



A Case Study of an English Language Learner

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Abstract

The study of the impact of learner strategies on English language performance is currently a hot topic in the field of foreign language teaching internationally. It has been rapidly recognized that the key to learner success depends on the factors of learning itself. With this conceptual change, people have shifted the focus of research from teachers to students, and from the study of “how to teach” to “how to learn”. A case study of a Chinese English language learner will be conducted in this paper. This study attempts to explore the following aspects: cultural and language learning background, language learning experiences, language learning preference, perceived difficulties with English, strategies used to overcome those difficulties, as well as some factors that influence language learning. In the end, some recommendations will also be put forward for improving his future English learning. It is hoped that this study will inspire further research in the area of language learning strategies and contribute to the development of more effective language teaching practices.

Keywords

English Learning, Strategies, Case Study

1. Introduction

English language learning has become an essential component of education, as individuals globally strive to acquire proficiency in this widely spoken language. Language learning strategies play a crucial role in facilitating the acquisition and improvement of language skills. Understanding the specific strategies employed by English language learners and investigating their effectiveness can significantly contribute to language teaching and learning practices. However, in the current English teaching in China, there are still some problems in creating an easy and pleasant classroom environment. Firstly, teachers have too much authority, and there are still some teachers who have not changed their views on the traditional view of teacher authority (Hu Yuncai, 2018). Secondly, in the classroom students are not enthusiastic about learning and their motivation to learn is missing (Li Fei, 2019). Thirdly, both teachers’ and students’ sense of cooperation needs to be strengthened (Liu Xiaoling, 2020). At the same time, students’ autonomous learning ability is not optimistic. Some scholars who investigated the situation of high school students’ English autonomous learning ability found that their English independent learning ability is generally low and their awareness of independent learning is not high (Jiao Jufeng, 2019). Through interview and literature analysis, the student’s ability to learn independently in English language learning was explored in depth and factors affecting the formation and development of this ability were searched for in this study.

1.1 Cultural and Language Learning Background

Nianqing Wang (the pseudonym used to protect his privacy), a 16-year-old boy, was selected as the participant in the case study. He is studying English as a foreign language in Gansu province and has been learning English formally for ten years since elementary school. He usually speaks Chinese at home and English only in class. Oxford (2011)

partitioned learning strategies into six parts: metacognitive strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, memory strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy. Thus, Wang is interviewed to explore more about his application of strategy in English learning.

In the interview, concerning his learning experiences, he mentioned that he has improved and doesn't like chatting with others. Therefore, he has little chance to communicate English with others in daily life. However, he has shown a great interest in English since primary school, and he uses cognitive strategy very frequently in learning English. For example, he often watches *The Big Bang Theory*, and English movies with Chinese subtitles and listens to English songs to practice listening and speaking skills. He believes that his English is improving quickly. Besides, reading is his weakness, and he reads articles (*New Concept English*) and newspapers outside of class to improve his reading skills. As for memory strategy, Wang mentioned that it takes a whole week to remember 400 words every semester, making him feel successful. From the English learning experience of Wang, he always uses effective strategies to encourage himself when facing emotional and motivational problems. Cohen (2010) believes that the factors that affect English learning are motivation, personality, anxiety, attitudes, learning style, world knowledge, sex, and family background. Inspiration comes from themselves, and they can manage their cause well. What's more, there are more introverted people in good language learners, and it shows that character is a factor in English learning. During the interview, Nianqing Wang mentions that he is deeply influenced by his parents, who like reading books in their spare time. Thus, it can be concluded that family background is closely related to English learning, which will provide a good learning environment for children.

1.2 Research Design

To carry out this case study, written and spoken data samples have been collected. This section will present the analysis and interpretation of the learner's data sample. Reflection and introspection on the teaching and learning process and his own professional development will also be introduced in this part. In this study, the interview will be used as an instrument to collect data, and it will last for about 30 minutes. Before the interview begins, the researcher chats casually with the interviewee to ease the students' nerves. The interview will be conducted in Chinese so that all questions and answers can be well understood. The interview is recorded with the student's consent, and then it is transcribed by the researchers.

Table 1. Two types of data

Two types of data		
Written data	At the beginning of the study, the authors were asked to write a diary of learning English., which contains four contents: learning strategies for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The English learning diary aims to investigate the general situation of learners' use of learning strategies in practical learning.	
Spoken data	Interview in English	Questions about the learner's culture and language background

2. Analysis of Data

2.1 Analysis of Written Data

Learners' diary serves as the core research method in this study. On April 1, the author asked Wang to write a piece of the learner's diary. He finished it on April 15, which contained much information about listening, speaking, reading, and writing for further analysis. In the following part, the author will show students' diaries from four aspects: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

(1) Strategies Used in Listening

In the diary he wrote, the author finds that Nianqing Wang is an autonomous student, and he adopted various strategies in his listening learning. The following table shows how he adopts direct strategies when listening to English.

From the table above, we can conclude that Wang is a very independent student who has mastered the basic methods of listening practice. He can find some materials by himself, such as news on TV and some essential English videos, without waiting for the teacher to help him. Also, he will repeat listen when he has trouble understanding the listening material. Moreover, he also employs compensatory strategies when he practices his listening skills. When he comes across a new word, he does not refer to the dictionary immediately but uses the compensatory strategy to

guess the meaning.

(2) Strategies Used in Speaking

In practising speaking, the author finds that he employs memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensatory strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies.

Table 2. Strategies used in listening

	In my spare time, I would like to watch the Discovery science and education series with Chinese subtitles and I feel my English is improving very quickly.
Cognitive Strategies	I listen to VOA or BBC every night. When listening to their conversation, I like to imitate attentively and remember some daily expressions.
Compensate Strategies	When I do the listening section on the examination, before listening, I scan the questions and mark the key information in each question in order to distinguish which is functional and which is not. When I encountered new words in the process of listening, I won't consult dictionary immediately and I would try to guess the meaning of the new words according to the context. Since lack of English environment, I should urge myself to more listening and more memorizing.
Metacognitive Strategies	I should not only listen to some standard English, but also listen to English with some accent. Sometimes I can't catch the key points, and sometimes although I can hear the words clearly, I don't know them. So I should increase my vocabulary as well as listen more and practice more.
Affective Strategies	At any time, I should take a positive attitude towards my listening practice
Social Strategies	Ask the English teacher how to extract the key words facing the difficult article. Listen to some students who have good English pronunciation.

Table 3. Strategies used in speaking

Memory Strategies	I always write down the new or unfamiliar words and sentences on a note, carry them with me at any time and place, speak out loud when I have nothing to do.
Cognitive Strategies	I like reading original English novels and magazines, mainly through extensive reading to expand my vocabulary and improve my reading and writing ability In class, I often read the text and words aloud after the teacher, and read silently in my heart, with the reading and realize the general content of the article.
Compensate Strategies	When I cannot speak a complete sentence, I will not think it over, but use Chinese to express myself. I always tell myself, don't be afraid of making mistakes. Only practicing more can I reach the point that practice makes perfect.
Metacognitive Strategies	In the process of English learning, I will have a certain plan for my English learning, and I will reflect on my learning situation from time to time. In the future, I shall cherish every opportunity to speak English, practice speaking more as well as strengthen speaking ability.
Social Strategies	Generally speaking, I practice my spoken English with my teacher in his class.

From Table 3, we can conclude that Wang exactly knows the importance of oral English, and he also knows his problems in speaking English. Besides, he has some plans for his further study of speaking skills. In his diary, Wang also states that he is not fond of communicating with his teachers and classmates in English and why he is not used to speaking in public: he is too afraid of making mistakes, and he does not to be embarrassed in public. In this sense, he lacks effective strategies to help him further practice his spoken English. In his diary, Wang also mentions that he does not like to communicate with others in English and that he is not used to speaking in public. Therefore, he lacks effective strategies to help him further practice his speaking English. Social strategy is one of the less commonly used strategies by GLLs, which is consistent with many studies.

(3) Strategies Used in Reading

Reading skills are another vital part of English learning, occupying a considerable proportion of English tests.

Therefore, teachers and the author have given corresponding attention to it.

Table 4. Strategies used in reading

	Before class, I will prepare carefully. Grasp the main meaning of the article by scanning, and then remember the usage of basic vocabulary in combination with the context.
Cognitive Strategies	In my spare time, I would like to borrow some good English magazines from my classmates, and read some good articles such as Teens, English and Weekly.
	When I read a passage, I immediately look for the topic sentences in the first and last paragraphs and choose other places to read them according to their importance in the passage.
Compensate Strategies	When I meet new words in the process of reading, I won't consult dictionary at once and I would try to guess the meaning of the new words according to the context.
Metacognitive Strategies	I will memorize the intensive text, even if I can't memorize the full text, but also to remember the key phrases and sentence patterns in the text.
	When I read English-Chinese books, I try to translate simple sentences by myself, and then compare them with others' in order to improve my translation ability.

From above Table 4, it is clear that Wang uses a top-down reading method, which means that when dealing with a passage, he first grasps the general idea of the passage and then looks for the meaning of some essential words. In addition, to understand the reading material more effectively, he will mark the critical information in the passage or the questions below. Also, when he runs into new words in reading, he guesses the meaning according to the context instead of referring to the dictionary at once. In a word, Nianqing Wang skillfully used these strategies and developed a very proficient reading ability.

(4) Strategies Used in Writing

Table 5. Strategies used in reading

	When I write an article, I outline it, read it aloud several times after I've written it, and revise it many times.
Cognitive Strategies	I have the habit of writing a diary, which has two advantages: one is to enhance the writing ability, the other is to improve the language ability.
Memory Strategies	Write down the good words and sentences in the school papers and recite some every day.
Compensate Strategies	When I see some beautiful Chinese words, I will try to translate them in English, and sometimes I will try to replace them with more words if I don't know the words.
Metacognitive Strategies	In terms of English writing, I need to accumulate more good words and sentences and apply them reasonably into the writing exercises, so as to improve my English writing skill.
Social Strategies	I need to appreciate good compositions written by my classmates, which could strengthen my writing ability.

As can be seen from the above Table 5, Wang attaches great importance to the cultivation of her English writing ability. She always keeps a diary in English and patiently modifies her compositions. With the help of his notes taken daily, he memorizes some sayings to make his composition better. In addition to adopting cognitive strategies, he also employs compensatory strategies to express himself in other ways when it comes to a brain block.

2.2 Analysis of Spoken Data

To make this study more comprehensive, Wang was interviewed to explore more about their use of learning strategies in English learning. According to the interview data, Wang's learning methods in reading, writing, listening, and speaking are introduced in the following.

(1) Metacognitive strategies.

In this study, Wang uses the metacognitive strategy of arranging and planning to learn in English learning. From the interview data, it can be seen that He has a plan for English learning. Specifically, he would listen to the recording of the magazine and read the CD after it, and sings English songs every day; He would read the corresponding English extracurricular books according to his learning needs.

(2) Cognitive Strategies

In this study, Wang employs cognitive strategies to practice, receive and transmit information, and establish input and output information rules. For example, he practices his pronunciation by repeating the text and reading after tapes and CDs. Receiving and transmitting information is reflected in that he reads English books, newspapers, and magazines, listens to English songs, and watches English movies outside class, which are all receiving information input.

(3) Compensate Strategies

When it comes to learning English, Wang knows where his weaknesses and strengths are. "I lack some good sentences in my writing", and "When I take notes, I only listen to what the teacher says and don't choose the useful ones". In these interviews, Wang can always find his shortcomings in the study.

3. Pedagogical Implication

According to the results, the following implications can be drawn from this study:

(1) In the process of English learning, the learner should be aware of the importance of learning strategies and consciously adopt appropriate learning strategies into English learning according to their level. Dornyei (2005) put forward that the role of an English teacher is not only to impart English knowledge and skills in class but also to teach students English learning methods and some practical English learning strategies.

(2) Learners can use school learning and self-study to enrich and improve their English level while learning the knowledge in class. Zimmerman (2002) believes that autonomous learning ability is crucial because one of the main functions of education is to develop students' mastery of lifelong learning. *The National English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School (2017 Edition)* attaches great importance to the cultivation of independent learning ability of high school students, proposing that teachers should improve their teaching methods and pedagogical approaches, pay attention to the guidance of students' learning strategies, and help them to develop good learning habits and develop autonomous learning ability. Still, the premise is that teachers should have a deep understanding of the cultivation of independent learning ability and encourage students to explore their potential and make progress constantly.

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