Language Learning Strategies and English Proficiency

of Chinese Junior college Students

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Abstract: This study looked for language learning strategies used by 278 English learners in a Chinese junior college and investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and English achievement of junior college students. The participants reported using affective strategies most frequently and communicative strategies least frequently. The research results also revealed that proficiency level has a significant effect on strategy choice and use. The more proficient learners used more learning strategies. Linear Stepwise Regression revealed that affective strategies could predict students' English proficiency. Findings suggest a need for further research carrying out longitudinal research on English learning strategies to investigate the development and change of English learning strategies and to strengthen the research on the effectiveness and application of English learning strategies in English classroom teaching and learning for the improving of learners' autonomous learning ability.

1. Introduction

Learning strategies play a prominent role in second/foreign language learning, contributing to improving learners' language competence in every respects[1]. In the past four decades, a considerable amount of research has focused on language learning strategies. Language learning strategies are of interest not only for uncovering how language learners apply learning strategies, but for proving the relationship between the use of learning strategies and effective language learning[2]. Because junior college students' entrance scores are not ideal, they are different from undergraduates in terms of mastering and applying learning strategies. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore English learning strategies suitable for junior college students, guide them to learn and develop relevant learning strategies in line with their actual situation, and improve their language application ability.

This study investigates language learning strategies used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in a junior college in China and explores the relationship between learning strategies and self-evaluation performance. This study would provide valuable reference for the improvement of students' English level and teachers' future teaching in junior colleges.

2. Literature Review

Language learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations"[1].Scholars at home and abroad classify learning strategies differently. Among the various abroad proposed classification systems, the one developed by Oxford is considered to be very comprehensive[2].The most representative ones in China are wen Qiufang[3], Zhang Jianzhong, Yu Hongzhen[4], Cheng Xiaotang and Zheng Min [5].This study is based on Cheng Xiaotang's classification of language learning strategies, which is divided into cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

Foreign researchers began to explore the relationship between language strategies and foreign language learning performance in the 1970s. Rubin found that the most effective use of learning strategies is a basic characteristic of high achievers[6]. Green and Oxford clearly stated that language learning strategies are closely related to academic performance[7]. In general, students who use

study strategies largely and frequently have a much higher level of language proficiency than those who do not[8][9][10]. On the other hand, domestic researches on this field mainly started from the late 1990s, mainly focusing on learners at different stages, mostly middle school students and undergraduates. The research on junior college students is aimed at finding out the correlation between learning anxiety, concept, style and learning strategy, and few of them directly involve academic performance. This study takes the English major students of Yunnan College of Tourism Vacation as the research sample to investigate the relationship between language learning strategy preferences and English proficiency, so as to provide reference for English teaching.

3. Purpose of the Study

This study investigates language learning strategies used by English learners in a Chinese junior college and explores the relationship between language strategy use and self-evaluation academic achievement. Knowing how to use appropriate learning strategies when learning a target language would help students learn more effectively. This study would provide language teachers and researchers with a greater understanding of the ways junior college language learners learn. The findings could further help language teachers in developing and implementing strategy training in second/foreign language curricula. Training students in the use of learning strategies would maximize their potential and contribute to their autonomy.

4. Research Questions

1)What is the current situation of English learning strategies of junior college students?

2)Is there any correlation between English learning strategies of junior college students and their English proficiency?

3)What are the important predictors of English learning strategies which affects the subjects' English proficiency?

5. Method

5.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 278 English majors at Yunnan College of Tourism Vacation, China. The sample consisted of a volunteer pool of 259 females and 19 males.Among those students, freshmen accounted for 52.9 percent and sophomores for 47.1 percent at the time of data collection. In the first part of the questionnaire, one question was designed to investigate students' self-evaluation on English proficiency. Students were allowed to choose from four options: excellent, good, average and poor. As shown in Table 1 , the poor-level group consisted of 43 students; the average-level group consisted of 207 students; the good-level group consisted of 25 students;and the excellent-level group consisted of 3 students.

Table 1 Distribution of Students by Self Assessed Proficiency Level

Self-assessed Proficiency Level	N	P(%)
Poor	43	15.5
Average	207	74.5
Good	25	9.0
Excellent	3	1.1

5.2 Instrumentation

The questionnaire of this research adapted Oxford's and Wen's measuring instruments of language learning strategies[1][9].The study compiled a questionnaire on students' English learning strategies in a junior college in Yunnan, which consists of 42 items.

In this questionnaire, the strategies of English learning are composed of four factors. These four factors include cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies and

communicative strategies.The questionnaire is made up of two parts . The first part is the personal information of junior college students, and the second part is a five-point Likert scale, consisting of 42 items. Students are required to choose one of the following five options: total disagreement, disagreement, uncertainty, agreement, total agreement.

The questionnaire has 42 strategy items: the 1,3,5,9,11,13,18,20,22,24,29,32,34,38,39,42 items are cognitive strategies, the 4,8,12,14,23,26,27,30,33,40 items are meta-cognitive strategies, the 6,10,15,17,19,21,28,35,37 items are affective strategies, and the 2,7,16,25,31,36,41 items are communicative strategies. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.879, which indicates that the questionnaire is of favorable reliability, and it can effectively evaluate the relationship between English learning strategy and English proficiency of students

5.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through the questionnaire. In December 2021, the author of this thesis distributed the questionnaires by creating Questionnaire Star links through mobile phone WeChat groups. Students utilized their free time to fill out questionnaires on their mobile phones. Meanwhile, the author of this thesis used WeChat or telephone to guide and supervise the process of the data collection.

5.4 Data Analysis

This research used the SPSS statistical software26.0 for the treatment of the quantitative data collected. Description Analysis was adopted to find out the general situation of the English learning strategies used by the subjects. Spearman Correlation Coefficient was conducted to measure the correlation between English learning strategies and English proficiency of the subjects. Linear Stepwise Regression was used to spot the important learning strategies predictors of English proficiency of the subjects.

6. Results

6.1 Research Question 1

Results from the SILL reported that participants used learning strategies at a high level. As showed in Table 2, mean scores for four of the strategy categories (affective, cognitive, metacognitive, and communicative) fell between 3.5 and 3.8. According to Oxfords (1990) classification, this range represents high strategy use.

As Table 2 indicates, affective strategies (M = 3.79, SD = .44) were the most frequently used strategies, followed by cognitive (M = 3.60, SD = .46) and metacognitive (M = 3.57, SD = .49) strategies. Communicative strategies (M = 3.55, SD = .51) were the least frequently used by participants in this study. Results of the use of the individual strategy items for the entire group indicated that students consciously cultivate their interests in English learning and gradually build up confidence in English with a positive attitude, but they rarely grasp the opportunity to communicate in English, and seldom turn to the teacher for help when they have problems.

Table 2　Mean and Ranking Profile for Four SILL Categories of All Students			
Categories	M	SD	Ranking
Affective	3.79	0.44	1
Cognitive	3.60	0.46	2
Metacognitive	3.57	0.49	3
Communicative	3.55	0.51	4

6.2 Research Question 2

In this section, Spearman Correlation Coefficient Analysis was performed to measure the relationship between English learning strategies and English proficiency of junior college students. Statistical analysis of the data shows that the correlation coefficient between English learning performance and English learning strategies is 0.000, and the p value on both sides of the

correlation coefficient test is less than 0.001, indicating that English learning strategies are positively correlated with English learning performance, that is, students who use more English learning strategies tend to achieve higher English learning performance.

Table 3 presents the result of the correlation between self relate English proficiency and the four factors of English learning strategies. The correlation suggests that there was a significant, positive and intermediate relationship between English proficiency and the four factors, i.e., affective strategies($r = .330$, $p = .000 < 0.01$), cognitive strategies($r = .291$, $p = .000 < 0.01$), metacognitive strategies($r = .285$, $p = .000 < 0.01$). communicative strategies($r = .299$, $p = .000 < 0.01$). This result means that the subjects' English proficiency and all the four factors affect one another mutually.

Table 3 Spearman Correlation Coefficient of English Proficiency and Four Factors

		Affective	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Communicative
English proficiency	Spearman Correlation	.330**	.291**	.285**	.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	278	278	278	278
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					

6.3 Research Question 3

Linear Stepwise Regression was performed to find the important predictors that affect English proficiency of the junior college students surveyed. Four categories of learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive , affective and social) were specified as independent variables, with self-assessed English proficiency as the dependent variable.

Table 4 the Important Predictors of Self-Assessment of English Proficiency

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.292a	0.085	0.082	0.513
a.Predictors: (Constant):affective strategies			

Table 4 shows the result of the Linear Stepwise Regression of the self-assessment of English proficiency on the four independent variables. The variable entered was affective strategies, which explained 8.2% of the total variability of the dependent variable- Self-assessment of English proficiency. This means that affective strategies is the important predictor of the subjects' English proficiency.

The results of regression analysis can be concluded that affective strategies can predict students' English proficiency. Therefore, there is a urgent need for further promotion of the junior college students' affective strategies so as to help them improve their English proficiency .

7. Implications

Based on the research results, some pedagogical implications can be obtained. Strong evidence indicates that the more proficient learners are, the more strategies would be used. Accordingly, the significance of making all students conscious of their own learning process and teaching students all the learning strategies available to them cannot be overstated. Besides, in order to improve students' English language application ability, teachers in junior colleges should enhance students' awareness of learning strategies, guiding them to form the habit of consciously using learning strategies to improve their learning efficiency.

In addition to the diverse effective strategies, junior college English teachers should also provide help for the unsuccessful learners in improving English sounds and speaking skills when learning English in class. It is also critical that students be encouraged to understand and use the strategies that they don't use frequently but that have proven to be beneficial for language learning.

8. Conclusion

The results of this study are consistent with findings from the majority of previous strategy

studies which indicate that English learning strategies are positively correlated with English learning performance, that is, the use of learning strategies has a significant effect on improving students' English learning level, and the higher their English learning performance is, the better they are at using English learning strategies. In general, junior college students use all kinds of English learning strategies at the moderate level. They use affective strategies the most and communicative strategies the least. However, the overall score of students' self-assessment of English shows that the learning effect is not ideal, which is largely related to the fact that students have not found their own learning strategies. Many students still passively wait for the teacher to teach them, and lack the enthusiasm for active learning after class, and have not developed a good habit of independent learning.

In the future, more research is needed to carry out longitudinal research on English learning strategies to investigate the development and change of English learning strategies and to strengthen the research on the effectiveness and application of English learning strategies in English classroom teaching and learning for the improving of learners' autonomous learning ability[11].

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