, which enhances their language acquisition. Similarly, Psaltou-Joycey et al. examined 92 teachers on their preferences and frequencies of LLS employed in their classrooms in 2018 [7]. The data show that all six categories of LLS are highly accessed, with metacognitive and cognitive strategies being the most frequently used. They suggest that it is because metacognitive strategies can develop learners' self-regulation, autonomy and cognitive strategies, which may directly enhance students' acquisition of the target language system [5, 7–9].

Mnemonic strategies have also often been discussed as an essential cornerstone of language learning because of their high association with the storage and linking of linguistic information. Some educational practitioners argue that mnemonic strategies are more frequently employed by low-level language learners since they emphasize the recall of language knowledge rather than the practice of authentic contexts [5]. However, according to Adhikary's survey of 50 Nepali undergraduate students in 2020 on the LLS application, although these students adopted other categorical strategies as well, the mnemonic strategies were the most frequently used [10]. The findings of Solak and Cakir's investigation of Turkish university students also examined the efficiency of mnemonic strategies in increasing the performance of high-level learners in acquiring their target language [1].

Compensatory and affective strategies, on the other hand, have been less studied due to their strong individual differences. However, with the advancement of technology and the proliferation of online classes, researchers claim that compensatory strategies can be effectively modified with computer-assisted and mobile-assisted technologies, which minimising the difficulty of information access and gaps in students' knowledge, for reinforcing the effectiveness of language learning [11, 12]. They have also identified some potential problems such as students' over-reliance on online devices, which may diminish their abilities to speak or write in the target language [11]. In terms of affective strategies, studies reveal that they can facilitate students' perceptions of the target language, but usually they have no direct impact on their classroom performance. Ayedoun's investigation of 40 Japanese university and postgraduate students identified that mitigating EFL learners' anxiety was beneficial in increasing their confidence and stimulating their willingness to communicate in the target language [13].

Social strategies can often achieve language learning and gain an effective learning outcome at the same time, which can be regarded as a vital method for developing EFL learners' ability for practical communicative production [5]. Taheri et al. believe that only cognitive, compensatory and social strategies are strongly associated with language performance. This is because of their assumption that the implementation of these strategies can foster students' competence in autonomous language learning [12].

3   Research Questions

(1) What are the frequent strategies that second language learners adopted in Chinese EFL classes among these four participants?
(2) What factors influencing the implementation of the LLS in EFL classrooms were identified by these four participants?
(3) How can LLS facilitate second language acquisition for the Chinese students taught by these four participants?

4   Research Method

This study mainly adopts qualitative analysis, including interviews with thematic analysis. This paper summarises and analyses data on the application of LLS in 4 experienced Chinese ESOL teachers from different educational institutions in their EFL classrooms, through individual in-depth interviews.

The interviewees included a teaching assistant for a research project, two IELTS teachers and a university tutor. They are aged 25–31 with degrees of Masters and higher, who are highly proficient in English in both written and oral communication. Three of them are targeting Chinese students with an intermediate level of English over the age of 12, and the rest works with advanced-level adult students who are international but mostly Chinese.

Interviews were conducted online (i.e., live voice on WeChat) in Mandarin and English with audio recordings. Selected quotes in this paper are translated into English. To ensure the interviews proceeded successfully, interview questions were sent to participants textually beforehand. All participants' names were provided as codes. They were asked to share their practical experiences of implementation and comprehension of LLS in their ESOL classrooms during the interviews. The three research questions in this study will be addressed and discussed in relation to the previous theoretical research and the interviewees' contributions.

5   Results and Discussions

5.1   Adoption Frequency

According to four participants' statements, cognitive and metacognitive strategies were the most frequently applied strategies in their ESOL classrooms, with compensatory strategies being the lowest. This result stands in line with the majority of findings that previous research provides [6–8]. It demonstrates the significant role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies for target language acquisition in diverse backgrounds and language levels. In addition, while all interviewees identified that they employed all six categories of strategies in their previous teaching, they suggested that LLS adoption should depend on the purposes and contents of the classes. For example, Participant D points out a challenge that Chinese students in his classes are good at writing and reading, but their communication skills need to be improved. Therefore, he spends most of the time developing students' affective and social strategies to promote their interests in

learning and develop their learner autonomy. This challenge seems to be common among Chinese EFL learners, especially for those students at low and intermediate levels. It is probably because some Chinese EFL teachers tend to focus on training their students to achieve higher scores in examinations, thereby neglecting their communication competence.

There is an unexpected perspective that emerged from the interviews. Participants appreciate the essential role of LLS in the successful delivery of the ESOL classrooms, suggesting that the six categories of strategies can effectively improve students' performance and teachers' instructional effectiveness. However, all of them insisted that it is unnecessary to advocate these strategies to students intentionally for various reasons. Participant A asserts that:

"It is the teacher's responsibility to decide which strategies should be adopted and how to use them in the learning process rather than the students themselves. The more important issue for students is the language knowledge acquired through the class activities."

Similar with Participant A, Participant D claims that:

"Learning strategies are usually adopted in learning activities unconsciously by students. It would be more useful for teachers to organise activities to help develop students' learning strategies, rather than lecturing or informing students of what they are literally."

These perspectives obviously conflict with the proposition of several previous studies [2, 5, 7, 8]. Oxford identifies LLS as a series of actions taken by learners to facilitate their language learning process [4]. Therefore, increasing educators suggest that EFL classrooms should be learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. Furthermore, two studies that teachers should explicitly promote the practical use of LLS as a crucial instrument for fostering students' independent learning skills and their language acquisition [2, 7]. Therefore, for Chinese EFL students, progressively exposing the notions and practical applications of LLS to them is probably beneficial in fostering the integration of a comprehensive target language system and proper language skills.

5.2 Influencing Factors

Three potential factors were proposed, including learning environment changing, students' individual differences, and teachers' personal preferences. Regarding the changing learning environment, due to the global epidemic in recent years, most districts have migrated education from face-to-face classes to online for safety considerations. While this shift provides convenience and access to information for educational learning, it has caused several challenges, for instance, lower student self-efficacy and technical difficulties. Therefore, most interviewees believe that the epidemic hindered their teaching effectiveness, except Participant A. For example, Participant C indicated that the learning effectiveness of her students dropped dramatically during the epidemic. It is probably related to the continuous cancellation of IELTS exams due to the lockdown, the learning environment changed and the limitation of learning devices caused severe anxiety and

learning stress among her students. To address this challenge, the implementation of a combination of metacognitive, affective and social strategies and the modification of classroom activities could be highlighted. For instance, stimulating students' internal motivation to relieve their tension and developing their emotional management skills and self-regulation competencies. Moreover, while online classrooms limit some physical activities, computer-assisted and mobile-assisted may allow new information and authentic communication contexts to be accessible and enjoyable.

The second factor is the individual differences of the students, such as age, personality, cognitive abilities, knowledge background, and intelligibility. All interviewees agreed that LLS is applicable and useful for students' individual differences due to its universality and comprehensiveness, which allows teachers to assign different level tasks and activities according to students' proficiency. However, most of the participants found it was tricky to achieve individualised instruction for students in practice. Therefore, instructors should take into account the different learning styles and learning levels and learning preferences of different learners when adopting LLS. Therefore, teachers and students should prioritise suitability rather than the ineffective stacking of quantities when choosing LLS. Research shows that more strategies used may not necessarily result in better achievement, while low-level language learners may reduce their language performance by constantly changing their learning strategies or selecting inappropriate strategies [14]. Studies suggest that extensive exposure to authentic contexts not only facilitates language acquisition and revision, but also raises students' confidence [9, 12, 15].

Finally, in terms of the teacher's personal preference, four participants prioritized different LLS depending on their audience level and instructional goals. For example, Participant C employs cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies most frequently. This is because as an IELTS exam trainer, she needs to develop students' analytical abilities on specific topics and academic writing skills. Therefore, she focuses on cognitive aspects to develop students' logical and critical thinking skills, uses flipped classrooms to help students develop their learner autonomy skills and offers emotional support to students in the learning process and psychological motivation to maintain the stability of their language performance. Participant D prefers the affective and social strategies because he considers that

> *"Most of my students are highly proficient English language users already and good at adopting cognitive, memory, compensatory strategies to pass exams, while have had limited access to the development of their affective and social strategies since they have had few chances to be exposed to social intercultural communication where English is used as the mediating language."*

It is evident that language teachers should make timely modifications to LLS selection and forms of their application when designing classroom activities that sufficiently take into account the specific needs of their students. The interviewees also mentioned that some instructors still prefer teacher-centred classrooms. In other words, they concentrate on completing the knowledge delivery without adjustment to the actual requirements of the students. Consequently, teachers' personal preferences can caused a positive

and negative impact on the implementation of LLS and students' language acquisition processes.

5.3 Implication

Studies imply that the adoption of appropriate LLS by language students can not only enhance their acquisition of the target language significantly, but also has a positive transfer effect on the learning of other subjects [14]. During the survey, participants widely agreed that the effective use of LLS not only enhances students' knowledge of the target language, but also develops their learning skills and awareness, such as self-analysis, critical thinking, intercultural communication competence and autonomous learning. Specifically, to answer the third research question, Participant B suggests that cognitive and memory strategies facilitate systematic generalisation, deduction, summarisation and acquisition of new information. Participants A and D agree that the social strategies can effectively alleviate the lack of an authentic communication environment for most Chinese language learners. This is in line with the research which implies that extensive exposure to authentic contexts contributes to cognitive improvement and independently learning development [15]. Participant C considers that the effective implementation of LLS can alleviate the negative transfer from L1 to L2 for Chinese students. In her view, there is a significant difference in expression logic between Chinese and English. Chinese expressions are more abstract and broader than English, which can easily be misunderstood in academic writing, for example, they prefer to convey a vision rather than a description. English expressions are more focused on the logical relationship of a sentence, such as cohesion. Therefore, instructors need to construct a transfer between the two mindsets and expressions through cognitive strategies. They are also expected to update their ideas and pedagogy in the process of teaching. It is clear that the appropriate use of LLS not only benefits learners' acquisition of the target language but also has a positive impact on the teaching of ESOL teachers.

6 Conclusion

In summary, this study examines the application of LLS in an emerging context of Chinese EFL classes, including the frequency, influencing factors and effectiveness. It was revealed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were the most frequently implemented among the four classrooms. Additionally, the current data emphasize intentionally and progressively exposing learners to the concepts and practical applications of LLS based on their proficiency level. This not only supports their target language acquisition but also allows a positive transfer to other disciplines. The limitation of this paper is the possible low generalisability due to the insufficient sample size. However, the four subjects are Chinese ESOL teachers with extensive teaching experience from different types of EFL classrooms. Therefore, their perceptions of their students and classrooms may offer a reliable picture of language teaching in the emerging context of China's post-epidemic era. This could provide valuable insights and reflections for ESOL teachers and students when using LLS.

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