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Article

Self-Taught Language Learners in China and Their Learning Strategies: A Multiple, Instrumental Case Study of Approaches in Contextual Situations

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Abstract

One fundamental question in second language acquisition (SLA) studies is: why do some language learners reach higher levels of language proficiency while others in similar contexts do not? To that end, research examining language learning strategies (LLS) and the particular learner characteristics that aid motivation and progress have been a central topic of concern. Many studies have been done to compile the strategies that learners use to acquire the language from the good language learner studies (Rubin, 1975) to Oxford's (2003) taxonomy of LLS. These original studies revealed the uniqueness existing amongst learners leading to the study of learners' individual differences (IDs) (Dörnyei, 2009; Skehan, 1991). These studies included the presence of context-dependent available resources and choices of strategies according to learning styles. Through an online questionnaire coupled with individual interviews, the research in this paper applied a multiple case study approach to 12 participants in China who described their various methods, LLS and approaches to mastering the language relative to their context. The majority began learning out of interest and eventually became English teachers in their own country. The overriding element found in these participants was their love of learning the language and the associated culture – an intrinsic motivation driving their learning styles. Their context did not appear to be a barrier to their progress and it was evident that their self-directed learning activities changed

according to available resources. The participants also described how they made use of 21st century media tools to learn, communicate and practise the language, giving them mobility and available resources at any time and place. The findings from these self-taught language learners are applicable to teaching contexts in that they raise awareness of the significance of LLS within learning activities in the English language classroom.

Introduction

There is, for many, the desire to learn a foreign language beyond the classroom. Classroom-based language learning may well suit some learners who merely wish to pass examinations but may be uncomfortable for many struggling students who have to keep pace with the class schedule and meet the deadlines. Moreover, language learning in classrooms can be severely limiting to those who endeavour to reach higher levels of achievement. In addition, learning English in a Foreign Language (EFL – English as a foreign language) environment brings its own challenges as learners may complain about the lack of resources or opportunities to interact and practise the target language. Nonetheless, there are learners who, despite these seeming restrictions, manage to reach varying degrees of proficiency in the target language thus demonstrating an ability to overcome such barriers within their contextual environment. While motivation and reinforcement are reasons that contribute to language proficiency, the question of why these learners achieve some success while their peers still struggle at basic levels, requires more research and is therefore the main aim of this study.

Twelve participants agreed to take part in the research and through quantitative and correlational analysis of a questionnaire along with qualitative case studies arising from interview data, this study examined the language learning strategies (LLS – Oxford, 1989) they used most frequently along with their individual differences (IDs) in learning styles. The participants were Chinese teachers of English based on the Chinese mainland in Beijing and Panjin (in the North East region), the majority of whom majored in English language studies. The focus of this study, however, was the extent to which they were self-directed learners who were able to go beyond the mandated school curriculum to learn English. Although many studies focusing on language learning strategies have been done in the past (Grossmann, 2011; Ring, 2015; Wu, 2008), very few, if any, have examined self-directed learners or LLS outside of academic environments. This study contributes to existing

knowledge by collecting information from the participants on their personal LLS usage and extrapolating their learning styles in correlation to their LLS choices, while also examining how they pursued their language learning goals independently.

Based on interviews and the analysis of the recordings made, the general descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) were used as a base to appraise the "Qualitative Aspects of Spoken Language Use" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 29) during the interviews and success, in this study, is defined as those who reached CEFR level B2 and above. The following questions were posed:

- What individual differences (IDs - Dörnyei, 2009) characterise English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who have achieved CEFR B2 and above given their contextual situations where others given similar situations and opportunities have not?
- To what extent are these learners self-directed?
- What are the most common learning strategies used by these learners?
- To what extent do these learners make use of and exploit 21st century ICT and media tools?

Background

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has contributed to understanding how learners acquire an additional language since the 1960s (Ellis, 1993). Research in the field is multidisciplinary and encompasses disciplines such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, and education, and has led to the development of several significant theories of language and learning, as well as methodological approaches to help the investigation of language acquisition (Ellis, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

SLA research has mostly looked at the universal aspects of acquisition since its onset (Ellis, 1998; Skehan, 1991), however, it is now also recognised that second language learning is very much an individualistic journey and thus one significant set of indicators of achievement in learning a second language has been the study of individual differences (IDs) amongst learners (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Skehan (1991) and Dörnyei (2009), for example, view language aptitude, motivation, learner strategies, and learner styles as more relevant to SLA research, and they both position aptitude and motivation as the most constant predictors of achievement in the language learning process (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Other studies suggest that learning styles, learning strategies and affective variables are central to the process as they are ultimately independent and inseparable (Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003).

Correlational studies

Dörnyei (2009) studied the interplay between language, agency and environment explaining that, in reality, various interlocutors will interact in different settings. He emphasized the unifying aspects of all individual differences and the omnipresence of context affecting each of them, a component previously thought to be independent of monolithically described learner characteristics. Taking into account more recent research on dynamic interchange, he underlines that the traditional notion of stable individual differences is outdated. The higher order IDs (e.g., cognitive, affective, and motivational) are seen interacting as wholes in what Snow calls "aptitude complexes" (as cited in Robinson, 2001, p. 372). Focusing on instructed learning, Robinson (2001) sees IDs as varying correlations of aptitude complexity and suggests combining our understanding of ability in order to favour certain learning conditions.

Schmidt (2010) discussed the importance of varying abilities while reiterating the noticing hypothesis with regard to IDs, motivation, aptitude, and language learning history. He recalls his well-known case study of Wes and re-evaluates his limited progress in grammatical accuracy despite the student's significant motivation to communicate. Schmidt discounts a lack of motivation as being a factor since Wes was a very good communicator and had the personality to take risks in speaking and learning. He compared another well-known naturalistic language learner (Julie), reported by Ioup, Boustagui, El-Tigi and Moselle (as cited in Schmidt, 2010) who, having experienced similar exposure and interaction to Wes, attained near-native accuracy in her learning of Arabic. Schmidt cross-examined both reports and showed one of the main differences to be Julie's use of language learning strategies (she kept a vocabulary notebook, paid attention to morphological variations and carefully kept track of corrections). This, Schmidt pointed out, was in sharp contrast to Wes's more relaxed approach to communication. Indeed, an apparent difference between Wes and Julie was the latter's use of language learning strategies to consciously move forward, both in terms of interaction and accuracy.

Language learning strategies (LLS)

Language learning strategy studies attracted considerable research during the latter quarter of the last century. Oxford defined learning strategies as the actions or behaviours that a learner undertakes to make his or her learning successful and personal (as cited in Ellis, 2008). Learning strategies are often correlated with learning styles (Ehrman et al., 2003;

Grossmann, 2011; Oxford, 2003) which in turn are affected by personality. Dörnyei (2009) included learning strategies in the interplay between motivation, language aptitude, and learning styles and defined their roles in terms of the proactiveness of a learner in his or her participation in the learning process.

Strategies aimed at learning a language have been classified as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, and socio-affective with variations from O'Mally and Chamot (as cited in Ellis, 2008) and from Oxford (2003). There is a great deal of overlap between these classifications (Skehan, 1991) and it is the classification by Oxford that will be used in this paper as a comparison point for the findings of the study as it is one of the most comprehensive (see Brown, 2000, p. 132 for a summary).

Manfred's (2008) study in Hong Kong attempted to examine the contextual factors influencing learners' use of LLS and the patterns of strategy use through a qualitative approach. In the study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with questions relating to the participants' use of LLS. They noted that the learners used few language learning strategies as they were not aware of them or they thought the concept was too difficult or cognitively demanding.

In another study by Sykes (2015), similar in some ways to the study outlined in this paper, a case study was conducted to analyse an adult learner's behaviour and compare it to attributes compiled from the various GLL studies. The Singaporean participant called Adam had generally been an enthusiastic and effective learner from primary school to university in which English had been the medium of instruction. Adam was a polyglot having learnt languages as needed throughout his career and was successful in part due to his own efforts and positive approach to learning languages but was in many ways unique in that he began by having his formal instruction in English environments from a young age which gave him an advantage over most EFL language learners in a non-L2 milieu. Despite these privileges, Sykes mentioned how Adam took full advantage of the resources available to him both in the instructional and non-instructional setting and can thus be described as a self-directed learner as he identified his own problems and worked out solutions to reach his goals.

The self-directed learner

In the mid-1970s, a series of studies labelled the good language learner (GLL – see Rubin, 1975) became popular and aimed to identify the characteristics that caused some language learners to succeed where others struggled. These included the study of cognitive

styles, attitudes, motivations, or past learning experiences with a focus on building a classification of strategies and activities used by the GLLs. Initiated by Rubin in 1975 and followed by Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, and Todesco in 1978 (as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2001), it led to acceptance of the idea that there were differences in learners, a finding that reflected the trends at that time towards viewing cognitive, affective, and motivational traits as factors shaping language learning success (Norton & Toohey, 2001). These studies, however, have been criticised for painting a too perfect picture of a 'good learner' and focusing too much on strategies at the expense of other factors such as attitude or context (Gan, Humphreys & Hamp-Lyons, 2004). Rather than identify the characteristics of a GLL as in Rubin's study, it may be more realistic to talk of the autonomous learner or the self-directed learner, what Cotterall (2008) generally describes as the extent to which a learner can take charge of their learning both on a psychological and methodological level. A self-directed learner is one who can take his or her learning beyond the confines of the classroom and many studies have shown the gains these learners achieve compared to those who do not go beyond the classroom tasks (Alghamdi, 2016; Cotterall, 2008; Gan et al., 2004).

Discussing the importance of self-direction necessitates an understanding of context (Dörnyei, 2009) such that teachers are more fully aware of EFL learners' choices with respect to strategies and the resources available to them. This study attempts to examine how EFL participants fared with the resources available and also to see how the advent of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and social networking in particular helped with this process. CALL may provide significant resources and tools for self-directed learners and can foster autonomy in different ways (Beatty, 2010). CALL refers to computers in its acronym but in the 21st century extends to include the use of mobile electronic and communication devices that make learning opportunities available at all times regardless of location (e.g., e-dictionaries, video clips, reading material, and communications via chat apps).

As the above discussion indicates, the research literature on self-directed learners and LLS has left some areas unexplored, the first of which is the influence of context on choice of LLS use. Many studies of LLS use have involved quantitative compilations of a commonly used questionnaire, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (Oxford, 1989), which is useful for the analysis of big data but, responding to closed questions, leaves little room for the participants themselves to speak in their own voice about how and why they implemented their strategic choices. A second gap, as mentioned before, is that except for the Schmidt study (2010), all other reviews were done in academic settings, an approach which

fails to examine self-directed learners in their informal situations. Finally, due to the early dates of the studies, CALL and other 21st century tools have not been involved in relation to LLS usage, although they are in common use today. One metacognitive strategy example would be easiness in finding practice opportunities using online communications tools when there are none in a particular physical environment. Other examples are the readily available electronic dictionaries and apps offering immediate resources via one's electronic device, some of which are mentioned below.

Methodology

Research approach and design

The study aimed to understand why some learners achieved success while others still struggled at the basic level. Was it the context, available resources, or specific learner IDs and their interaction that contributed to their achievement? Due to the multifarious elements that interact in the learning process, a multiple-case study was used as it enabled the cross-examination of each of the participants for differences and similarities in contextual situations, learner IDs, and strategy use thus strengthening the results of the findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tellis, 1997). The survey data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics and interview data via a qualitative process in which themes were identified to observe patterns in the participants' learning styles and subsequently matched to keywords with the Oxford strategy taxonomy (Oxford, 2003). Finally, interviews served the purpose of building a narrative of each participant's learning progress relative to their contextual situation and available resources.

In previous research other ways of researching strategy usage have involved longitudinal studies using observations and think-aloud techniques to identify strategies used. One example is Zhou (2014) who used such methods in a qualitative research study involving a single participant to discover a child's strategy usage to guess word meaning. Another case study involved two English major university students for a comparison (Gu, 1994). These were done with interviews and the analysis of think-aloud sessions. Questionnaires, as well, can be used to obtain data as a study in the Middle East was done via a survey of 251 middle school Arabic and Turkish students (Köksal & Ulum, 2016). The questionnaire used was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and they included interviews with 46 of the participants.

Participants

The target participants in this study were Chinese English-language teachers in mainland China who were, to varying degrees, autodidacts. Each participant was in a different context and location and many did not know each other. 12 participants completed the online questionnaire and were interviewed at different locations. Their ages ranged from 30 to over 50 years old and their varied experiences in learning English as a second language brought interesting insights into learning possibilities with their particular IDs (see Table 1).The rationale for this sampling choice was based on the researchers' premise that English language teachers would be more aware of their language learning process and progress and may therefore bring more richness to the research although future research could focus on the learners themselves for their experience. Another reason was that teachers appreciated the purpose of the research and the benefits it may bring and thereby were more willing to participate.

Table 1

Participants' general profile

Name	Age range	Years learning English	1st, 2nd or 3rd tiered city*	Formal English instruction in:				
				Primary school	Middle school	High school	University studies	Studies abroad
Alice	<45	23	3rd	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Barbara	<45	21	3rd		✔		✔	
Brian	<45	30	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Carl	<45	10+	3rd	✔	✔	**then dropped out and continued self-taught**		
Gina	<45	20	3rd	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Jennifer	45+	22	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Kate	<45	10+	3rd	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Liz	45+	45	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Margaret	45+	15	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Mary	45+	10	1st		✔	✔	✔	
Roger	<45	35	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	

Name	Age range	Years learning English	1st, 2nd or 3rd tiered city*	Formal English instruction in:				
				Primary school	Middle school	High school	University studies	Studies abroad
Tracy	<45	27	1st	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

*Note: these are fictitious names created for the purpose of anonymity.

In China, 1st-tiered cities include metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai (Zhang, 2016). 3rd-tiered cities offer much fewer facilities and for our participants, fewer resources for language practice.

Procedures

The duration of the study was three months. From nineteen invitations, four students either did not respond or were not willing to participate, three participated in the pilot study and twelve were part of the final research. An official invitation was then disseminated to all of the willing participants describing the details of the project. Once ethical consent was received, participants were given the link to the online questionnaire. Following this, semi-structured interviews were then conducted and recorded to follow-up on the questionnaire. Eleven interviews were conducted in person and one was conducted via telephone. This phase lasted three weeks as it involved some travelling between locations to interview the participants. Finally, the questionnaire data were compiled for analysis with the qualitative interviews coded, and a summary report was produced for discussion.

Data collection and analysis

A 29-item questionnaire was designed, written in both English and Chinese and was made available online (SmartSurvey, n.d.) because some of the participants were not in the researchers' location. The different sections of the questionnaire collected data on historical background, strategy use, learning styles, and character. An interview complemented the survey to improve validity and the Chinese translation of the questionnaire helped to increase the accuracy of the respondents' input and avoid ambiguities in the questions.

Data were obtained both from the online questionnaire rendering quantitative data and from the interviews giving qualitative data to be coded and analysed. Key results from the quantitative data were presented in the form of bar charts to show comparisons between respondents' preferred choices. For the qualitative data, the interviews were first transcribed in

their entirety after which the transcriptions were analysed, coded (with the help of NVivo software), and compared to a pre-defined set of categories of learner IDs and the Oxford (2003) taxonomy of strategies.

Results and analysis

Quantitative results

This section explores the strategies used through the lens of the categories and classification system derived from Oxford (Brown, 2000; Oxford, 2003). Referring to Q14 in the questionnaire (see Figure 1), it is evident from the data that two memory strategies dominated as preferred strategies: trying to create new sentences from learned words (50%, scale 5) and memorisation of words (58.3%, scale 5). In addition, two listening strategies were stated in the preferred choices: detailed listening (50%, scale 4) and listening dictation (41.7%, scale 4). Finally, another significant preference was the activity of extensive reading (41.7%, scale 5).

Q14. Do you use any of the following language learning strategies? *Please mark your usage on a scale of 1 to 5 from 'don't use' (1) to 'use quite a bit' (5).*
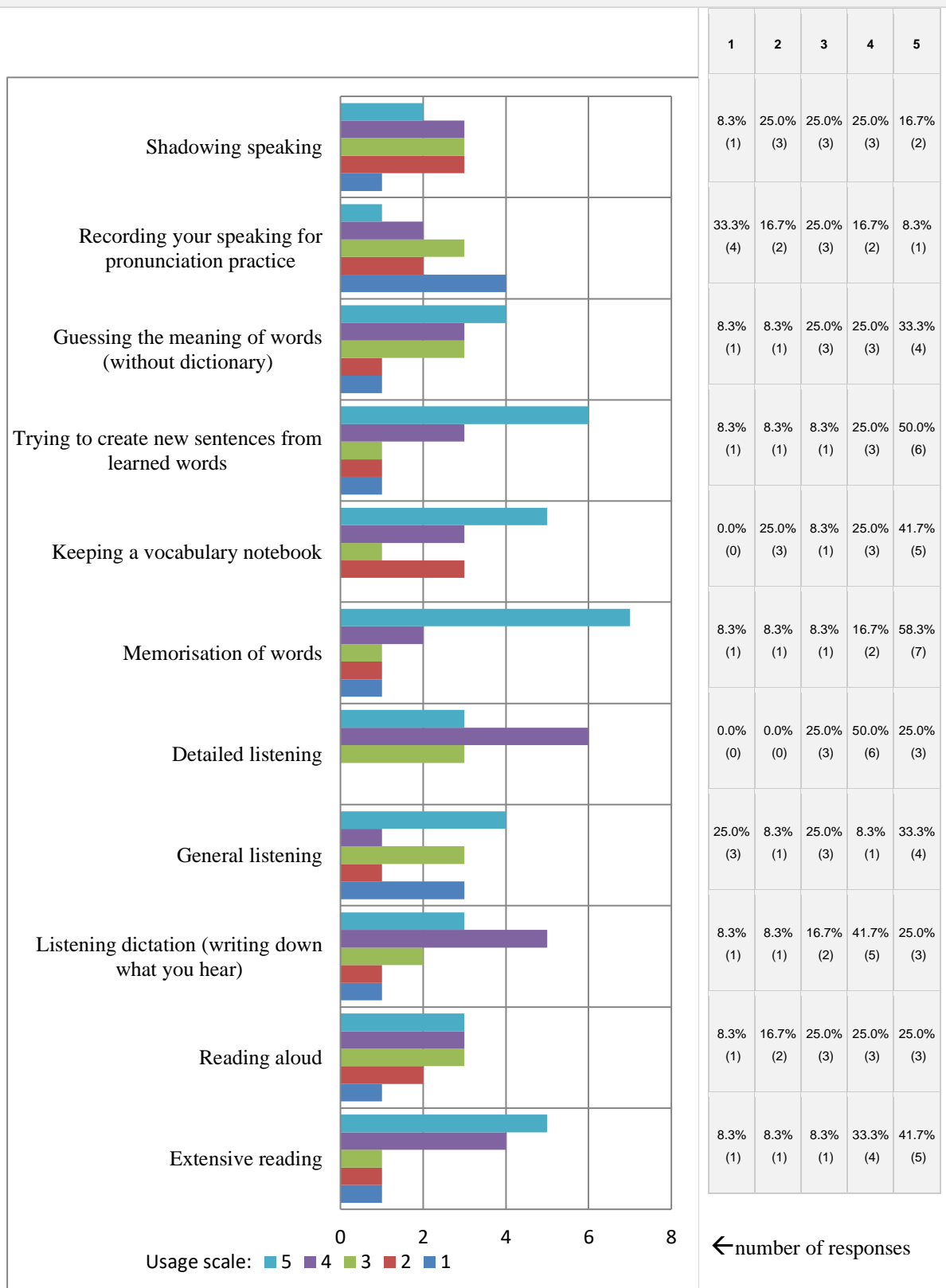

	1	2	3	4	5
Shadowing speaking	8.3% (1)	25.0% (3)	25.0% (3)	25.0% (3)	16.7% (2)
Recording your speaking for pronunciation practice	33.3% (4)	16.7% (2)	25.0% (3)	16.7% (2)	8.3% (1)
Guessing the meaning of words (without dictionary)	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	25.0% (3)	25.0% (3)	33.3% (4)
Trying to create new sentences from learned words	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	25.0% (3)	50.0% (6)
Keeping a vocabulary notebook	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)	8.3% (1)	25.0% (3)	41.7% (5)
Memorisation of words	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	16.7% (2)	58.3% (7)
Detailed listening	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)	50.0% (6)	25.0% (3)
General listening	25.0% (3)	8.3% (1)	25.0% (3)	8.3% (1)	33.3% (4)
Listening dictation (writing down what you hear)	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	16.7% (2)	41.7% (5)	25.0% (3)
Reading aloud	8.3% (1)	16.7% (2)	25.0% (3)	25.0% (3)	25.0% (3)
Extensive reading	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	8.3% (1)	33.3% (4)	41.7% (5)

←number of responses

Figure 1:Survey response - Language learning strategies

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Learning activities

Overall, the data from Q10 as shown in Figure 2 showed that a majority of participants clearly placed watching movies as a preferred learning activity (58.3%, scale 'really like'). This was coupled with a desire to interact as much as possible where opportunities presented themselves (58.3%, scale 'really like'). The interviews corroborated these numbers in the corresponding discussions.
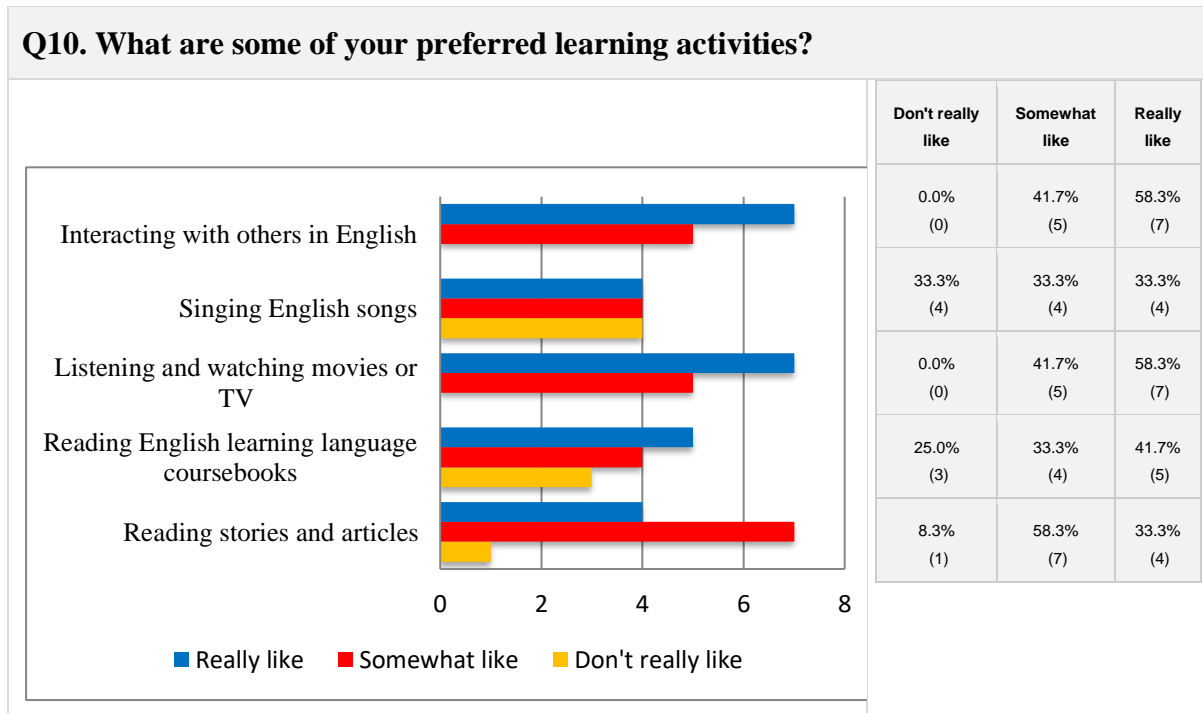

Q10. What are some of your preferred learning activities?

	Don't really like	Somewhat like	Really like
Interacting with others in English	0.0% (0)	41.7% (5)	58.3% (7)
Singing English songs	33.3% (4)	33.3% (4)	33.3% (4)
Listening and watching movies or TV	0.0% (0)	41.7% (5)	58.3% (7)
Reading English learning language coursebooks	25.0% (3)	33.3% (4)	41.7% (5)
Reading stories and articles	8.3% (1)	58.3% (7)	33.3% (4)

Figure 2: Survey response - Preferred learning methods

Additional strategy usage and preferred learning activities emerged from the interviews to which we now turn below.

Using CALL and media tools

When asked in the questionnaire (Q7) what resources students would use to learn English, the dominant choice was Internet use (91.67%). Watching movies and English TV (83%) also had a high preference and the interviews reaffirmed using the Internet to either download or watch them. Figure 3 illustrates these prevailing numbers.

Q7. What resources do you use when you want to learn English?			Response Percent	Response Total
1	English language course book		66.67%	8
2	Newspapers		58.33%	7
3	Magazine articles		66.67%	8
4	Movies		83.33%	10
5	Speaking to foreigners		50.00%	6
6	Watching English TV		83.33%	10
7	Internet resources		91.67%	11
8	Any others not on this list		25.00%	3
Any others not on this list (3)				
	1	ID: Tracy	Listening to radio	
	2	ID: Carl	News scripts	

Figure 1: Survey response - Resources used to learn English

The predominant language-learning tool reported in the interviews was the use of smartphone apps where, besides being with them at all times, helped them practice various aspects of their language skills such as vocabulary memorisation or pronunciation and intonation practice.

Qualitative data from interviews

This section presents the interview discussions highlighting commonalities and differences amongst the participants as well as discovering unique approaches or strategies used for the multiple facets of language acquisition. The various topics have been organised around learner IDs mentioned above (e.g. motivation, learner strategies, learner styles, and affective variables).

Motivation

Several topics of interest emerged regarding this ID. The first and foremost learner ID contributing to these participants' successes was the intrinsic motivation; 10 out of 12

participants (83%) repeatedly described how their motivation was related to their love of the language or simply learning out of interest.

Alice: *I like English very much.*

Barbara: *at that time, I didn't, (0.4) eh think too much to be an English teacher or something. Just out of interest.*

Gina: *(Did you have a goal…), (0.2) eh, not a very definite one. I (0.4) I just <u>loved</u> English and <u>now</u>, I love it too.*

Kate: *I just love listening to English with no ((special)) goals.*

Motivation is often influenced by the presence of the teacher through their teaching methodologies or as a model to emulate. Here two participants talked about the teacher as an exemplar of success demonstrating the interplay of motivation with affective variables and one reflected how the teaching methods helped.

Barbara: *I didn't have a clear goal at first (0.6) my interest comes from my first English teacher. She was, (0.4) eh, Russian raised. (0.8) She seemed like a foreigner and she's beautiful. I'm interested in the teacher first and then I'm interested in English. I wanted to talk with her in English (.) and that's why I learned it.*

Margaret: *During the high school, (0.6) I was very interested in studying English at that time. And (0.4) one secret, ha ha, (0.8) it was because I liked my English teacher ha ha (0.4) he was very handsome […] because I wanted to draw his attention, so I studied to get a higher score ha ha.*

Alice: *I think the education (.) in middle school and high school matters much because from (.) my middle school, I had a very good teacher and she taught the pronunciation and (.) I think the pronunciation is very important for me to memorise words and (0.4) in my university, the teacher has taught me a lot of learning methods for me to (.) improve my English level.*

Another surfacing ID, resulting from motivation, was the extent to which the students worked harder at learning English than the average students during their formal education. Five described how they put in more efforts than their peers in the following example statements:

Barbara: *I think I did more than some others. You know, in high school, there are courses, (0.2) not only English, so,(0.2) I think what I did more was on my way from home, to*

school or back, when I say something, (.) I will try and say it in English. I will try and think of some words, some things I learned and (0.6) when I am doing some other courses, I will try and translate into English and then answer it.

Kate: *I did more than the other students because I'm not clever*

Liz (who spent her time listening intensely to the radio and speaking to herself talks of entering university): *Even when I did some housework, I spoke to myself and I just repeated what I heard and I could recite a long passage because I read many times. So, I think I, (0.8) so, that's why I could speak English when I entered university [...] I passed the test with high marks (0.4) in my speaking because I practiced myself.*

Doing more than the average student shows an inclination towards self-directedness in learning the language.

Self-directedness

Interestingly, self-directedness implies planning and goal-setting, but as the interviews in this research showed, goal-setting was not predominant at the early stages of seven of the participants. Such examples are shown in the following excerpt from Alice, Liz, Barbara, Kate and Brian:

Alice: (Interviewer: did you think of becoming a teacher?) *no … just learning English*

Liz: (Interviewer: did you have a goal of wanting to reach a higher level of English?) *no, no, I don't think (0.6) I have actually a goal. I just (0.2) go like that. I just enjoyed it [...]*

Barbara: *I didn't have a clear goal at first (0.6) my interest comes from my first English teacher.*

Brian: *em (0.8), well, eh, (0.8) years ago, (0.2) I had only one aim (.) or target – to improve my English. (0.4) I mean, when I was young.*

Kate: *I never planned to be an English teacher.*

With their motivation for learning being intrinsically driven, this section now turns to examine what language learning strategies prevailed in their learning styles and self-directedness.

Strategy usage

From the interviews, cognitive strategies dominated the dialogues illustrating the various activities used for practicing the language along with some meta-cognitive strategies

used in goal-setting and planning (see Brown, 2000, p. 132 for a summary of Oxford's taxonomy of strategies). In addition, there was also some discussion on memory strategies, compensation strategies, and social strategies which are described below.

Cognitive strategies

Within cognitive strategies were many examples of the subcategory of practicing. This included the use of repetition as a strategy as is evident in the following extract:

Carl: *I watch movies such as (.) Gone with the wind sometimes around 10 times. I want to know what they said, why they said that, and (0.2) what is the story around the speaking.*

Roger (talking about remembering words): *repeat again and again and (.) you will remember it. For example, persimmon, eh, (0.2) this is food. I don't know this word, persimmon. So, I look it up in the dictionary (.) but after half a year, I will forget it. And, I'll look it up again and find it (0.4) and forget it again, (0.6) I think this is the 10th or 11th time I remember this word persimmon.*

Alice (talks about watching movies only once): *eh, (0.2) when I watch two or three films there are some expressions that appear again and again and then I grasp them. I didn't watch it again [...]*

Alice, contrary to others, watched movies extensively rather than intensively trusting that common expressions return in most situations.

Combining practicing naturalistically with formally practicing with sounds, the majority of the participants exercised speaking aloud as that is often encouraged in schools. However, half of them also talked about a Chinese smartphone dubbing app (QuPeiyin) which provided opportunities to learn movie lines by recording themselves repeating it to compare the differences in pronunciation and/or tonality in expression – a form of shadow speaking (repeat a speech immediately after hearing it).

Roger: *read aloud. I like to read (0.4) aloud because (0.2) when I was young, this was a (0.4) very important way to practice (0.2) the English.*

Gina: *eh, (.) I have one application for-QuPeiYin…, it can make me correct my own(.) pronunciation and sometimes the most important is the intonation in a sentence. […] pronunciation is not usually important in your communication. I think the (.) intonation plays a (.) a more important role.*

Liz: *I just spoke to myself. I spoke to myself, mainly, I recited what I heard from the recording. Like I said, I could recite passages all the words, maybe, at that time. A long passage, I could recite … I just spoke, I didn't have to think…*

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategy use was evident in the Oxford categories focusing on listening, paying attention, seeking times to practice, and in self evaluations to some degree as was evident in this extract:

Alice: *when I was in university, I listened to VOA or BBC for half an hour every morning. I think that's very (.) beneficial to help you with your listening.*

Tracy also mentioned that she listened to English radio while driving to and from work:

Gina (discussion paying attention): … *not only pay attention to the clause but also (0.2) the expressions they use (0.2) in the series, in the movies*,

Barbara: (Interviewer: ok, so you pay attention to some things) *yes, I will think 'oh, this is how they say it' […] when you learn English to some certain level, you will (0.2) unconsciously notice English in your daily life. For example, when I am cooking fast noodles, I will read the instructions in the English version and I will see some expressions such as 'shelf life', 'expiry'. I think it's a good way to learn from daily life. That makes it interesting. It's better than learning from the books.*

To compensate for the lack of practice opportunities to communicate with native English speakers all the participants discussed using various strategies. For example, speaking to themselves at times or, being English teachers, practice through actual teaching. Jennifer, for example, is no longer a teacher but a director of a school. She hires a native English speaker on contract to teach the learners and takes the opportunity to have a practice session by discussing teaching.

Self-evaluation of one's progress appeared to be a difficult task for the participants; however, some of the participants mentioned ways they were able to accomplish that although it was not something they could do regularly. Four participants (33%) discussed doing standard tests (TOEFL) occasionally to see what score they may have reached. Jennifer mentioned that she sometimes completed a placement test at a school with no intention of taking a course to see where she was placed. Four other participants also explained how they

self-evaluated themselves by choosing to do tasks, either listening or writing, and evaluating how well they performed.

Social strategies

Social strategies included cooperating with others and, on that topic, the interviews discussed the benefits and limitations of having a language learning partner. Overall, all participants agreed that it was beneficial as it pushed them to go further in their learning. Many had such partners when in college but do not have any now.

Another category of social strategies according to Oxford is developing cultural understanding. In that regard, one of the participants who watched movies to learn English (Roger) also did it to understand the culture:

> Roger: *Because I was very interested in eh (0.4) Chinese culture and western culture. So, if you don't know language, how can you (0.6) learn western culture? […] language is more than the culture. It is the culture, it is science, it is (0.6) everything.*

Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies were used by learners to make up for a gap in language ability or knowledge (Villamizar, 2014) and in these interviews, the following strategies emerged: guessing intelligently and switching to the mother tongue. Jennifer, for example, asserted that she was successful most of the time in guessing meaning from context and Roger sometimes watched movies with Chinese subtitles to assist the comprehension of some lexical details.

Memory strategies

Finally, with memory strategies, two participants talked about using keywords and one described how she used imagery:

> Kate: (Interviewer: So, remembering vocabulary [reading the survey form] you remember by roots and affixes?) *yes, it's a good way. I think it's a better way to remember those words but (0.4) there is another way to remember how to use the words is to make more and more sentences using the new words. It helps me to remember how the word is used.*

> Tracy: (Interviewer: What do you mean by imagination?) *Imagination, eh (0.8) because, if you want to remember this word, sometimes, I need to imagine (0.2) eh (0.4) it's like a*

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picture in my mind. For example, I remember 'apple', in my brain, it's a picture of an apple. […] Imagination is also (0.2) personal actually. For example, maybe this word is related to my personal experience. It can, from the imagination … I can think of something and I can relate this word to things, I (.) can think of. Then, I can remember it, you know (0.2) more easily.

The interviewees also discussed how strategies had changed over time with a common response being that participants were less systematic in their learning or more relaxed about learning English than before. This would indicate that some strategies have been abandoned while some others have been adopted. For example, taking notes and reading aloud have been replaced with a more relaxed approach to learning (affective strategies) and memorisation has given way to understanding as Barbara suggested:

Barbara: *at first, I tried to memorise words, (.) grammar rules, but now, (0.8) there is no focused purpose of learning English. Whatever I learn, I don't have a (.) purpose. Just out of interest, I want to learn about something, I will do it and so, I think the biggest change is my mind – my mind to learning English. I don't em, (0.4) see it as a tool or something. It's a habit.*

Learning without Internet

As an additional question, the participants were asked how they handled learning English before they could use the Internet. Interestingly, the participants' responses to this question did not manifest a lack of resources:

Alice: *from the books and from the radio; ya, when I was in university, I listened to VOA or BBC for half an hour every morning*

Barbara: *during college, (0.2) not everyone had a computer. Our school had a library and there was an Internet bar but it was inconvenient for you to check (.) something anytime. So, I had to refer to the book and talk with my classmates or ask my teachers for help. Most of the time in my self-study, I would refer to books, dictionaries and books. I'll go to the library a lot.*

Jennifer: (Interviewer: and how did you deal with resources before the Internet?) *just eh…learn from (.) books, (.) textbooks and (.) teachers, especially in high school and in (0.6) college.* (Interviewer: so, even at that time, you feel you had resources?) *ya, ya … eh, in middle school, very limited (0.2), only textbooks and tapes.*

Liz (note: Liz is the oldest participant of the 12): [now] *we have a lot of facilities – you have recordings, you can go online, you have tape recordings, all these kinds of (.) advanced technologies to assist you but back at that time, I didn't have them. So, what I could do is (.) just listen to the radio, maybe how many times, I don't know. As far as it was the program so I just listened to it and* (Interviewer: was it a program to learn English or …) *to learn English and there was a teacher there and I just followed that program and we didn't have a textbook so I had to write down (.) the sentence, or if they broadcast a story, I wanted to write down every word so I could practice my listening ability and also writing.*

Discussion

What learner IDs characterised the participants?

As initially posed in the introduction of this study, the aims were to discover how successful self-directed learners approached the learning of English with innovative strategies and/or selected learning activities and how that differed from learners in a traditional classroom setting. The related question asked "What individual differences (IDs) characterise EFL learners who have achieved CEFR B2 and above given their contextual situations where others given similar situations and opportunities have not?"In order to address this question, this subsection refers to the category of learner IDs from Ellis (2008) from which motivation and personality would seem to be the main driving force behind the participants' approach to their learning achievements. Because of their intrinsic motivation, participants' learning seemed to be less structured than it might have been when they were studying their majors in university. They discussed using all available resources (radio, movies, smartphone apps, and speaking to oneself) to acquire the language whereas students in an English learning program such as the Hong Kong example mentioned before (Manfred, 2008) applied more metacognitive strategies of organisation and planning (more structured) and cognitive strategies of note-taking and summarising as one would expect to do when preparing to pass a course. However, the participants in this study reported using such strategies in their college days.

To what extent were these learners self-directed?

In the profiles above, and from the interviews, two of the participants (Carl and Liz) could be considered to be most self-directed and even self-taught (having learned the language almost entirely on their own with little formal instruction). Although the research

initially sought to identify self-taught learners for closer examination of strategy usage, what emerged were intrinsically motivated English major students who had worked harder than the average Chinese English language learner due to their interests and eventual career directions.

What were the most common learning strategies used by these learners and to what extent did these learners make use of and exploit 21st century ICT and media tools?

The results have shown wide usage of strategies covering all the categories of Oxford's Taxonomy – memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and social (Brown, 2000; Oxford, 2003). Strategy use was not always a conscious choice, however. Rather, it was through the activities the participants described that their usage emerged. Through their favoured medium of watching movies emerged the practice of repeating, and the use of compensation strategies. Internet and smartphone usage for language learning demonstrated cognitive strategies mainly related to practicing (pronunciation) and metacognitive strategies of centering the learning. Memory strategy usage emerged through imaging and creating mental linkages of words to patterns (roots and affixes).

As mentioned above, the participants took advantage of opportunities to involve English in their lives and through activities of listening, reading and speaking, used various strategies consciously and unconsciously to fulfill their general goals of learning the language. As their studies progressed, they used fewer strategies or approached the learning of the language more casually.

When watching movies (one of the main reported activities), 33% reported watching casually and still learning from it, two said they do a bit of both, and three affirmed continuing to watch movies with a purpose to learn. When discussing reading, the majority identified reading casually or extensively rather than intensely (one read intensely) and only two talked about writing in this respect.

The participants' learning styles and relaxed approaches at this time may have been because they had already reached a good enough level to be comfortable in the language but it may also illustrate their adoption of English in their lives as mentioned in the questionnaire where 75% asserted that English had become part of their lives. Seeing English as part of their lives would allow them to access all possible resources to enrich their skills and knowledge both culturally and linguistically.

Strategy usage embedded in learning activities was shown to be the best recipe. Recalling the comparison of learners Wes and Julie (Schmidt, 2010) would indicate that

language learning strategies are the elements that add purpose to language activity and that doing an activity (such as watching an English movie) without the purpose may produce average results in the long term.

Limitations

The study targeted one type of learner – Chinese English-language teachers. On reflection, this may have limited the variety of samples and contextual situations we could discover but likewise, this was an instrumental case study (Dörnyei, 2007), and was thereby more interested in the phenomenon than the sample. Another limitation was that this research initially sought to study self-taught learners as the study title suggests. However, the participants, although quite self-directed in their learning, were for the most part, English majors in their university studies making them less of a model for the struggling learners as originally desired.

Although the approach and methodology used allowed the participants to describe their styles and choices, it must be noted that these are specific experiences and that the results cannot be generalised, especially due to the small sample size involved on this occasion.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to understand the learning habits and use of language learning strategies of a group of self-directed learners in China. This was done, in part, to address the problem many EFL learners in China frequently identify as being the lack of opportunities and/or resources to learn English. That claim was countered in several ways by demonstrating the possibilities and the achievements of some participants through examination of the interview data relative to the research questions.

Through the interviews and results of the online questionnaire it was evident that individual differences (IDs) in learners enabled them to achieve higher goals than others and which learning activities and strategies they applied to scaffold their progress. It was notable that one key ID amongst all the participants was a keen interest both in learning the language and the target culture. This provided the solid base which allowed the participants to make use of every available resource and become a self-directed language learner forming their careers and life directions. Finally, the analysis of the participants' path of progress indicated that it was not as structured and perfectly planned at every step as some GLL studies (Gan et al.,

2004; Rubin, 2005) would like to suggest but more an experimental undertaking that changed as possibilities changed.

Implications for teaching

What can be learned from the experiences of these participants? One common answer would be to create teaching materials relevant to the learners' needs – one that would kindle their interests both linguistically and culturally. But another aspect could be to raise the awareness of strategy usage during activities in the classroom. More than completing tasks, the learners should know why they are doing a task in a certain way and that the aim is not simply to complete the task (not a race to the finish). For example, in an activity asking students to survey five other students (one by one) in a communicative task, they should be made aware that repetition and practice is an important learning strategy in the activity and to avoid grouping together in order to complete the survey faster.

Future research

Much, if not most, research on strategy usage has been done in institutional contexts most likely due to convenience. Regarding self-directed learners, further research in non-institutional contexts would add potentially unique approaches such as the ones found in this study complementing existing teaching methodologies and providing new concepts for material developers. Additionally, any one of the language learning strategies combined with activities uncovered in this research could be isolated in an intervention study for its efficacy in use versus non-use (e.g. students' regular use of flashcards in a spaced-repetition app on a smartphone or using movies in the classroom (and using the dubbing app) to measure the effectiveness of use in a classroom and the exposure to authentic language as opposed to coursebooks).

This research has shown that language learning strategies, far from being an old topic, are well-embedded in the language learning process and has revealed the myriad ways they are applied in personalised and context-sensitive situations. Acting as models, these examples could serve learners pedagogically by raising awareness of their benefits and flexible individualised application.

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