

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR SPOKEN ENGLISH IN CHINESE COLLEGE

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Abstract

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With respect to learning English, Chinese students face a number of problems that are probably specific only to the Chinese context. English teaching in China usually starts at junior schools, in many big cities at upper grades in the elementary schools. At first sight the Chinese student's exposure to English as a foreign language looks quite similar to that of students in western countries, but the results are quite different.

Seen in terms of language education, what causes considerable problems in class, especially for teachers aiming at creating communicative competence in a second or foreign language, is the issue of the ability of students to produce spoken English. An analysis of the factors that account for the present difficulties in promoting spoken English in schools in China is provided.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Applied linguists have turned their research focus from “teaching” to “learning” since the 1970s. With this change teachers and researchers are trying to make foreign language classroom more “learner-centered” rather than “teacher-centered.” Foreign language practitioners aim at helping students become better and more independent learners. Various articles, books, studies and research have discussed how learners process information and what strategies they employ to understand and learn a second language, and what effective and efficient ways of English language teaching can be inferred from such studies (Oxford 1990, Cohen 1990, O’Malley and Chamot 1990, Wenden 1991, Rubin and Thompson 1994).

In fact, China’s college English educators have been experiencing such a shift with the official issue of a national college English syllabus, the College English Curriculum Requirements, by the Ministry of Education (as a landmark in 2004). The syllabus clearly states the importance of developing students’ communicative competence, learning strategies, and intercultural communication skills (College English Curriculum Requirements, Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004). One clear feature of this newly issued syllabus, unlike the previous college English teaching syllabi which attached great importance to the linguistic knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing and translation, emphasizes the development of communicative competence and gives priority to the learning of oral or spoken English.

Current researchers attempt to explore if strategies-based instruction is effective in improving Chinese EFL learners' speaking proficiency, if there is any relationship between the frequency of strategy use and ratings of performance on speaking tasks, and what their rationale for strategy use is.

In China though more and more teachers of English have accepted a communicative approach and are practicing speaking more than before. Many teachers continue to use traditional method of teaching English. The traditional grammar translation method emphasizes vocabulary and grammar rules but ignores oral ability. In class, they are the masters and authorities that dominate the whole class. Students are waiting to be filled up with knowledge by them and seldom get any chance to speak in English.

In general, the situation in English language teaching is changing and students are given more opportunities to practice speaking, but the result is not satisfactory for various complicated reasons. The basic one is the lack of effective learning methods and strategies in speaking.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed as a question is as follows: What are the effective strategies in an oral English class?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Learning Strategy.** Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions; behaviors, steps, or techniques students use - often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990b)

EFL. Most commonly refers to English as a Foreign Language.

### **Delimitations of the Research**

The research review was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “oral English strategies”, “oral English ability”, and “learning strategies”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the studies of learning strategies and speaking strategies learners was conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Definitions of language learning strategies

It usually is the first issue of concern for any thesis to sort out terms. In the following sections the definitions of and distinctions among learning strategies, communication strategies and speaking strategies in all will be revisited. The major concern of this paper, oral English speaking strategies, and the users of such strategies, i.e. Chinese college English learners, are described and clarified.

Learning strategies as a term is jargon in education and psychology. In this paper language learning strategies are strategies related to language learning. Language learning strategies are applicable to a wide variety of language learning tasks, ranging from rather discrete and isolated tasks such as vocabulary and pronunciation over grammar to integrative tasks like oral communication and reading comprehension. However, there is no consensus on a definition of the term language learning strategies. Inspired by Ellis's neat summary of definitions of learning strategy (1994), there are nine definitions modeled after Ellis's table of four definitions with more new definitions supplemented. The table below provides a summary.

**Table 2.1. Definition of Language Learning Strategy**

Source	Definition
O'Malley and Chamot (1990)	Learning strategies are intentional cognitive or affective actions taken by learner in order to learn simple and complex materials.

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p.212)	Those conscious or unconscious activities undertaken by learners that problem learning.
Cook (1991, p. 103)	Learning strategy: a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language that learning.
Oxford (1993, p.18)	Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative abilities. Oxford provides specific examples of LLS-specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that student use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. Defined by their functions, these strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, and use of the new language.
Towel and Hawkins (1994, p.226)	Learning strategies are deployed by learners to ensure that they learn.
Green and Oxford (1995, p.262)	Learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that students use, often intentionally, to improve their progress in developing L2 skills.
Mayer (1998)	Learning strategies are “behaviors of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information.”
Nunnan (1999)	The mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language.
Chamot (2004)	Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions

	that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal.
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Cohen (1990) has pointed out the importance of consciousness in strategy use and thus displayed the controversy in giving definitions to language learning strategies. Cook (1993) used the word “choice”, Green and Oxford (1995), “intentionally”, and Mayer (1998), “intended”, all of which stressed the role of consciousness in the use of language learning strategies. Based on the close study of the above definitions, the research findings so far published, the nature of foreign language learning as a conscious choice of methods or actions taken by the learner to facilitate foreign language learning.

To define foreign language strategies in the above manner has the following three advantages:

- the definition of strategies as methods or actions makes it feasible to identify the strategies, classify them, and study them.
- since the learning of a foreign language as a school subject is largely a conscious learning process, the definition stressing the consciousness of learning a foreign language is true to certain extent. The stress on the consciousness of strategy use will also accredit those frequently used methods of research on learning strategies—questionnaires, diaries, and self reports.
- the definition summarizes and condenses the definitions provided by different experts at different times, with special reference to foreign language learning. It is clear, new, and relevant.

## **Definitions of Oral English Learning Strategies**

Speaking is a communicative activity. Oral English learning strategies are complex procedures that individuals apply to tasks; consequently, they may be presented as procedural knowledge which is acquired through cognitive associative and autonomous stages of learning and later be performed without the person's awareness. For most Chinese learners of Chinese learners of English as a foreign language, it takes a great deal of psychological preparation and efforts to develop oral English communication skills. Oral fluency in English requires lowered inhibition, enhanced self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, greater ambiguity to tolerance, realistic personal goals and most of all, adventurous risk-taking. Meanwhile, effective communication also necessitates language accuracy based on less L1 interference and pragmatic appropriateness obtained through linguistic and non- linguistic media.

## **English Speaking Strategies Used by Chinese College English Learners**

Chinese college English learners discussed in this paper are Chinese college students who learn English as a foreign language and whose native language is Chinese. By the time they enter college, most have learned English for at least six years as a school course and have already mastered a basic knowledge of the English language, including pronunciation, grammar, and a vocabulary of about 4500. To study the situation of oral English learning in China, Chinese college English learners' learning of speaking must be studied first. Chinese college English learners as learners of the intermediate level, their major task of English learning at college is to

try to apply what they have learned into actual use. If their English learning in middle school years can be overtly viewed as the input stage, then college English learning should be a transitional stage from inputting to outputting and producing. In addition, at this stage, the college English curriculum and future career development both require then to develop communicative skills. Therefore, learning to speak fluent English in order to communicate with native speakers, to pass exams for certificates, to pave the road for further education abroad, or to obtain better job opportunities in the international job market, is the goal for most of them. There are many actual activities of oral English learning to be observed and studied.

To study oral English speaking strategies, it is also very important to take Chinese college English learners as research subjects as they are successful adult learners. Since China's college enrollment rate is low, Chinese high school graduates have to be very successful learners in order to enter college through an intensely competitive and selective National College Entrance Examination. It can easily be assumed that Chinese college English learners have a strong strategic competence, and that they have a strong tendency to use strategies both in learning and using a foreign language such as English.

English speaking strategy needs to be clarified and defined. In applied linguistics, there have been different ways of describing speaking-from linguistic descriptions of spoken language, speaking as meaningful interaction, to speaking as a social and situation-based activity (Luoma, 2004). "The ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language" (Luoma 2004,

p.ix). The ability to speak, or communicate, in a language, is undoubtedly the goal of many language learners. But the competence in speaking tasks time and efforts to develop.

It can easily conclude that we choose different ways to speak to different people according to the situation, and a speaking activity, no matter how vague or brief it might be, task many efforts to happen and is influenced by many factors. However hard it is to describe the nature of speaking, as a language producing process it can be divided into stages of planning, processing and producing so that it can be closely looked into.

Chinese college English learners are learning English as a foreign language. To them, oral English speaking is more a learning target than a tool of communication. So one may say that their oral English speaking strategies are more for the learning than communication, although during speaking the functions of the strategies in use overlap and it is very hard to distinguish what strategies are solely learning strategies or what are absolutely communication or production strategies.

Based on Cohen's (1998) two-dimensional division of learner strategies (strategies for learning and strategies for using), the English speaking strategies used by Chinese college English learners fall into the categories of English speaking strategies for "learning" and English speaking strategies for "using". The former can also be alternatively called oral English learning strategies and the latter oral English using strategies, which include communication strategies and production strategies.

## **Studies on Language Learning Strategy in China**

The study of language learning strategies has also attracted researchers' and language teachers' attention in China. Some focus has been on the introduction of researches done by western scholars (Wang Lifei, 2001). Liu Zhi and Zhu Yuezhen (2000) have described strategy training frameworks set up by Oxford, Dadour and Rubbins Zhang Min (2000) questioned the learning strategy clarification frameworks. Zhang Min (2000) argued that metacognitive strategies played the function of macro-monitoring and thus should be at the top of the learning strategy frameworks, instead of being at the same level with other strategies like cognitive, communicative and social strategies.

Quantitative research is also useful. Quantitative research and observation of learner's employment of language learning strategies have been reported. For example, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), developed by Oxford (1990) was used in testing the strategy use by Chinese university students (Li Jiongying, 2002). It was found the most often used language learning strategies were memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies, followed by compensation strategies, and the least used strategies were social strategies and affective strategies. Contrary to what Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found, gender was not a determinant of strategy use in the research. Li concluded the major factors that influenced Chinese students' strategy choice were learner's target language efficiency, learner's culture background, learner's personality, the learning circumstances for the target language learner's awareness of learning strategies, and the time devoted to target language learning.

## **Classification of Learning Strategies**

Different taxonomies exist in classifying language learning strategies. For example the work of Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have made an important contribution to our knowledge of the classification of learning strategies. Their findings are discussed next.

On the basis of the information-processing model, O' Malley and Chamot (2000, p.137-139), distinguish three major types of strategies. Metacognitive strategies are higher order executive skills. Cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. Affective/social strategies help to create opportunities for practice. Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning the process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning task, and evaluating how well one has learned. Cognitive strategies involve interacting with the material to be learned, manipulating the material mentally or physically, or applying a specific technique to a learning task. Affective/social strategies involve interacting with another person to assist learning or using affective control to assist a learning task. Oxford (1990) presented a new taxonomy that a general distinction between direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consist of 'strategies that directly involved the target language' in the sense that they 'require mental processing of the language.' (1990, p.37), while indirect strategies 'provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means' (1990,

p.151). There are sub strategies under both of the direct and indirect strategies as the following shows:

#### Direct strategies

- Memory strategies (including setting up nets of relationships, making use of image and sound, reviewing, acting.)
- Cognitive strategies (including practicing, receiving and conveying information, analyzing and inferencing, setting up rules for inputting and outputting information.)
- Compensation strategies (including guessing, overcoming deficiencies of language knowledge in speaking and writing.)

#### Indirect strategies

- Metacognitive strategies (including focusing on key points of learning, arranging and planning learning, evaluating learning.)
- Affective strategies (including lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, learning about one's own state of affect.)

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION**

The teaching of spoken language, as well as that of other language aspects, is affected by textbooks, teachers, teaching methods, students and many other factors. But the method is considered to be one of the most important factors. It determines how much progress language learners can make in their process of the foreign language learning.

There are some suggestions for learning English speaking:

- Learners should try best to exert as many learning strategies as they can on oral English learning.
- Before teaching oral English, teachers should introduce some learning strategies to the students first, then the importance of learning strategies.
- Individual differences also influence on learning strategy choice. Teachers, of course, should pay enough attention to students' personal differences such as gender, age, motivation, learning style, learning beliefs etc. So to different students, teachers should introduce different strategies to them in order to get the best learning result.
- Most important of all, while teaching oral English, teachers also should apply these learning strategies to their teaching in order that students can use them automatically because the students can clearly see the improvement of oral English level.

In all, learning strategies really can improve your learning results. In practicing oral

English, utilizing learning strategies also can greatly improve your oral English level.

The purpose of this thesis is to make students as well as oral English teachers familiar with learning strategies and aware of their advantages. Finally, they can use them automatically in their learning process.

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