

The Usage of Learning Strategies and Gender Effects in English Language Study

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Abstract: Learning strategies are very important in second language learning. For most Chinese students, English is their second language. In order to better teach students and provide them with help in English Language learning, this paper takes undergraduate students as the research subjects. Through questionnaire and data analysis, it aims to understand the differences between male and female students when choosing language learning strategies. The results can help teachers better design college English courses and provide students with more targeted help.

Keywords: English language study; Learning strategies; Gender effects

During the process of second language(L2) learning, learners may face various difficulties in L2, including vocabulary, grammar, speaking, etc. For Chinese college students, their second language is mainly English. In order to solve learning difficulties, learners need different strategies to help them.

1. Learning strategies in second language study

Oxford (1990) has given the definition of learning strategy. He pointed word “strategy” comes from Greek, which means purposely taking action to win a war. Nowadays, it extends to an operation that learners purposely use to help their L2 study. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) agreed with Oxford and they believed that learning strategies are ways to improve comprehension and retention in L2 learning. Based on these definitions, Mariani (2002) further concluded that these purposely actions belong to students themselves. Thus, learning strategy could defined as an action that is purposely used by students to achieve comprehension, retention, and other goals in L2 learning.

Since there are many learning strategies, authors in the area tried to catalog strategies into different groups. It is Oxford (1990) systematically proposed six types of learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies. However, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) reduced it to three (metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies). Dornyei & Skehan (2005) believed memory-related strategies were one sub-group of cognitive strategies and compensatory cannot be regarded as strategies. Thus, they slightly changed categories into four, which were metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies.

2. Gender differences and usage of learning strategies

Several previous studies have concerned different factors that affect the usage of learning strategies, and gender is one of them (eg: Goh & Kwah, 1997; Zeynali, 2012; Pinar, 2011). Goh & Kwah (1997) investigated the relationship between learning strategies and gender with 175 Chinese ESL students. By using questionnaires, the authors concluded that males and females chose different learning strategies, and females used more strategies than males. More specifically, female students use more compensation strategies than males. Zeynali (2012) also concluded that females and males are different in using strategies. Although they have concluded similar results, there are differences between the two studies. After examining 149 learners in Iran, Zeynali found that female learners tend to use more social/ affective strategies than males. What’s more, the author further proposed that there are no big gender differences in other types of strategies.

However, it is interesting that Pinar (2011) argued that there is no significant correlation between gender and learning strategies. He investigated teachers instead of students and believed that a teacher’s gender has little effect on the usage of strategies. In order to find out the relationship between gender and the usage of strategies, we are trying to deal with this research question: Do grade one male and female students in Hangzhou Medical College (HMC) use strategies differently when learning new English words?

3. Study results and discussion

60 HMC grade one students (30 female, 30 male) finished questionnaires and the results were as follows.

Overall, as shown in Table 1, female students (M=2.62) use strategies more often than males(M=2.88). Both male and female groups use metacognitive strategies at the middle level because the means of female and male are 2.67 and 2.56 individually. It should be noted that males(M=2.70) like to use cognitive strategies more often than females(M=2.97) but they seldom use social strategies(M=3.30).

Table 1. Gender differences on overall strategies.

	Means (M)	Means(F)
Overall strategies	2.88	2.62
Metacognitive strategies	2.67	2.56
Cognitive strategies	2.70	2.97
Social strategies	3.30	2.48
Affective strategies	2.85	2.48

To see each item clearer, as illustrated in Table 2, the majority of the strategies are obviously used at the middle level (M<3).

Table 2. Results of 12 strategies usage according to Gender.

Vocabulary strategies	Gender	Mean	Mode	S.D.
1. Make word plans.	M	3.00	3	0.70
	F	2.67	1	1.50
2. Divide word plans into small parts.	M	2.56	2	0.73
	F	2.89	4	1.45
3. Memorize 1 or 2 times after learning it.	M	2.44	2	0.88
	F	2.11	3	0.93
4. Under sentences/context.	M	2.67	2	0.87
	F	2.56	2	1.33
5. Use one approach to remember.	M	3.00	3	1.22
	F	3.34	3,4	1.00
6. Analysis root, affixes.	M	2.44	2	0.88
	F	3.00	3	1.22
7. Ask for teacher's help.	M	4.00	4	0.70
	F	3.22	4	1.30
8. Use online dictionary.	M	2.00	2	0.50
	F	1.33	1	0.50
9. Classmates check spelling/pronunciation.	M	3.89	4,5	1.05
	F	2.89	3,4	1.05
10. Find a suitable place.	M	2.33	2,3	0.70
	F	2.00	2	1.00
11. Give rewards after finish one plan	M	3.44	4	1.24
	F	2.67	2	1.00
12. Learn new words to encourage students learn more.	M	2.78	3	0.83
	F	2.78	2,3	1.20

Among individual items, male students are dividing word plans into small parts (item 2) more often than female, because the mean is 2.56, which is lower than female(M=2.89). Males also use one approach to remember all the words (item 5, M=3) and analyze the root,

prefix, and suffix of the words (item 6, M=2.44) more often than females. What's more, for dividing word plans into small parts, the male's mode is 2 while female's mode is 4, which indicates the same results above.

Perceptions are different according to gender as well. The largest difference between males and females is to make word plans before learning because differences in standard deviation between males (0.70) and females (1.50) are the largest. Table 3 shows gender differences in the most and least frequently used strategies.

Table 3. The most and least frequently used strategies.

Most used strategies				Least used strategies			
Means(F)		Means(M)		Means(F)		Means(M)	
(8)	M=1.33	(8)	M=2.00	(5)	M=3.34	(7)	M=4.00
(10)	M=2.00	(10)	M=2.33	(7)	M=3.22	(9)	M=3.89
(3)	M=2.11	(3)	M=2.44	(6)	M=3.00	(11)	M=3.44

It is clear that the most frequently used strategy in both male and female groups is learning new words by online dictionary (item 8, M=1.33). Finding a suitable place (item 10) and memorizing 1 or 2 times after learning it (item 3) are also used at a high level(M<2.5). The least usage strategy in male group is to ask for teacher's help(M=4.00). Moreover, both groups regard asking for teacher's help as a low-used strategy. In the female group, the mean of item 5 is the largest(M=3.34), indicating that females seldom use only one approach to remember all the words.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the overall strategies are used at the middle level. Females use more strategies than males, which is similar to Goh & Kuah (1997) and Zeynail (2012) studies. However, results are different in using different types of strategies. Goh& Kuah (1997) found out female group used compensation strategies more than males, while in this study, females used social and affective strategies more than males. Zeynail (2012) figured out that there are no gender differences in using strategies excluding social/ affective strategies. Whereas in this study, gender differences appeared in other types of strategies as well, like males prefer to use cognitive strategies more than females.

Moreover, this study gives more details on the most and least frequently used strategies. It should be mentioned that gender has a small effect on some middle-used strategies. However, for least used strategies, females tend not to use cognitive strategies while males likely to use social strategies less.

As for implications, the results from report above help to confirm gender differences in vocabulary learning strategies, such as females are more likely to use social and affective strategies while males prefer cognitive strategies when they learn new words. To be specific, teachers could understand gender differences clearly and take gender factors into consideration when using different strategies. Teachers could encourage female students to work with classmates and analyze roots and affixes. For male students in class, teacher could encourage them to ask for help more in order to help them learn better in new words.

What's more, using online dictionary (item 8) and remembering words by memory (item 3) are also two often used strategies in both groups. Teachers could help students with memory training like combined reading, listening activities, checking spelling in class, etc. Lastly, it should be mentioned that both males and females use strategies at the middle level. In order to help them have effective study and help students be more successful in learning new words in English, teachers could help students familiarize themselves with all learning strategies.

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Appendix I

Part A: Background Information

Gender: male female

Education level:

Part B Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire

1= always, 2=very often, 3= sometimes, 4=not often, 5= never

	Always (1)	Very often (2)	Some times (3)	Not often (4)	Never (5)
1. I make some words plans before I start to learn it.					
2. I divide one words plan into several small parts so that I can learn it step by step.					
3. After I learn the words, I memorize them in mind for one or two times.					
4. I try to learn words in the sentence or under the context.					
5. I use one approach to remember all the new words from the beginning to the end.					
6. I analysis the root, prefix and suffix of the words when I try to learn it.					
7. I ask teacher for help to learn new words in the classroom.					
8. I learn new words by online dictionary to get explanation of the vocabulary.					
9. I learn new words by cooperative with my classmates to check the spelling and pronunciation.					
10. I try to find a suitable place to make myself focusing on learning words.					
11. After I finish one words plan, I reward myself a little bit.					
12. Every time I learn the new words, it encourages me to learn it more.					