



English Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Senior High School Students in China ---A Pilot Study

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Abstract

English vocabulary plays a very important role in English learning and teaching. Quite a number of researches and scholars focus on vocabulary learning strategies these years in China. Yet, few of them focus on one of the largest ethnic groups—Miao. This pilot study makes an attempt to explore the overall pattern of English vocabulary learning strategies employed by the Miao senior high school students. Based on Gu & Johnson (1996) and O'Malley & Chamot's (1990) classification of vocabulary learning strategies, the author developed a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to conduct the pilot study, which included metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective, and translation strategies. 30 Miao students were randomly sampled to participate the study in Kaili Senior high school for nationalities in South-East of Guizhou province in China. The findings of the pilot study revealed that 1) most of the Miao students believed that words should be studied and put to use; 2) the majority of students tended to use cognitive strategies in their vocabulary learning compared with the other three strategies. They seldom used translation strategies; and 3) they had their own specific strategies in English vocabulary learning because they took Miao as a first language (L1).

Key words: English vocabulary, Learning strategy, Senior high school, Miao students

Introduction

China is a unified, multi-national country with 56 nationalities in all. There are 55 ethnic groups except Han Chinese. Every ethnic has its own language, unique cultural and educational background. Miao (is also called Hmong in English) is the 5th largest one among the ethnic groups with the population of more than 8,000,000 (NBS, 2003). According to the constitution, regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of ethnic minorities live in compact communities. This is one of the basic political systems of China. There are 30 ethnic autonomous prefectures in China. Guizhou is a multi-national province with three ethnic autonomous prefectures. Qiandongnan Miao & Dong Autonomous Prefecture (QMDP) is one of them in south-east of Guizhou province, which has the largest ethnic population among 30 ethnic autonomous prefectures in China. It also has the highest concentrations of Miao groups in China (NBS, 2008). There are 15 counties and a capital city in the prefecture. Most of

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senior high schools are for nationalities. Kaili, Huangping, Congjiang, Taijiang, Jianhe and Leishan are the main areas where Miao live in concentrated communities.

With the high speed development of economy, English is playing more and more important roles in China. In accordance with the actual conditions in the ethnic areas, Chinese central government has worked out and adopted a series of policies and measures to assist these areas in developing their economies, and to mobilize and organize the developed areas where Han people live to support them. In 1999, the central government made an important decision to implement the Great Western Development Strategy (GWDS), which provides a rare historical opportunity for Guizhou's development. Many measures have been taken to improve English Language teaching from primary school to university. As a result, bilingual teaching in primary schools (teaching in both Mandarin and ethnic languages) in countryside is one of the specific policies in QMDP.

English Teaching and Learning in Ethnic Regions

English teaching and learning in QMDP is quite different from other developed regions in China. Firstly, QMDP is a remote mountainous area, so educational conditions are comparatively poorer than other areas. Secondly, every ethnic group has its own language, but most of which have no their own written words/languages. Thirdly, all ethnic groups learn English as an L3, not L2, because their L2 is Putonghua/Mandarin. As a result, English teachers in QMDP encounter many problems/difficulties in teaching English as an L3 in primary and middle schools, even though the prefectural government has taken measures on how to improve English teaching, e.g. bilingual teaching. As for the ethnic students, most of them cannot find an effective way to learn English well. Ethnic cultures interfere the students' English learning. That's reflected in strategies employed in learning English. Actually, Miao and Dong have their own strategies in learning English because they have their own languages and unique cultures.

In senior high school, students are required to take English courses as one of three core courses (the other two are Chinese and Mathematics). To go to college or university, students must take National Matriculation English Test (NMET) which is held in June every year. In Chinese educational system, each academic year is divided into two semesters, each of which lasts twenty weeks. As for English courses, there is a national new English curriculum (NEC) / (language benchmarks) which were published by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) in 2003. There are 9 levels in the NEC, which requires different English proficiency ranging from primary school to senior high school. According to the NEC, senior high school students are required to reach level 9 before they go to college or university. In the senior high school, English is offered 4 hours of classroom training per week. There are different requirements on different language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing practice). As to the vocabulary in level 9, the students are required to master at least 3,400 English words (MOE, 2003). A number of researches show that most senior high school students have difficulties in learning English vocabulary.

Research in English Teaching and Learning in Ethnic Regions

In the past 30 years, many scholars both in other countries and in China made research studies on learning strategies and/or vocabulary learning strategies, and most of them made great success. However, most of them took undergraduates as subjects, and few scholars focused on the English vocabulary learning strategies employed by ethnic students. Very few



of research studies focused on the Miao students in senior high school in China. (Rubin 1975, Naimen et al. 1978; Huang & Van Naersson 1987; Wen 1996, 2003, 2004; Cheng & Zheng 2002; Chen 2005; Zhou 2007; Wang & Yin 2008)

Research Questions

With the stated problems above, the aim of this study was to investigate in-depth how the Miao students in senior high schools in QMDP learn English vocabulary. The purposes of this study were making an attempt to answer the following questions: 1) What beliefs do the Miao students hold on English vocabulary learning? 2) What strategies are most and least commonly employed by the Miao students in English vocabulary learning? And 3) Do the Miao students have their own strategies in English vocabulary learning? If so, what are they?

Method

Participants

Thirty grade-two senior high school students from Kaili Senior High School for Minorities participated in the pilot study. The participants were selected on the basis of convenience and availability. One half of them majors in Arts and the other majors in Science. There were 12 female students and 18 male students. 6 of them (4 male, 2 female) participated as interviewees for the oral interview.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in the pilot study included a written questionnaire and an oral interview. The questionnaire was used to elicit Miao students' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their self-reported vocabulary learning strategies. The oral interview was used to obtain more in-depth information about Miao students' attitudes to English vocabulary learning and English vocabulary learning strategies.

Data Collection

The pilot study started on March 19, 2009. The treatment of the pilot study lasted for about two weeks. The fulfillment of questionnaire and interview were as follows:

Firstly, 30 grade-two senior high school students from Kaili Senior High School for Minorities participated to answer the questionnaire in a normal evening class on March 19, 2009. After some key points of directions to the questionnaire answering, the researcher administered 30 questionnaire papers with 30 students, who voluntarily participated. Secondly, in order to obtain more detailed information in the interview, after the questionnaire papers were returned, the researcher randomly selected 6 students from the 30 participants to participate in the oral interview on the next two evenings. There were 4 male students and 2 female students participating as interviewees. The researcher delivered interview questions to each of them 5 minutes earlier before the interview time so as to give the interviewees sufficient time to think how to answer the questions more in details. The Chinese language was also used for better understanding and convenience. All the students' interviews were recorded by MP4, transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. The whole interview lasted about 3 hours.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire and oral interviews were submitted to either quantitative or qualitative analysis. What follows were the results of the data analysis.



Results

The Reliability Check for the Questionnaire

According to Devellis (1991), good reliability of the questionnaire will be found if the alpha(α) is at least equal 0.70 ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). After being collected from the questionnaire, the data were calculated using SPSS 16.0 for Windows. The reliability value was found to be 0.944 ($\alpha = 0.944$), which is much higher than 0.70(see Table 1). That is to say, the present questionnaire is reliable and can be used in the main study.

Table 1: The Reliability Check for Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.944	90

Students' Beliefs on Vocabulary Learning

The mean scores and standard deviations of the students' beliefs on vocabulary learning are as follows (see Table 2):

Table 2: Standard Deviation and Mean Scores of Students' Beliefs

Students' Beliefs on Vocabulary Learning	Mean	SD	N
Words should be memorized(6 items)	3.26	1.09	30
Words should be acquired in context: bottom-up (4 items)	3.32	1.08	30
Words should be studied and put to use : top-down (2 items)	3.97	1.03	30

Mean = Mean Score SD = Standard Deviation N = Number of the Students

Table 2 shows that most Miao students believe that words should be studied and put to use (Mean = 3.97, SD = 1.03). Words should be acquired in context comes to the second rank (Mean = 3.32, SD = 1.08). While they also hold a belief that words should be memorized (Mean = 3.26, SD = 1.09). This indicates that majority of Miao students hold the belief that integrated models with bottom-up and top-down should be utilized in vocabulary learning instead of memorizing an isolated word.

Student's Self-Reports to Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

The mean score and standard deviation of every category and sub-category of vocabulary learning strategies are displayed as follows:



Table 3: The Mean Score and Standard Deviation of the 4 Categories of VLS

Categories	N	Mean	SD
Metacognitive Strategies	30	2.44	1.071
Cognitive Strategies	30	2.63	1.166
Social/Affective Strategies	30	2.47	1.026
Translation Strategies	30	2.25	1.042

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics on the 4 categories of learning strategies. It shows that cognitive strategies (M = 2.63, SD = 1.166) and social/affective strategies (M = 2.47, SD = 1.026) stand at the first two places. Guessing strategies rank the third (M = 2.58, SD = 1.029), and translation strategies rank the lowest (M = 2.25, SD = 1.042). This indicates that majority of students tend to adopt cognitive strategies in their vocabulary learning compared with the other three strategies. They seldom use translation strategies in vocabulary learning.

Table 4: The Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Sub-Categories of VLS

Categories	Sub-Categories	N	Mean	Std. D
Metacognitive Strategies	Planning(2 items)	30	2.30	.967
	Selective Attention(4 items)	30	2.52	1.142
	Self-Initiation (5 items)	30	2.43	1.056
Cognitive Strategies	Guessing Strategies(7 items)	30	2.58	1.029
	Dictionary Strategies(8 items)	30	3.07	1.271
	Note-Taking Strategies(4 items)	30	2.59	1.176
	Memory Strategies(20 items)	30	2.53	1.201
	Activation Strategies(5 items)	30	2.43	1.040
Social/Affective Strategies	Social Strategies(4 items)	30	2.03	.870
	Affective Strategies(3 items)	30	3.07	1.183
Translation Strategies	English-Mandarin Strategies	30	4.01	1.054
	English-Miao Strategies	30	1.87	.969
	English-Mandarin-Miao Strategies	30	1.82	1.059
	English-Miao-Mandarin Strategies	30	1.71	1.000
	English-Miao/Mandarin Strategies	30	1.86	1.132



Table 4 presents descriptive statistics on each sub-category of the 4 categories of learning strategies. It shows that some sub-category of learning strategies rank comparatively high. It can be seen that English-Mandarin strategies (M = 4.01, SD = 1.054), affective strategies (M = 3.07, SD = 1.183) /dictionary strategies (M = 3.07, SD = 1.271), and note-taking strategies (M = 2.59, SD = 1.176) stand at the first three places, and the other 4 sub-categories of translation strategies rank the lowest 4 strategies. This indicates that: 1) the majority of the Miao students tend to use English-Mandarin strategies even though Mandarin is their L2; 2) they tend to adopt cognitive strategies such as dictionary, effective, and note-taking strategies; 3) they seldom use translation strategies related to Miao language in vocabulary learning.

Self-Reports to Vocabulary Learning Strategies Use between Male and Female Students

The mean score and standard deviation of every category of vocabulary learning strategies used between male and female students are displayed as follows (see Table 5):

Table 5 The Mean Score and Standard Deviation of the 4 Categories of VLS Use between Male and Female Students

Categories	Gender	N	Mean	Std. D
Metacognitive Strategies	male	18	2.51	1.05
	Female	12	2.34	1.07
Cognitive Strategies	male	18	2.70	1.19
	Female	12	2.52	1.14
Social/Affective Strategies	male	18	2.58	0.97
	Female	12	2.31	1.02
Translation Strategies	male	18	2.26	1.12
	Female	12	2.24	0.83

Table 5 shows descriptive statistics on the 4 categories of learning strategies use between male and female students. It shows that compared with the female Miao students, the male Miao students tend to use more strategies from cognitive strategies(M = 2.70, SD = 1.19), social/affective strategies (M = 2.58, SD = 0.97), metacognitive (M = 2.51, SD = 1.05), and translation strategies(M = 2.24, SD = 0.83).

Semi-structured Interview

The results from the oral interviews conducted with the 6 interviewees showed that: 1) 4 of them hold attitudes towards “Words should be studied and put to use” and 2 of them thought “Words should be acquired in context”; 2) 4 of them were good at learning vocabulary by using variety of strategies which cognitive strategies comes the first and translation strategies comes the last, 2 of them didn’t know what meaning by “learning strategies” so that they seldom effectively used them in English learning; 3) 3 of them indicated that they had their own strategies related to some specific features of Miao language in learning vocabulary,



while 3 of them indicated they had no ideas about what specific strategies are when learning English vocabulary; and 4) 4 of the interviewees agreed that Mandarin played very important roles in English vocabulary learning, while 2 of them insisted that vocabulary was much easier for memorizing in mind if they can be related to Miao language.

Conclusions

As a pilot study, the present results must be considered tentatively. Nevertheless, the current pilot study can be considered to indicate how English vocabulary learning strategies are employed by the Miao students, and how they influence and promote English learning.

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