

Mainland Chinese English Learners' Biographies: Successful Strategies and Failure Patterns

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Abstract

I diachronically survey three English learners' biographies to define how determination and study plans help students to keep interests in learning English and passing the national and internal exams in the exam-oriented and limited-English-language academic environment. My method is based on narrative inquiries of a few Chinese students' learning agendas, interviews and questionnaires related to their successes and failures. I analyze their personal stories of learning English, their learning strategies in terms of R.Oxford's Language Learning Inventory and their motivations to learn English as well as their frustrations.

I describe my own experience of learning English at the school and college level (memory and cognitive strategies dominated) comparing it to study agendas of my classmates through personal narrative inquiries of English learners. I describe in detail how a student can become a role-model in studies (using metacognitive strategies) and how/why a learner lost interest. My description of role-models and successful learning strategies (cognitive, social,) defines the areas where Chinese learners can improve their English in the Limited-English-Language-Environment such as: 1. Lessons revision before and after class. 2. Determination comes from the eagerness to supplement learning from extra materials like reading English newspapers (student A, B, cognitive and affective strategy).

Key words

Learning strategy, learner's biography, college exams, English majors, exam-orientedness, limited-English-language-environment

Introduction. Learning Strategy

Language learning strategies are memory-based, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social. Memory strategy includes creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, employing action. Cognitive strategy includes practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output. Compensation are guessing in arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Metacognitive strategy is centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning. Affective strategy is lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, taking your emotional temperature. Social strategy is asking questions, cooperating with others, Empathizing with others. (Oxford, 1990)

1. Literature Review.

Xuesong Gao (2005) reports a biographic enquiry of two tertiary English learners from mainland China and attempts to capture the developmental processes of their language learning experiences. Both learners' accounts suggest that their language learning approaches are influenced by the contextual discourses about learning English,

stressful social recesses and a sense of threatened self-identity as English major graduates in highly competitive educational context. There have been a multiplicity of studies investigating on motivation generally, but research has been scant on how certain individual differences like place of birth impact the second language learning pattern. (Wong, 2010) Tsui (2007) examines the lived experience of Minfang as an EFL learner and EFL teacher throughout his 6 years of teaching, the processes that were involved as he struggled with multiple identities, the interplay between reification and negotiation of meanings, and the institutional construction and his personal reconstruction of identities. Identity can also be thought of as the result of rational construction through the generalization of values. In this matter each individual is what she simply considers her inscriptional group by age, beliefs, economical status, culture, *etc.*

2.1 Research questions

1. What's the study strategies the students have been being used in learning English?
2. What kinds of strategies are more effective in learning English in a language environment-limited country?

2.2 Method: Narrative inquiries of a few Chinese students' study agendas

Interviews. Narrative inquiry. A few personal stories of the Chinese private college students, successful and not very. Analysis of the interviews.

2.3 Novelty

Chinese learners' English study trajectories, analysis of learning factors, what strategies from the well-known sources (e.g. Oxford' Inventory (Oxford, 1990: 317-330)) can and actually have been used by the learners.

2.4 Data collection.

Pilot project. Identity formation of the successful students and the not very good ones. One total success story. Main project: 1 partial success story and 1 failure story.

3.1 Success story.

3.1.1. Student A's Total Success (Role model). Student A came from a very typical Chinese family which under the pressure of her parent to study hard. What's more, the competitive environment urged her to study harder too.

Learning experience: Primary/Mid/High school/College. Primary School (No foreign teachers). she did not pay attention to studying English in class and she said she learned little English from grade 3 to grade 6. (metacognitive strategy (Oxford, 1990: 322). After she graduated from Primary School, she went to the countryside where her relative lived and the relative held a summer English training class (Social strategy). Student A's reaction: "It was an important turn for me to learn English." She said, " I love the teacher, because she let me fall in love with English." (Social/metacognitive led to affective, so student A enlarged her strategy pool/inventory through diversifying her learning experience.

The detailed descriptions of Chinese summer schools/camps and their impact on learners can be found in Wighting, Mervyn, Nisbet,. and Tindal, (2005). (a classical social strategy (Oxford, 1990, p.320) with the strong competitive component brought about within Chinese culture.

3.1.2 Junior School (no foreign teachers): She had been the English study leader at her class for 3 years. She tried to attract her teacher's attention in Grade 7 and she did it because she knew and spoke English better. Then she could answer the questions which made her happy. What's more, when she heard that there was a good English teacher taught the other class English, she also wanted to buy the book the teacher introduced to her students because student A knew a student of that class. She did that exercise in that book and learned more than her classmates. (affective strategy, encouraging and motivating herself through leadership in class. It's typical Chinese competitive attitude).

3.1.3 High school - no foreign teachers: Student A's English teacher asked the students to subscribe to the English language weekly *The 21st Century*. Student A enjoyed reading the newspaper and she kept reading it every week. She would highlight the

new words. Student A said: “I just think the way she teaches me fits me very much and I enjoy it. I have learned the grammar which used in the whole high school at Grade One with this teacher.” (social and affective strategies, but it’s culture specific and situational. She continued to read *The 21st Century* after class and highlighted new words. That’s the important thing to keep her interest in English. (social and affective coupled with metacognitive elements – arranging your own way of learning). “I learned a lot of new words from this newspaper and it broaden my knowledge. The texts are so colorful and so close to our life and I enjoyed reading it. I have learnt a lot other aspects of knowledge from it. And I felt more proud and confident when I knew I learned more than others” She said. Here is the Chinese competitive learning style comes to the fore.

3.1.4 At College—there are foreign teachers, so the Communicative language learning (CLL) came to the fore. Learning style. In-Class Learning. CLT as Communicative Language Learning and Participation in Class”. She was very active in communicative language learning and participation in class. She liked to discuss with her classmates in groups of four students. And she also took the opportunities to communicate with her foreign teachers when other groups were not finish in discuss. She responded to the teachers in reading class. And participate in the presentations or role plays. (social, cognitive, affective, metacognitive strategies – joining the group discussions, practice oral English, be active in class taught within CLT.

3.1.5 Extra-curricular (*Out-of-Class Learning*) (Art-star, CCTV-speech contest, English-song contest). She took part into English speaking Contest “Art Star”. She failed to go to the final contest at the first semester at Grade One, however, she continued to take part into it in the second semester and went to the final contest and she got the first prize. (affective strategy, encouraging herself to practice her English) . She felt upset for the first time when she failed. But she adjusted it when in later days. Then when the contest came again, she wanted to take part into it and practice it again. (affective strategy)

3.1.6 Handling Exams.

She passed CET-6 with a 521 scores and passed TEM-4 both in the oral exam and the paper exam .

3.1.7 Student A’s Learner’s Identity

She is a persistent student in learning English and she uses the memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and affective learning strategies. The most important of her learning strategy is the affective one. She encourages herself to learn English by reading English newspapers or buying exercise books to learn more after classes. At the same time, she uses the cognitive strategy, highlights the new words in English newspaper. She also used the memory and metacognitive strategies to review well and make plans for preparing the TEM4, CET6 exams. She also has practiced her English by taking part into extra-curricular activities which is cognitive learning strategy.

3.2 Partial Success Story. Student B.

3.2.1 Student B was born and lived in the countryside and her study environment was full of competitive before high school, so she used the traditional study way to learn English. Learning experience: Junior/high school/college

3.2.2 Junior school. She just followed the teacher’s plan and did not have a personal plan for study. Every evening, the English study leader would do vocabulary dictations. The teacher would have small tests after a period time (social strategy). She prepared the tests before taking it by reviewing the exercises and always could get a reasonable score like 114 of the total of 120.(memory strategy, reviewing well) She was paying attention in junior school class. (metacognitive strategy, focusing on her learning)

3.2.3 High school: In grade one, she did not pay too much attention to English and seldom learned it after class. Student B did not have too much interest in English. However, the students in her class were not very competitive, and she had a good basis of learning English because of Junior school. So she got a reasonable mark at the exams. In grade 2, she

taught by the best teacher at her school. The teacher was charming and had passed TEM-8, was very famous and popular at her school. Every student admired the teacher at her class. Student B liked her at the first class because the teacher brought her a fresh feeling of English. The teacher had a good sense of humor. (social strategy) She could feel that she was relaxed in English class. (affective strategy) At that time, she listened carefully in class and did the exercise or began doing English reading (metacognitive, affective strategies) At the Mid-term exam of grade 2, she got the highest mark in her English class and since that time she got the teacher's attention. In grade 3, there was a teacher who learned *Crazy English* (a Chinese way to learn English by reading English aloud everyday created by Liyang who got a very high mark in CET6 with this method and became famous since that time) came to her school to give a speech about how to study English to preparing for the university entrance exams. He introduced the Crazy English way for students like getting up at 6 am to read English aloud for an hour and repeat the words 7 times and did the reading before having meals and after meals as well as before and after sleep (social strategy). Student B was interested in Crazy English reading and got a good result in English.

3.2.4 College: there are foreign teachers.

Student B was active in foreign teachers' class and always volunteered to answer questions (affective strategy). She liked to join in group discussions and making presentations in class. She got her teachers' attention by being active in speaking English. In the grammar class, she enjoyed it and answered questions and volunteered to get the teachers' attention (metacognitive strategy). Student B borrowed English novels and magazines from the library. She read extra materials about western cultures. (affective strategy).

3.2.5 Extra-curricular activities: "Art-star"- the English speaking contest at the College, the CCTV-speech contest, the English-song contest) Student B liked to take part in the English speaking

contests. (cognitive learning strategy) After classes, she asked her communication teacher for help to correct her pronunciation, and the accent as well as the intonation and expression (affective learning strategy) She also read some English newspapers such as *The 21st Century*. She also went to the Halloween parties, had lunches/dinners with foreigners and went to their office to chat with them. (social and affective learning strategies) Those all helped her to speak English more fluently and kept her interest in learning English.

3.2.6 Handling exam

She failed to pass TEM 4 exam with a score of 57 and passed the CET 6 exam with a score of 435.

3.2.7 Student B' Learner's Identity

She was not interested in English until the second year at high school. No particular attention paid to her by the teachers in her English class. In Grade two at high school, she was taught by the teacher who encouraged her. Student B used social, affective, metacognitive, cognitive learning strategies in learning English. Social strategy like reading *Crazy English* and taking part in extra-curricular activities and was paid attention by the teachers. These factors all helped her to improve her English and kept her interested in English. Compared to student A, student B did not have a plan for study and was not persistent. She did not use the memory learning strategy and did not increase her vocabulary as student A did. So she did not do so well like the role model.

4. 1 Failure Story. Student C

4.1.1 Background. She was born in the countryside. Her parents are farmers and there were two children in her family. Her parents expected her to study hard and go to university since she was young. Her mother was taking care of her homework everyday in the whole primary school. Her parents were strict to her regarding study and if she did not get good scores in the exams, they blamed her. She was not interested in English all the years of studying English but she chose it to be her major because one of her father's friend gave her an advice to major in English at college, because it was a popular major and it would be

easy to find a job. So she chose to be an English major.

Learning experience:

4.1.2 Junior/high school/ She listened to her teachers carefully in class (metacognitive learning strategy) but was not very active and she did her homework and did morning readings at Junior school. She did not have too much impression in her class and her English at high school. In grade 3, high school, she did model tests and did not like to ask her teacher questions after classes (failure to apply a metacognitive, memory strategy).

4.1.3 At college, she was not interested in communicating and language learning and she did not like to speak English in foreign teachers' classes. She would speak Chinese when the teachers asked students to discuss topics in English. She did not like to be volunteer to answer questions. She was addicted to playing computer games and did missed some class. She seldom went to the library, did not like to read English books or watch movies in English.

4.1.4 Extra-curricular activities (Art-star, CCTV-speech contest, English-song contest) She had little interest in learning English so she seldom did activities in English. She just watched a few movies in English and she spend a lot of time in playing computer games since the second semester after grade one.

4.1.5 Metacognitive components (self-reflection on planning)

She said that when she came to college she lost her goal in life. She did not know what she wanted and did not interest in anything. Therefore she spent almost all her free time on playing computer games. If she chose her interest - Chinese to be her major and did not care too much about if it was popular she would felt like to enjoy it she thought. So she would like to tell others' did not choose the wrong major anymore. And she did not like to build interest in English by changing her life by making plans. Now she lost her goal to do further study after graduation.

4.1.6. Handling the exams

Student C failed both the national exams because she was addicted to playing computer games and did not have interest in learning English.

4.1.7 Student C's learning identity

Student C was a good student before going to college because she had build good habit in studying, but she was not interested in English much since she started learning it and she did not get any attention from the teachers of English. However, she was encouraged by her Chinese teachers' in learning Chinese, so she got good mark and felt more interested in Chinese. After coming to college, she did not have the pressure of taking entrance exam for university, so she did not have plans for study. Because she chose the major she did not interested in so she had light motivation in learning it. Compared to students A and B, Student C failed to use the learning strategies, so she did not get good results in the exams.

5. Conclusion

I gave detailed the description of a role-model's learning strategy (student A) and the partial success (student B) and failure (student C) in the case of a limited language environment. Social strategies play a very important role in Chinese students' learning and they affect other strategies (metacognitive, cognitive, affective, compensation, memory etc.) The stories I presented helped me to define the areas where learners (Chinese/Asian) can improve their English in the Limited-English-Language-Environment.

1. We need to do lessons revision before and after class as it helps students move faster in learning.
2. Determination comes from the eagerness to supplement learning from extra materials like reading English newspapers broadening students' knowledge (student A, B, cognitive and affective strategy). Example of student A (role-model) who highlighted new vocabulary and keep reading English newspaper regularly for seven years.
3. Clear goals and careful planning help you keep motivation in study and you relate your learning accomplishments to your goals.

4. Goals help you control your life not allowing to waste time (negative example of student C who lost goals during her first year in college)
5. Preparing for exams regularly help us to be focused. Examples of student A, who has her own plan for learning after class and student B who prepared erratically.
6. Students should combine the western learning style (through speaking and listening in class) and the traditional Chinese style (memorizing, reading, going over grammar, vocabulary) of learning English.
7. Taking part into extra-curricular study such as English speaking contest can keep our interest in English.
8. Parents help us to make long-term plans in life and give us motivation in study (example of student A). Her parents oriented her to plan her further study when she just came to college (social

strategy).

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