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Empirical Studies on English Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Mainland China over the Past Two Decades¹

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ABSTRACT

Wen and Wang (2004) reviewed the empirical studies over the past two decades (from 1984 to 2003) on learning strategies that Chinese EFL learners used. This article, following their methodological framework, reviews about 45 empirical studies on Chinese EFL learners' English vocabulary learning strategies, conducted by Mainland Chinese scholars over the past two decades. The review shows that more than half of the Chinese scholars are interested in questionnaire investigation of EFL learners' preferences for vocabulary learning. The reports of the questionnaire investigations indicate that most Chinese EFL learners prefer rote learning of vocabulary to learning vocabulary in context or through language use. The experimental studies suggest that strategies-based instruction results in the learners' vocabulary achievement. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the two groups of strategies that Chinese researchers show particular interest in.

Key words: China; empirical study; English learner; strategy; vocabulary learning

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1.0 Introduction

When discussing the nature of the linguistic sign, (Saussure, 1983:97-100) attempted to elucidate the nature of a word in a language. He said that, for most people, a language, reduced to its essentials, is simply a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things, i.e. a list of words in relation to a list of things. However, this conception assumes that ideas already exist independently of words. He asserted that a word, i.e. a name for a thing, is a psychological entity and that the word and the thing it stands for are both psychological and are connected in the brain by an associative link. "A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern." For Saussure, a language is essentially something acquired by the individuals from the outside world. Saussure's "sound pattern" is the mental representation of the word form as an abstract linguistic item, corresponding to the mental concept of a thing in an individual.

From this point of view, the extent or degree of an individual's language acquisition can be measured by the size of his vocabulary. This is why vocabulary always serves as an indicator of the difficulty or level in language learning and teaching. Accordingly, in second language acquisition or foreign language learning, the efficiency of vocabulary learning becomes most important. Unfortunately, after so many years of research on vocabulary learning and teaching, foreign language learners are still struggling with the new words and expressions they encounter in their daily language input and output, and foreign language teachers are still complaining about the inefficiency of their vocabulary teaching and their students' vocabulary learning.

Ever since (Rubin, 1975) drew the public attention to the customary learning behavior of the "good language learner", the field of second language acquisition and foreign language learning has seen a thriving branch of research on language learning strategies. This pedagogical move towards the explicit focus on learning strategies was part of the larger movement in the field of education, where emphasis had been placed on the learner's autonomous or independent learning. Over the past 30 years or so, some researchers (e.g. Oxford, 1988; Cohen, 1990; Nation, 1990; Takač, 2008) have researched strategies for learning vocabulary, and many more (e.g. Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Macaro, 2001) have explored strategies in learning and using a second language, where strategies of learning vocabulary are considered as an essential part.

According to (Wen and Wang, 2004), who reviewed empirical studies on English learning strategies in Mainland China over the past two decades, the first research on strategies of Chinese EFL learners began in 1984, when a master student named Xiaohua Wang in the Chinese University of Hong Kong finished his master thesis titled "An investigation of learning strategies in oral communication that Chinese EFL learners employ." Wen and Wang divided the two decades into two stages: the beginning stage from 1984 to 1992, and the developmental stage from 1993 to 2003. In the beginning stage, studies on English learning strategies were few and far between.

Ten years have passed since their review. In this paper we would like to focus primarily upon empirical investigations conducted in Mainland China in terms of the English learners' strategies for learning English vocabulary. It aims at projecting an overall picture of the empirical studies on English vocabulary learning strategies that Chinese EFL learners employ, and attempts to find out if there is any significant tendency in the study of English vocabulary learning strategies in China.

2.0 Methodology and data collection

We first searched, by key words of “strategies” and “English vocabulary learning”, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), one of the largest databases of academic papers published in Mainland China. Then we went over the papers published over the past 20 years (from 1995 to 2014) in important journals, most of which are from the so-called core journals listed in the *Catalog of Core Journals in China*, published by Peking University. Through careful examination of the 102 papers selected, we finally selected 45 papers, which can be considered as empirical studies on vocabulary learning, i.e. studies based on experiments or questionnaires

The collected papers are reviewed and classified in accordance with the taxonomy elucidated by (Oxford, 1990) in her *Language Learning Strategies: What English Teacher Should Know*. According to (Oxford, 1990:14), her classification differs from earlier attempts to classify strategies. “It is more comprehensive and detailed; it is more systematic in linking individual strategies, as well as strategy groups, with each of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing); and it uses less technical terminology.” In her strategy classification system, language learning strategies are divided into two major classes: direct and indirect. These two classes are subdivided into a total of six groups (memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct class, metacognitive, affective, and social under the indirect class).

When we matched our collected studies with Oxford’s systematic classification, we found that most of the empirical studies on Chinese EFL learners’ English vocabulary learning fall into three main areas of research. The first area of research is the situation of the learners’ use of vocabulary learning strategies; the second one consists of the learners’ beliefs and preferences in their selection of strategies when they are learning vocabulary, and the third concerns the correlations between the strategies they employ and their achievement in vocabulary learning. As vocabulary learning is a particular area in second language acquisition or foreign language learning, it is mainly concerned with the problem of learning vocabulary by rote or in context where they are used. Researchers direct their research to the problem of vocabulary learning rather than following or testing Oxford’s classification of learning strategies.

Table 1: An overview of the collected data

Research Areas	Subjects						Total
	English Majors	Non-English Majors	Postgraduates	Vocational Students	High School Students	Mixed	
Metacognitive		1			1		2
Cognitive	1	2			1		4
Metacognitive & cognitive		2					2
Beliefs and Preferences	7	14	1	5	3	2	32
Correlation Between Strategies and Achievement	1	1	1	1	1		5
Total	9	20	2	6	6	2	45

The subjects under study also vary, including English major undergraduates, non-English major undergraduates, non-English major postgraduates, students in vocational schools or colleges, and junior or senior high school students. Some researchers have mixed subjects in their studies. Table 1 is an overall picture of the collected reports of research on strategies of Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

The above table clearly shows that two reports study metacognitive strategies, four reports cognitive strategies, and another two reports both meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies. More than 70% of the researches (32 reports out of 45) are conducted to explore the learner's beliefs and preferences in their selection and use of vocabulary strategies. Five reports are on the correlations between the vocabulary learning strategies the learners use and the result of their vocabulary tests or their English proficiency where their vocabulary achievement can be identified. 20 of the reports study non-English majors, nine English majors, six high school students, another six vocational school students and two mixed subjects.

3.0 Preferences for vocabulary learning strategies: rote learning vs learning in context

There are many mnemonic tricks and scientific strategies for remembering new words and expressions in a foreign language, but more often than not EFL teachers focus their teaching on anything but the strategies of vocabulary learning. Students are left by themselves to cope with the vocabulary in their input learning materials. Many of them transfer their habits of vocabulary learning that they developed in learning their native language to the tasks confronting them in learning English as a foreign language. It is quite natural that they learn vocabulary by rote so as to remember the words and expressions that appear in materials they are learning in spite of the warnings from their English teachers that they should learn vocabulary in context and through using the language. Why do they act against their teachers' warnings? In the report by (Wu and Wang, 1998), the respondents are given three ideas of vocabulary learning for selection: rote learning, learning in context and learning through use. Rote learning is the most unpopular one. However, when it comes to the question about the actual use of rote learning as a cognitive strategy, it becomes a very popular one. To this contradiction, they gave the following account. "On the one hand, most students disapprove of learning vocabulary by rote; on the other hand, they actually unconsciously employ this strategy. In other words, these students are beginning to change their traditional idea of the mechanical vocabulary memorization, but this idea has not been entirely substituted yet." Unfortunately, more than 16 years has been passed and this idea has not been substituted at all. One of the conceivable reasons is that they have no idea as to how to remember words in the context where they are used, and that the quickest and most effective way is to remember the glossary of new words and expressions after the materials they have read or listened to. This assumption is confirmed and supported by the results of the questionnaires that researchers administered to the respondents of Chinese EFL learners.

There are altogether 10 reports investigating what strategies learners employ in their vocabulary learning. The above-mentioned investigation by (Wu and Wang, 1998) concludes that the most disliked strategy of English vocabulary learning is learning vocabulary by rote, that the two most popular strategies are learning words in context and by using them, and that good learners are more likely to learn words in context and through using them. But (Yu, 2013) did not find any significant differences between good and poor learners in their strategy preferences. An investigation by (Chen, 2001) shows that 74% of the non-English major undergraduates learn by rote the vocabulary in the Intensive Reading

and Extensive Reading textbooks and 36% attempt to remember the Glossary in the Syllabus. Liu (2007) confirmed the percentage of the learners who learn vocabulary by rote (70%). Only a small number of the learners under investigation are aware of vocabulary learning in context (18%) or through sense relations of words (14%). Li and Ren (2001) interviewed 40 English major sophomores in a university of foreign languages. She got a similar result. 80% of the learners think that the mastery of vocabulary requires rote learning; only 20% believe that vocabulary can be naturally acquired from context (mainly from extensive reading).

From the above reports, we can conclude that learners are aware that learning words in context or by using them are good and effective strategies of vocabulary learning. Even though we do not know for sure where and how they have got this idea, it is deeply rooted in their belief and highly valued. But the harsh fact is that most of them practice rote learning in real situation. It is also true of students of such a key university as Tsinghua University. Hang and Li (2002) investigated some freshmen at Tsinghua University with similar questions. 55% of the respondents are of the opinion that vocabulary should be learned in context and 83% believe that vocabulary should be learned through use. They realize that their problem is that they lack relevant operational strategies of vocabulary learning through use. About a half of them (47%) mention that vocabulary should also be learned by rote, and 65 % of them admit that they often or always learn vocabulary by repetition or by rote.

Huang (2012) studied some students majoring in art and discovered that students generally know that vocabulary should be learned in context through reading and from the collocations of the words, and that words should not be learned by rote. This indicates that the students have a better understanding of vocabulary learning, but they lack practice and perseverance. As a result, the strategies that they use the most are repetition and word guessing from context.

All the aforementioned investigations clearly suggest one thing -- there is an obvious gap between what the learners know or believe and what they actually do. One of the reasons may be that Chinese learners of English are likely to be influenced by the Chinese traditional theories and practices of native language (Chinese) learning. In their native language learning, rote learning is highly valued and widely practiced. When they begin to learn English, they transfer these strategies into their new language learning. Chinese EFL learners are often informed by their English teachers about the significance of the strategies of learning vocabulary in context or through language use. Thus they come to know that it is more effective to learn vocabulary in context or through language use, but as they generally lack necessary knowledge of how to employ them in their actual learning practice, most of them fall into the habit of learning vocabulary by rote. Another possible account might be that foreign language learning really differs from second language acquisition. In such circumstances of foreign language learning as in China, English is learned as a compulsory course in school or university and as a course to pass the nation-wide college entrance examination or a course to pass the nation-wide College English Test Band Four or Band Six. For those poor English learners, it is quite plausible that the quickest and the most effective way to improve their English so as to pass the examinations is the mastery of the inquired vocabulary in the syllabuses by remembering the glossary. As they lack other meaningful elaborative memory techniques, they naturally resort to their habitual ways of memorization through mechanical repetition. This conclusion is also confirmed by an investigation by (Huang and Sun, 2005), who studied students who failed in the nation-wide College English Test Band Four. 86% of them approve of the statement in the questionnaire that the main strategy of learning vocabulary is repeated memorization. Only 9% disapprove it, and 5% others have no opinion about it. These outcomes from the

investigations are contrary to the popular idea of natural vocabulary acquisition through extensive and comprehensive input, proposed by Western researchers like (Krashen, 1982).

Yu (2013) investigated non-English major students and compared her result with (Wu and Wang's, 1998). The average percentage is higher in terms of the students who believe that vocabulary learning should be done in context or through actual use, and the percentage is lower in terms of those who believe in rote learning of vocabulary. This might indicate that over the fifteen years of time, there are more students who hold the belief or notion that vocabulary learning should be conducted in context and through actual language use.

4.0 Interest and differences in age or stage in vocabulary learning

Just as the saying goes, interest is the best teacher. Without interest in learning English, an EFL learner can never get anywhere. The learner's interest in English learning first shows in his vocabulary learning. Therefore Chinese EFL learners' interest in English vocabulary learning may serve as an indicator of his overall interest in English learning. Also, if the learner is interested in vocabulary learning, it might mean that he has developed some effective vocabulary learning strategies. Some researchers reviewed in this present paper investigated interest of Chinese EFL learners in vocabulary learning.

An, Zhang, Chai, Cheng and Yu (2005) surveyed 258 students about their interest in learning vocabulary. 31% show interest and 69% hardly have any interest. The result of (Ma's, 2007) investigation also confirms this point. 21% of the students surveyed show interest in learning vocabulary, a little bit higher than the percentage of the interest in grammar learning. 60% of the respondents believe that vocabulary learning is the most difficult part in their foreign language learning.

Students of different ages or at different stages of schooling demonstrate different preferences in the strategies of vocabulary learning. In general, junior and senior high school students use fewer and simpler strategies. They use more cognitive strategies than social and affective strategies. The most popular strategies include strategies of mental associative linkage, word guessing, contextual situation, dictionary consultation, and the like. There is also a significant difference between good learners and poor learners in their selection of vocabulary learning strategies. These findings are found in investigations by (Lu and Zhang, 2007), and (Zhang, 2014).

Students in vocational colleges stand somewhere between those in the secondary and tertiary levels. As they cannot perceive the importance of learning English in the future, they generally lack interest in vocabulary learning and therefore they do not like to try new learning strategies and continue to use the rote learning strategies they were accustomed to in high school (Zhang, 2014).

5.0 Correlations between vocabulary learning strategies and achievement

It is generally acknowledged that correlation exists between the learner's strategies of language learning and his language proficiency or achievement. This idea has been well documented in literature concerning strategies of successful or good language learners. Researchers under this review also take this point as a research topic. Their findings in general agree with those in previous researches in China and abroad. The higher the student's proficiency is, the more varied strategies he uses. Some even attempt to predict the learner's achievement by analyzing the strategies he employs. For instance,

(Zhang, 2004) investigated the strategies used by postgraduates and attempted to design a model to predict learners' possible achievement by analyzing the strategies they use in their English learning.

Yang and Gong (2004) focused on the correlation between the vocabulary learning strategies of junior high school learners and the results of their senior high school entrance tests. They divided the junior high school students into the high-score group and low-score group and examined respectively the characteristics of their vocabulary learning strategies. Their study shows that 12 strategies correlate with their achievement, four of which have significant difference between the high-score group and the low-score group.

An experiment conducted by (Zhang, 2006) examined the instruction of one particular vocabulary learning strategy, a meaning-based strategy to vocabulary learning, and found that this way of vocabulary learning can improve the learners' memory and comprehension of words, and hence the improvement of their achievement.

6.0 Metacognitive and cognitive strategies in vocabulary learning

Of the 45 reports reviewed, eight focus metacognitive or cognitive strategies or both. Two studies explore meta-cognitive strategies for vocabulary learning. One report by (Li, 2007) is a teaching experiment. Li randomly selected some second-year senior high school students as the subjects of a ten-week training experiment of vocabulary learning strategies. The students were divided into the experiment group and the control group. Li taught meta-cognitive strategies to the students in the experiment group. The result of the experiment shows that the students in the experiment behave much better than those in the control group.

Another study was done by (Liu, An and Li, 2009). They investigated 120 students from a technology university and discovered that the students are not well equipped with meta-cognitive strategies. The students tend to set long-term goals for their learning, but often cannot find adequate learning content and progress. They use fewer strategies, fail to monitor their own learning progress, and have no intention of evaluating the efficiency of their learning.

Hou (2011) designed and administered a questionnaire to 52 English major sophomores in order to examine their cognitive strategies of vocabulary learning. The result of the analysis of the collected data shows that the most infrequently used strategies are the affix strategy and collocation strategy. Hou then conducted a training program on the affix and collation strategies and saw significant improvement in the students' vocabulary learning. Zhang (2014) also carried out a teaching experiment of cognitive vocabulary learning strategies for a year in a teachers college. She had two similar classes and one was made the experiment class and the other the control class. Also, the result of the vocabulary test of the students in the experiment class is much better than that of the students in the control class.

Both of the aforementioned studies indicate that instruction of vocabulary learning strategies can improve the result of the learner's vocabulary learning. Other findings from studies on cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies of vocabulary learning include (1) minority students have more frequent uses of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Xu, 2011); and (2) strategies of mental association and vocabulary classification correlate with the efficiency of vocabulary learning (Wang and Yu, 2013).

7.0 Conclusion and recommendation

This review of the empirical studies on vocabulary learning strategies that Chinese EFL learners employ enables us to have a glimpse into the research area of EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies in Mainland China. Comparison with corresponding researches abroad and in-depth analysis of the reports also enable us to draw the following conclusion.

(1) Chinese scholars show great interest in investigation of the EFL learners' preferences for vocabulary learning strategies. More than half of the reports are devoted fully or partly to the learners' beliefs and preferences in their selection and use of vocabulary learning strategies. It seems that the wording of the questions matters. When the respondents are asked what they think are the best vocabulary learning strategies, they prefer learning vocabulary in context or through language use, but when they are asked to tell what strategies they actually employ in their vocabulary learning, they prefer learning vocabulary by rote. This contradiction is only mentioned in (Wu and Wang, 1998). Admittedly, the findings in the reports confirm our beliefs and ideas about the learner's actual use of vocabulary learning strategies, but as a researcher, one has to think about the motivation of these repeated studies. Most of them lack references to previous similar or relevant studies. Very few make any in-depth analysis into the causes of this common and popular phenomenon.

(2) The experimental studies show that strategies-based instruction results in vocabulary achievement. This finding might be open to doubt. It is a common sense that strategy training leads to better memory of vocabulary. The studies should not be directed to the result of the vocabulary test, but to the habit formation of the learners. There is no experiment devoted to the development of any new habits or new strategies of vocabulary learning.

(3) Cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies are the two groups of strategies that Chinese scholars show particular interest in. It stands to reason that studies of vocabulary learning focus upon these two groups of strategies since the motivation of the investigations is to examine the learner's strategies of vocabulary learning.

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