

Second Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) Used by Chinese Students at Assumption University, Thailand: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigated Chinese students' use of second language learning strategies (LLSs) for learning English at Assumption University (AU), Thailand. Focusing on a multicultural and multilingual context of education, the researcher adopted an ecological view of second language (L2) for L2 learning as a contextualized, dynamic process. Eleven Chinese students at AU were invited to participate in the study. Instruments for data-collection were two semi-structured interviews with each participant, one conducted in their first semester and the other in their fourth semester at AU. The obtained findings revealed differences between the participants' strategy use when they studied in China and when they studied at AU; and as time evolved, the participants' strategy use at AU evidently changed. These differences and changes in the participants' strategy use were caused by changes and interactions in the participants' learning contexts and their *agency* (knowledge and capacities applied in learning). This study was expected to shed light on the dynamic interrelationship between context, learner's factors and the Chinese students' strategic behavior for learning English in Thailand.

Keywords: *L2 learning strategies, Chinese overseas students, agency, ecological perspective*

1. Introduction

1.1 Chinese overseas students and English learning

To date, China has become the country with the largest number of students to study abroad (Wang & Miao, 2015). In Thailand, Chinese students have become the major body of foreign students since 2006 (Yin et al., 2015); and in 2012, Chinese students enrolled in Thai higher education institutes have taken up nearly half (46.4%) of the total foreign student population (ibid.).

English is the lingua franca of the global academy (Jenkins, 2014). However, Chinese students tend to lack adequate English proficiency when they enter an international university; therefore, the development of English proficiency has become a primary target of their overseas education. In L2 learning, context exerts some impact on the learners' behavior (Block, 2003); therefore, those Chinese students learning English in Thailand will not avoid issues and challenges unique to this particular context in the social, cultural and linguistic aspects. For example, as Kirkpatrick (2011) suggested, international students in Asian countries were to adapt to the varieties of English used in their contexts of education; Gao (2010) pointed out that aside from English, the local language might challenge international students' studies and everyday life. Quite a few studies, particularly Gao (2011), Xue (2011) and Kong (2014), explored Chinese students' English learning in Anglophone countries, but little has been done in L2

research dealing with those in the multicultural and multilingual contexts such as Thailand. This study aimed to fill this gap.

1.2 Assumption University of Thailand

As the first international university in Thailand and a private Catholic university in a Buddhist country, Assumption University, Thailand (AU) provides a multicultural context of education for local and foreign students. AU hosts the largest number of international students in Thailand (Jareonsubphayanont, 2014). In 2013, when this study was conducted, AU had a student body of 22,312, including 3,139 international students from over 90 nations (AU Registrar's Office, 2013). Meanwhile, there were 1,157 Chinese students, taking up 34% of the international student body at AU (ibid.). In its multilingual environment, AU uses English as the medium of administration and instruction, while Thai is commonly used among Thai students, Thai academic and non-academic staff, and among local residents around the AU campus.

1.3 Second language learning strategies and Chinese overseas students

This study investigated second language learning strategies (LLSs) as the entry point for Chinese students' English learning experiences at AU. Previous studies on LLSs (e.g. Gao, 2010; Takeuchi et al., 2007) revealed that L2 learners used LLSs in a dynamic process susceptible to changes as influenced by individuals and situations. In this sense, those changes in the use of LLSs reflected challenges from the learning context and the learner's action upon coping with the contextual influences. Furthermore, two studies by Parks & Raymond (2004) and Gao (2006), focused on Chinese overseas students adapting LLSs to their overseas learning contexts. This study therefore looked into LLS changes in Chinese students at AU and particular challenges and issues they had to deal with in the new language environment.

1.4 Theoretical basis of the study

This study adopted an ecological view of L2 learning (Tudor, 2003). As such, L2 learning is conceptualized not merely as a process of acquiring the rules and sequences of the target language structure; it is also a process of becoming a member of a certain community, which entails the ability to communicate in the language of this community and acts according to its norms (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Meanwhile, this study used theoretical basis of LLS from two sources. The first source was after Gao's (2006, 2010) *conception of L2 strategy use as a process resulted from ongoing interaction between context of learning and learner's agency*. Context of learning encompasses *material resources* (e.g. books, computers) and *social resources* (e.g. teachers, classmates). Learner's *agency* refers to the knowledge and capacities that the learner applies to their use of learning resources.

The second source was after Oxford's (2011) Strategic Self-Regulation (S²R) Model. The S²R Model includes *cognitive* and *sociocultural-interactive* (SI) strategies. *Cognitive strategies* help the learner construct, transform, and apply L2 knowledge, while *SI strategies* help the learner with communication, sociocultural contexts, and identity. The items of cognitive and SI strategies in the S²R Model are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Cognitive and sociocultural-interactive strategy items in the S²R Model

<p>Cognitive strategies <i>(Purpose: Remembering and processing the L2, including constructing, transforming, and applying L2 knowledge)</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using the senses to understand and remember 2. Activating knowledge 3. Reasoning 4. Conceptualizing with details 5. Conceptualizing broadly 6. Going beyond the immediate data 	<p>Sociocultural-Interactive strategies <i>(Purpose: Dealing with issues of contexts, communication and culture in L2 learning)</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interacting to learn and communicate 2. Overcoming knowledge gaps in communicating 3. Dealing with sociocultural contexts and Identities
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Source: Adapted from Oxford (2011: 16)

The S²R Model proposes six types of knowledge that the L2 learner uses to guide and control strategy use. Six types of knowledge are: (1) *person knowledge* is the learner’s knowledge of his/her *individual factors*, such as his/her learning styles, goals, strengths and weaknesses; and (2) *group or culture knowledge* deals with norms and expectations in the learner’s home/group culture or the target group/culture to which the learner wants to gain entry. As for (3) *Task knowledge*, it is knowledge of the characteristics and requirements of the L2 learning task that the learner is immediately involved; (4) *whole-process knowledge* is of the characteristics and requirements of the long-term process of his/her TL learning; (5) *strategy knowledge* is of available learning strategies and their usages; and (6) *condition knowledge* is for using a specific strategy in a specific situation based on the other five types of knowledge.

The S²R Model by Oxford (2011) also includes *tactics* in addition to strategies. Tactics are specific manifestation of a strategy conducted by a particular learner in a given setting for a certain purpose in learning. Once a strategy is manifested by the use of certain tactics in learning, it becomes *a strategic learning activity*. *Activity* is the basic unit of analysis in LLS research. With the focus placed on activities, L2 learners’ use of strategies and tactics in their learning contexts and conditions across time can be empirically investigated (Oxford, 2011).

Based on the theoretical basis for the study as described above, the researcher classified strategic learning activities into two types: *cognitive strategic learning activities*, which refer to the learner’s use of strategies to *learn* English at the cognitive level; and *SI strategic learning activities*, which refer to the learners’ use of strategies to *interact* with others in English in the target context and culture. These two categories of strategic learning activities were labeled as *COG strategies* and *SI strategies* in this paper.

2. Research Objectives

The study was to investigate second language learning strategies used by Chinese students at Assumption University, Thailand in two aspects: (1) How their COG and SI strategies at AU were different from the ones they used when studying in China, and how their COG and SI strategies changed when studying at AU over a period of time. (2) How the contextual factors and six types of knowledge in the participants' agency influenced those changes in the Chinese students' language learning strategies found in (1).

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodological approach with the use of recorded audio data and interview data.

3.1 Participants

The researcher adopted convenience sampling (Kothari, 2004) and accessibility by inviting eleven undergraduate students at AU from Mainland China to participate in the study. The participants were seven males and four females from four faculties: Architecture and Design, Management, Arts, and Engineering.

3.2 Instruments

This study used audio-recording and semi-structured interviews as research instruments to collect data. The researcher piloted the interview questions with a Chinese first-year student at AU and made subsequent adjustments for clarity. The adjusted questions were validated for content clarity by an academic staff member at AU.

3.3 Data collection

The researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant individually, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the data collection period. The first interview asked the participants to describe their LLSs used in previous English learning in China, and their LLSs when studying at AU. The second interview focused on changes in the participants' LLSs used at AU. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately for one hour. The researcher used Chinese in the interviews. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and three steps were involved. Firstly, the researcher thoroughly read each participant's data to gain a general idea about English learning experiences in China and at AU. Secondly, the researcher identified changes made in each participant's learning strategies and underlying factors. Thirdly, the researcher compared the findings from the second step across all participants' cases and identified similarities or differences in the changes apparent in the participants' learning strategies and the underlying factors. Throughout all the three steps, the researcher analyzed data, coded data, and took records.

After completing the data analysis, the researcher assessed reliability of the analyzed data after Gordon (1992) in two steps. Firstly, the researcher invited a colleague to independently code parts of the obtained data--ten randomly selected semi-structured interview transcripts. Secondly, the researcher and a colleague worked together to compare codings with two measures: percentage agreement and Cohen's Kappa coefficient. The scores of percentage agreement were 0.87 to 0.93; the scores of Cohen's Kappa were 0.73 to 0.81. The results were in support of data analysis reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Difference between the participants' learning strategies in China and at AU

The researcher found differences between the learning strategies used by the participants in China and at AU.

Participants' COG strategies

The obtained data revealed that in China the participants' use of English was limited. The participants' tactics were '*listening to the teacher's talk*' and '*taking notes of teachers' talk and blackboard writing*'. The quote below is an example:

In English classes, I listened to the teacher, and I was always taking notes; the teacher always wrote a lot of things on the blackboard, like conjugation, word formation, and vocabulary. I noted them down on every page in my textbook. (Participant 6, 1st interview)

After class, the participants used such tactics as '*memorizing vocabulary and texts from the textbook*' and '*work on exam papers*' to study English, as shown in the quote below:

In China, after class, I just did the exam papers that the teacher assigned, and memorized vocabulary, and also memorized texts in the textbooks. (Participant 7, 1st interview)

These tactics indicated that the participants' COG strategies in China focused on vocabulary, grammar, and written exercises, with '*conceptualizing with details*' and '*using the senses to understand and remember*' as the main cognitive strategies.

In comparison, the participants were more involved in the use of English and thus COG strategies at AU. Their involvement was not only in the English courses, but in all other courses offered at AU. The quote illustrates this point:

[...] the study at AU is like learning English all the time, because it's not in Chinese language, but everything is English. So whenever and whatever I'm studying, I'm actually learning English in addition to new knowledge. (Participant 5, 1st interview)

Meanwhile, the courses at AU required the students to read texts and hand-out materials to learn knowledge in various areas. Such a learning situation prompted the

participants to use other learning strategies to accomplish their learning tasks: (1) *'using senses to understand and remember'*, (2) *'conceptualizing with details'*, (3) *'conceptualizing broadly'*, (4) *'activating knowledge'*, (5) *'reasoning'*, and (6) *'going beyond the immediate data'* The quote below points to the participants at AU paying more attention to context and meaning of the language in reading tasks, which required the use of such strategies as *'activating knowledge'*, and *'going beyond the immediate data'*:

The way I learn English, in the past in China, was mainly by rote memorizing; now at AU it was mainly through use, like reading. (Participant 4, 1st interview)

In addition, the participants at AU joined such activities as watching English movies, listening to English songs, and using APPs on the smartphone to learn English. These activities helped them to develop communicative skills in English, as mentioned by one participant:

[...] watching English movies is good for me. Some of the words that I use to communicate with others are learnt from movies. (Participant 8, 1st interview)

Participants' SI strategies

In China, the participants rarely used English to interact with others in their schoolwork, as expressed in the given quote:

What we learnt in China was 'dumb English', we rarely spoke; the teacher might pick you to answer questions, but even if you got the opportunity, you probably just spoke one or two sentences. (Participant 6, 1st interview)

Meanwhile, the participants did not use English to interact with others outside the classroom either, as shown in the quote below:

The researcher - In China, did you have any opportunity to use English with foreigners?

Participant 1 - No, not at all. (Participant 1, 1st interview)

As seen, the participants used little of the SI strategy *'interacting to learn and communicate'* when they studied in China.

In contrast, the participants at AU had more opportunities to use English to interact with others both for their coursework and in everyday life. Below are two examples:

In China we just do rote-memorizing, read the textbooks; but in here at AU there are more different tasks; we have interaction in class and after class, and we write composition by group. (Participant 8, 1st interview)

In the past in China, I didn't have the motivation to use English. Now if you are not willing to use English then you can't deal with affairs. Now even for buying a lunch, I have to use English. (Participant 4, 1st interview)

Therefore, the participants at AU evidently used their SI strategy '*interacting to learn and communicate*'.

It should be noted that the participants were also engaged in learning Thai at AU:

[...] I've been learning Thai. I attended tutorial classes. (Participant 6, 2nd interview)

Learning Thai not only helped the participants conveniently live their lives at AU, but it also increased the participants' knowledge and understanding of the variety of English used at AU and in Thailand, as mentioned by one participant:

Thai people's English has different pronunciation, stress and rhythm. I've been learning Thai, so I have some knowledge about this; it's influenced by the Thai alphabet. [...] (Participant 5, 2nd interview)

Therefore, learning Thai facilitated the participants' English learning in the sense that they could access the social resources at AU for English learning more easily and understood the features of the English variety used at AU. It thus prompted participants' use of the SI strategy '*dealing with sociocultural contexts and identities*' in dealing with the sociocultural and linguistic aspects of the AU context.

It can be concluded that the participants in China mainly used vocabulary and grammar with two COG strategies of '*using senses to understand and remember*' and '*conceptualizing with details*' and they were rarely involved in activities that required SI strategies. At AU, the participants' use of COG strategies increased in a good variety for authentic communication in their study and daily life. Meanwhile, the participants had to use SI strategies for interaction, particularly two strategies: '*interact to learn and communicate*' and '*dealing with sociocultural contexts and identities*'.

4.2 Changes in the participants' learning strategies at AU across time

There were also evident changes in the participants' learning strategies in their study time at AU.

Participants' COG strategies

At AU, several participants (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8) worked hard in their study. Participant 4 stopped playing web games and spent more time on her coursework:

[...] now I got used to not touching the games; I am definitely more diligent in my studies, because I stopped playing the web games I'd played for three years. (Participant 4, 2nd interview)

Participant 2 reported that he used more of his COG strategies by reading English magazines and novels to learn more of English in addition to working for coursework:

[...] At AU at first I just memorized the vocabulary from the textbook to learn English, that's all. Now I also read the novels and magazines I bought and learn new words from them. (Participant 2, 2nd interview)

As shown, the participants became more diligent in learning English with different material resources. As a result, they resorted to the use of more COG strategies.

Participants' SI strategies

Seven participants (Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, and 11) increased their interaction with others at AU. Participant 2 in particular became active in interacting with the teacher and his classmates in class:

In this semester, the teacher had a nice impression of me, probably because I like to interact with him. And I like to sit with Thai students, because Thai students kind of like to talk. [...] Last semester I totally relied on the Chinese classmates, I kept close to them; they translated for me to understand what the teacher was talking and what we had to do for assignments. (Participant 2, 2nd interview)

Participant 7 also socialized with others in the third and fourth semesters after she and a Korean classmate became close friends:

[...] My Korean classmate moved to my downstairs now, and we meet almost every day. Since last semester, we have met very often. And from her I knew many other Korean friends, then we often get together, and we talk. (Participant 7, 2nd interview)

The participants increased their interaction with others at AU and thus increased their use of the SI strategy '*interacting to learn' and communicate*'.

In addition, there were also changes in participants' involvement in learning Thai. In the first semester, Participant 4 wanted to learn Thai:

[...] I hope I can learn Thai and know Thai, but now it's not in my schedule. (Participant 4, 1st interview)

In the third semester, Participant 4 began to learn Thai by attending tutorial classes. However, in the fourth semester, she stopped learning Thai:

[...] I stopped my Thai tuition. I have no time now. (Participant 4, 2nd interview)

The participants' involvement in learning Thai across time indicated changes in the use of the SI strategy '*dealing with sociocultural contexts and identities*' at AU.

The researcher found increase in the majority of the participants' use of COG strategies at AU during their study time at AU. They also used more of the SI strategy '*interacting to learn and communicate*' and increased their interactions with local students by learning Thai—thus showing their SI strategy '*dealing with sociocultural contexts and identities*'.

4.2 Factors underlying the changes in the participants' learning strategies at AU

The interview data revealed changes in the participants' learning strategies as caused by their learning *context* and/or *agency*, i.e., knowledge and capacities applied in learning.

Different learning contexts

Differences between the participants' learning strategies in China and those at AU were caused by change in learning context. In China, the participants learned English in a sociocultural context that placed high value on College Entrance Examination (CEE), which acted as a dominant 'non-physical artifact' (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Therefore, the emphasis was placed on material resources regarding vocabulary and grammar in written exercises to obtain high scores in CEE. On the other hand, there were no social resources available for the participants to use English outside their schools. The participants therefore were not prompted to use SI strategies.

In contrast, the participants at AU used English to learn all the courses and communicate with the teacher and classmates in their coursework and daily life. The participants were actively involved in communication by using both COG and SI strategies at AU. In particular, they tried a wide range of cognitive strategies for learning tasks and SI strategies for interactions, especially '*interacting to learn and communicate*'. Their interaction with teachers, classmates and people in daily life was in a multicultural and multilingual context at AU. In addition, the participants also learned Thai as part of their SI strategy in coping with the sociocultural and linguistic aspect of AU.

Interaction of context and agency

Those changes in the participants' learning strategies at AU appeared to stem from their new learning *context* and *agency* at AU. Participant 4 explained thus:

In this semester, I've taken more courses, and the courses are more difficult too, so I had to stopped playing web games; previously I felt easy even though I played web games often. (Participant 4, 2nd interview)

As seen, there was a change in Participant 4's learning context, as the participant took more courses and the courses became more difficult. As a result, the participant came to realize that she was facing a tougher situation and she should spend more time on her study. It was her change in *task knowledge* about her courses, which stopped her from playing web games. This example also revealed change in her *agency* or knowledge and capacities applied in learning new material resources in the new learning context.

The participants' learning strategies changed for adjustment in context and agency, for example, the use of magazines and novels to learn English, as Participant 2 put it:

[...] I came to realize that my English was too poor. Studying in this university, the most basic thing is English. At first I totally couldn't understand in the class. So I thought it's important to improve my English. (Participant 2, 2nd interview)

The participant has changed in *person knowledge* in that his English proficiency was not sufficient to handle his courses at AU; in this case coursework at AU was a contextual factor. Other social resources also caused change in the participant's *agency* or the way he had to apply new knowledge and capabilities to the new learning task:

[...] I have a previous classmate, and his English is good; I asked him how to learn English, and he said, to improve English, I need to ask myself what I like. I said I like basketball and cars, and he said then you just buy English magazines on basketball and cars, and read them. (Participant 2, 2nd interview)

[...] I bought English novels because of my elder brother's advice; he told me to read them seriously. He said reading novel could improve my English fast. (Participant 2, 2nd interview)

It can be seen that advice from his previous classmate and elder brother served as social resources, Participant 2 adopted the *knowledge strategy* to upgrade his English with magazines and novels. Therefore, Participant 2's involvement in reading English magazines and novels was a result from influences of a combination of material resources, social resources, and changes in agency.

Another example was Participant 4 who started learning Thai and later on had to stop because of time limitation. This participant used an SI strategy to study Thai for socialization but later had to cancel her Thai learning to give more time for coursework, which was a COG strategy. Two quotes illustrate this point:

[...] currently learning Thai is not in my schedule; now I'm just thinking of making my GPA higher. (Participant 4, 1st interview)

I started to learn Thai just because I had a lot of time at that time. Now I stopped still because of time issue. Now the courses are more difficult, and I am taking more courses. (Participant 4, 2nd interview)

It should be noted that COG and SI strategies came into play and competed for their dominant position, depending on the need of the learner or the participant. It was evident that Participant 4 had to make a balance between her coursework and learning Thai—thus alternating between her SI and COG strategies.

5. Conclusion

This study was an initial effort to investigate Chinese overseas students' use of strategies in learning English at Assumption University, Thailand (AU). The researcher analyzed eleven participants' learning strategies used during their study time at AU. It was found that the participants showed changes in learning strategies from the context of China to that of AU. The two types of learning strategies were cognitive (COG) and sociocultural-interactive (SI). Changes in COG and SI strategies were caused by the new *context* and *agency*. Changes in COG strategies were prompted by academic tasks and SI strategies by needs for interactions and socializations.

The obtained findings of this study echoed previous studies (e.g. Carson & Longhini, 2002; Gao, 2010) that explored changes of language learning strategies (LLSs) and the interconnectedness of L2 learner's context, agency and strategic behavior that forms the *ecological wholeness*. Educators need to be aware of the complex influences of the learning context and students' individual factors in adjusting themselves to their new learning context and tasks. As shown in the study, Chinese students' learning English in China was determined by CEE-oriented tasks—thus prompting their use of COG strategies. Once they entered the new learning environment at AU in Thailand, they adjusted themselves and switched to more use of both COG and SI strategies. This study called to educators' attention for the emphasis of local and overseas learning tasks that prompted differences in individual learners' choice of learning strategies. The obtained findings also suggested improvement of second language learning with alternating learning contexts from the local one to the overseas environment.

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7. The Author

Zhiguang Huang is an MA-ELT and PhD-ELT graduate from Assumption University of Thailand. His research interests include second language acquisition, language learning strategies, and multilingualism.

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