

# Language Learning Strategy Use of Chinese EFL Students in Relation to Gender

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**Abstract** The current study aimed to examine the language learning strategy use of Chinese EFL students in a British university and to explore the impacts of gender on the selection of these strategies. 102 postgraduate students from Newcastle University in the UK were investigated through the administration of Oxford's (1989) SILL and 20 of them were also interviewed. Significant differences were discovered in the use of language learning strategies between genders with females reporting more use in cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Pedagogical implications for language learning strategy instruction have been suggested in order to help improve the language learning performance of Chinese EFL students.

**Keywords** Language Learning Strategies, Gender, Chinese EFL Students

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## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, researchers have begun to explore the learning behaviours or skills of good language learners. [1-4] Identifying what contributes to the success of foreign language acquisition, these scholars have demonstrated that certain strategies are deployed by the learners during their learning process, such as guessing and monitoring. [1] While those early investigations were based primarily on classroom observations and were questioned by other researchers later on due to 'the lack of grounding in theories of second language (L2) acquisition or cognition', [5] a large body of research has been conducted since then.

Even though there is no universal consensus, various definitions and classifications on language learning strategy (LLS) have been put forward by different researchers. [5, 6, 17, 33] However, until the late 1980s, the examination of factors that may affect the use of LLSs was conducted. It has been discovered that learner's characteristics can impact the choice of strategy for language learning, such as gender. [7, 8, 22, 25] To some extent, findings from these studies have been adding insight to the field of LLS research, which is claimed to be 'one of the most fertile areas of research in

language learning in recent years'. [9]

While investigations in this area are of considerable quantity, little attention has been paid to the LLS use of Chinese learners. Several studies were carried out over the last 15 years to explore the strategy use of Chinese EFL (English as Foreign Language) students. [10-14] However, only very limited research was conducted in English learning settings where English was the only official language. [15,16] With the increasing development of globalization and Chinese economy, more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad, particularly to study in such English-speaking country as the UK. The shift of learning setting such as moving from an EFL context to an intensive English learning environment may lead to the change in learning performance such as the use of LLSs. [15-17] As Oxford and Anderson assert, the relationship between second or foreign language learning and learning contexts is 'inextricably linked'. [18] Hence, the research on language strategy use by this group of population in such a learning context could have significance for both teachers and learners. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore the LLSs used by Chinese EFL students, in particular to examine how their selection of language strategies may be impacted by their gender. The findings in this study will trigger the awareness of both language teachers and learners on effective language strategies that are suitable to Chinese EFL students studying in UK universities. They will also help these students to apply appropriate strategies in accordance with their diverse characteristics to various learning activities during their learning process. Hence, the learning performance of these Chinese EFL students will be improved through appropriate language strategy instruction.

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that more learning strategies are deployed by females than by males. [7-8, 13, 23, 25] In an exploratory study on how sex impacts the use of LLSs for adult learners, Ehrman and Oxford [7] investigated both language learners and language teachers, and discovered that females reported greater strategy use

than males, particularly in the application of social learning strategies. The finding corresponded with what had been identified by Politzer, [23] who examined the self-reported language learning behaviors of college students and stated that a significantly greater preference to deploy social interactions with others outside the classroom had been reported by females than by males.

According to Green & Oxford, [7] apart from social strategies, strategies more frequently employed by female learners also include memory, metacognitive and affective strategies, which have been presented in a quantitative study carried out among university students in Puerto Rico. Oxford and Nyikos [25] also explored LLSs used by university students and illustrated that compared with males, females reported more frequent strategy use not only in conversational input elicitation strategies that reflect social interaction, but also in additional two types of strategies: general study strategies and formal rule-related practice strategies. Moreover, based on their empirical study, Bacon & Finnemann [22] identified that females were more likely to engage in global or synthetic strategies, whereas males tended to favor decoding or analytic strategies.

Hong-Nam and Leavel [21] researched the LLS use of EFL students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in intensive English learning context and discovered that although there was no apparent difference in overall strategy use between male and female students, a statistically significant difference in the use of affective strategies was identified, with females reporting higher utilization in this category. In addition to this, females favoured social and metacognitive strategies most and memory strategies the least whereas males engaged in metacognitive and compensation strategies most, and affective strategies the least. Phakiti [39] analyzed how gender influences the application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension test in the EFL learning context, identifying that metacognitive strategies were significantly higher used by males than by females.

However, within groups of the same language proficiency (highly successful, moderately successful, and unsuccessful), either the reading behaviour or the application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies was affected by gender. On the contrary, in an investigation of strategy use in listening comprehension, Bacon [20] tested fifty motivated Spanish learners and demonstrated that female participants deployed a significantly higher proportion of metacognitive strategies than male participants did. Females displayed a greater propensity to plan for the listening, monitor their comprehension, and evaluate their strategy use than their counterparts. In contrast, males tended to avoid the planning and monitoring aspects favouring a direct cognitive method.

As is indicated in the majority of these findings, it is a universally agreed reality that gender tends to affect the use of LLSs and males and females adjust their strategies differentially to different learning contexts and activities. However, limitations can also be recognized in these studies

after in-depth analysis. Due to the diversity of research instruments, type of tasks involved, survey population focused on and study contexts, the researchers may interpret the investigation results with different criteria, and even the same learning strategy may be interpreted in different ways as a result of different research purposes. Furthermore, few studies have explained why such significant gender differences in strategy selection occur, how these varieties originate and whether they relate more to social behaviour, linguistic aptitude or personality. In addition, gender diversities should be interpreted very strictly in their specific contexts where they occur. As Phakiti [39] claims, 'to date, there is little empirical evidence to show how language learning strategies are related to actual strategy use in context'. While it has been suggested by most studies that females are more likely to deploy a greater use of strategies, the results should not be a generalization of female learners' feature and the differences do not necessarily denote that people of one gender are more expert at language learning than people of the other [8]. Therefore, the findings should be closely related to the investigation backgrounds when discussed and the implications may also be interpreted in different ways accordingly.

Very few studies have been conducted related to the LLS use of Chinese EFL students but commonalities can still be drawn from limited published literature. Gu [12] conducted a questionnaire survey on gender and vocabulary learning strategy employed by non-English major students at a Chinese university. The findings suggested that there were significant differences of strategy use in gender, whereby females outperformed males at each academic level (academic level was measured by College English Test scores in this study). Compared with males who used more rote-memorization, females engaged in more cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Peacock & Ho [13] investigated the use of L2 learning strategies used by students of different disciplines in Hong Kong City University to explore the relationships among strategy use, L2 proficiency and gender. It was shown that the most frequently used strategies were compensation strategy whereas the least frequently used was affective strategy and a significantly higher frequency of overall strategy use was reported by females over the males, particularly in the categories of memory or metacognitive strategies. Bremner [11] also focused on the same issue and selected the subjects at the City University of Hong Kong. Likewise, the findings showed that compensation and metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategies while affective and memory strategies were the least used by the participants.

Strategy use of Chinese EFL students in English learning contexts has also been examined. Goh & Kwah [10] used SILL to survey the strategy use of Chinese EFL students enrolled on an intensive English program at a University of Singapore in order to explore how it is related to the learners' language proficiency and gender. It was revealed that metacognitive strategies were most frequently employed

whereas memory strategies were least often utilized. How strategies use relates to language proficiency among Chinese research students in UK higher education was also analyzed. It was illustrated by the data that the most commonly used strategies were metacognitive strategy [16]. Gao [15] tried to identify changes in LLS use of a group of Chinese EFL students at a British university after they moved from China to Britain and discovered that fresh motives, knowledge, and beliefs as well as LLSs were being acquired by some of the students after they began to study in the new learning contexts. Although the conception of learning English as a 'tool' was still strong, many participants had stopped the application of rote-learning such as memorizing, regular reviewing and note taking to remember new words. Instead, they resorted to adopting more social and interactive strategies to guess, learn, and apply meanings of new words in real conversations.

Based on the literature reviewed above, it is apparent that the difference of strategy use in gender is also true to Chinese EFL learners, i.e. females tend to show greater use of LLSs than males. However, it seems that there is a dynamic relationship between strategy use and the learners' learning contexts. When learning in mainland China the students seem to employ memory strategies more because of the examination-oriented feature of Chinese language learning setting and the lack of application of knowledge to communication. By contrast, when studying in an English learning context, the learners may deploy social strategies more frequently due to the constant and adequate language exposure. As is indicated in many studies, compensation and metacognitive strategies are usually preferred by Chinese EFL learners whereas memory and affective strategies are the least favoured. However, whatever strategies may be used by Chinese EFL learners, the interpretation should always be related to the specific social and cultural contexts within which language learning is fully situated and be analyzed from social-cultural perspectives.

As far as the current study is concerned, similar research questions were also explored such as the relationship between gender and LLS use in Chinese EFL students. However, since each study is carried out in a specific context with different characteristics the findings could also be varied. The results of the current research will be compared with those of the previous studies' in order to discover the similarities among these Chinese EFL students in their use of language strategies as well as to identify the differences. In addition, further discussion will be conducted and reasons contributing to the differences will be analyzed in order to provide significant implications for the future teaching practice.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Questions

The present research focused on the LLSs used by Chinese

EFL students studying in a British university in order to examine the relationships between language strategies and gender. Thus, the following research questions had been answered after the investigation in this study:

1. What language learning strategies are most frequently used by Chinese EFL students studying in this university?
2. Are there any significant differences in strategies used by male and female students?

#### 3.2. Participants

The investigation was conducted at Newcastle University in the UK. One hundred and twenty postgraduate students enrolled in different Master-level programs were randomly selected via the Outlook Web App system of the university, in which they were able to be contacted by means of their campus email addresses. One hundred and twenty emails attached with questionnaires as well as consent forms were sent to these students but only one hundred and two of them replied to the emails and expressed their wiliness to participate in the research. Therefore, the exact number of participant in the current study is one hundred and two, of whom fifty-three are females and forty-nine are males, which means that the ratio of gender was approximately even to address the second research question.

#### 3.3. Instrumentation

In order to identify language strategy use scholars have attempted to employ many different approaches, of which the most prevalent one is to use questionnaires. In this study the main instrument used to evaluate the participants' strategy use was Oxford's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL). The SILL was first designed as an instrument for assessing LLSs in 1986 and to date various versions have been developed. In the current investigation SILL Version 7.0 (1989) was used to collect the quantitative data.

SILL version 7.0 is a summative rating scale devised to assess the frequency of use of LLSs deployed by speakers of other languages learning English. 50 items are included in the inventory that can be classified into two main categories, direct strategies and indirect strategies, which are further subdivided into 6 groups. Memory strategies (items 1-9), cognitive strategies (items 10-23) and compensation strategies (items 24-29) belong to direct strategies whereas metacognitive strategies (items 30-38), affective strategies (items 39-44) and social strategies (items 45-50) constitute the indirect strategies. The detailed explanation for each strategy category has been illustrated in chapter 2 (see Table 3). The SILL uses a choice of 5 Likert-scale responses for each strategy depicted: never or almost never true of me, usually not true of me, somewhat true of me, usually true of me and always or almost always true of me. The respondents are asked to specify their response (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) to a strategy statement such as 'I use flashcards to remember new

English words'. An instruction on how to compute and interpret the scores is also offered for the investigators following the 50 strategy descriptions. According to Oxford [6], the frequency of use of LLSs can be grouped into three levels based on the overall averages worked out from the results: high (3.5-5.0), medium (2.5-3.4) and low (1.0-2.4). To date, the SILL has been applied worldwide and translated into different languages including Chinese. However, considering that all the participants involved in the present investigation were postgraduate students and they had been studying in the UK for over half year, the SILL was not translated into Chinese. In spite of their diverse English proficiency levels the respondents were expected to be proficient enough to understand all the 50 strategy statements listed in the questionnaires.

Both quantitative and qualitative research procedures were conducted in this study in order to achieve triangulation, which is regarded as an effective approach to guarantee research validity. The instrument employed to collect the qualitative data was interviews. As many researchers have pointed out, 'questionnaires are notorious for their low response rates'. [40] In addition, they have inherent weakness. For example, questionnaires can reveal people's attitudes and beliefs about what they want and what they will do, or have done, but they cannot tell us what they actually do. [41] Therefore, more direct approaches such as the use of interviews will help the investigator to gather the in-depth information needed to explore the complex meaning behind the questionnaires. In this study, semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted after the quantitative data had been analyzed. Based on what had been discovered from the quantitative survey, the interviews aimed to confirm the findings of the questionnaires and to explore why and how the participants applied the corresponding categories of strategies in their actual learning process.

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In the emails, all the participants were informed of the research purposes and procedures of the study. It was made clear that they would remain anonymous and all their personal details would not be shown in the dissertation; and the data collected would be stored confidentially and for research objectives only. A consent form was distributed to each student to guarantee that they all participated in the survey voluntarily. They were also instructed that there were no correct or wrong answers to any questions and they were asked to respond to each statement listed in SILL based on an honest evaluation of their LLS use in order to make sure that the final results are reliable. Of the 102 questionnaires responded to none had missing values, which means they were all valid and can be analyzed statistically.

The second part of data collection in this study is qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to examine and confirm the findings of the questionnaires. As Dornyei [19] points out, sometimes

we cannot examine in-depth information with questionnaires because the respondents tend to show less engagement. Hence, a follow-up qualitative component to the study should be the perfect approach to remedy this weakness. Twenty participants were randomly selected from the total subjects and were interviewed. In order to avoid sexual bias 10 participants were selected from each gender group. Considering the fact that the language proficiency of participants was varied the interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English during the transcription phase. The interviews were recorded and each lasted about twenty minutes on average.

The *Statistical Package for the Social Science* (SPSS) for Windows version 19.0 was applied to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics (mean, maximum, minimum and standard deviations) were performed to answer the first research question examining the overall strategy use, strategy use in six categories, and the most and least used strategy items. Then independent t-test procedures were conducted to answer the second research question to determine whether there were significant differences in strategy use between male students and female students. In the current study, the significant level for the mean variation was set at  $p < .05$ , and the means and standard deviation of each strategy category were computed and analyzed to test the significant difference.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. 'Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful mater) to the contexts of their use'. [42] As a research technique, content analysis provides fresh insights, promotes a researcher's understanding of phenomena, or informs practical actions. Qualitatively, content analysis may include any form of analysis in which communication content such as speech, written texts and interviews is categorized. Content analysis may be used in an inductive or deductive way according to the purpose of the study. The former is employed when there is not enough previous knowledge about the phenomenon, in order to formulate the categories. The latter is applied when the structure of analysis is based on the former knowledge and the aim of the research is to test a theory. [43] However, both approaches include three main stages: preparation, organizing and reporting.

In this study, the interview transcripts were first organized through the identification of key words related to various LLSs, and then they were categorized into different groups based on similar units of meaning. Finally, a general description of the research topics was formulated through these categories. The abstractions generated from the qualitative data were then compared with the results discovered from the quantitative research, in order to examine and confirm the final conclusions. However, only the selected transcripts that could justify the arguments are to be presented in the discussion section.

## 4. Results

In this section research findings statistically analyzed by SPSS are presented. First, the overall strategy use of the participants is illustrated through descriptive statistics, and then the contrast between female and male students in their strategy use is demonstrated by independent t-test results.

**Table 1.** Summary of Descriptive Statistics for LLS Use

Strategies	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Rank
Compensation	3.25	.637	1.83	4.33	1
Metacognitive	3.22	.650	1.22	4.44	2
Social	3.19	.767	1.67	4.67	3
Cognitive	3.18	.524	1.85	4.21	4
Memory	2.83	.487	1.44	3.89	5
Affective	2.71	.727	1.00	4.33	6
Overall Use	3.06	.632	1.50	4.31	

*N*=102

As shown in Table 1, the mean of frequency of overall strategy use was 3.06, which indicated the participants employed a medium ( $M = 2.5-3.4$ ) degree of strategy use. As seen in the statistics, all the six strategy categories in the present investigation were used at the medium range of strategy use. According to the results, the most frequently used strategies were compensation strategies ( $M = 3.25$ ), followed by metacognitive strategies ( $M = 3.22$ ), social strategies ( $M = 3.19$ ), cognitive strategies ( $M = 3.18$ ) and memory strategies ( $M = 2.83$ ). The affective strategies were the least preferred by Chinese EFL learners in this study ( $M$

= 2.71).

The differences in strategy use between female and male learners were analyzed by t-test procedures and the results have been illustrated in Table 2. As indicated in the table, females reported a higher use in overall strategies ( $M = 3.20$ ) than males ( $M = 2.93$ ) and they outperformed their counterparts in the use of all strategies except in the category of compensation of which males showed a greater use ( $M = 3.29$ ). Significant differences between genders were identified in the use of three strategy categories, cognitive strategies ( $t = -2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ), metacognitive strategies ( $t = -2.70$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and social strategies ( $t = -2.70$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which meant females significantly employed more use of strategies in these three categories than males. However, compared with other strategies, social strategies were the most favoured by females ( $M = 3.45$ ).

## 5. Discussion

The statistical analyses in the previous section have revealed several meaningful findings. First, the frequency of LLS use of Chinese EFL students studying in Newcastle University in this study belongs to medium range ( $M = 3.06$ ), with compensation strategies being the most preferred and affective strategies the least. Second, significant differences have been discovered between male and female students in overall strategy use with females engaging in a greater use of strategies in each category, but most significantly in the cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies.

**Table 2.** Summary of Variation in LLS Use by Gender

Strategies	N Male	Female	M Male	Female	SD Male	Female	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Memory	49	53	2.77	2.88	.480	.497	-.856	.396
Cognitive	49	53	3.05	3.33	.554	.458	-2.09	.040
Compensation	49	53	3.29	3.22	.654	.629	.398	.693
Metacognitive	49	53	3.00	3.44	.650	.580	-2.70	.009
Affective	49	53	2.54	2.88	.743	.680	-1.83	.072
Social	49	53	2.93	3.45	.689	.764	-2.70	.009
Total	49	53	2.93	3.20	.580	.576	-2.43	.011

\* $p < .05$

### 5.1. Differences in LLS Use by Gender

Consistent with most research findings, [10, 13, 20, 21] female students in this study reported more strategy use than the male students did. Significant differences have been identified in the use of three strategy categories, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. According to Oxford, cognitive strategies are used to manipulate or transform the target language and various strategies are involved in cognitive strategies, ranging from repeating to analyzing expressions. [6] The analysis results have suggested that female students tend to employ more cognitive means such as repeating, practicing, reasoning and summarizing to facilitate the language learning process and promote their language proficiency than their male counterparts, which has also been approved by other researchers. [12, 22] As one female participant stated:

*'I like reading intensively and repeat reading the material until I fully understand it...I pay attention to and imitate the way natives speak including the pronunciation of words. I think repeating and practicing is the most basic and important way to learn a foreign language'.*

In contrast, male students are less aware of cognitive strategies even though they are typically discovered to be the most preferred strategies by language learners. [6] A male student reported:

*'I like watching movies with bilingual (English and Chinese) subtitles. Occasionally I pay attention to some good expressions while watching but the impression couldn't last too long...I seldom write them down or think about how to use them in daily life'.*

From the statements above, it is apparent that the male students in this study are less likely to analyze and summarize what they are exposed to during their learning process than female students are, thus the use of cognitive strategies is infrequent among them.

Another strategy category that has been revealed to be significantly more frequently used by females is metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategy refers to actions that go beyond merely cognitive devices and that offer an approach for learners to coordinate the learning process. [6] The higher frequency of use in metacognitive strategies indicates that female students are more skilled at centering, arranging and evaluating their English learning. They monitor their learning process and adjust learning strategies differentially to different learning settings and tasks, which has been supported by previous research. [20] Normally, these female learners have developed good habits of learning the language and they set goals and objectives for the learning as well. As one interviewee remarked:

*'I preview what is going to be discussed in the coming lectures including looking up new words involved...I don't have very detailed schedules for everyday*

*learning but I do have a clear general plan for period learning'.*

Compared with their female counterparts male students have demonstrated little inclination in terms of organizing their language learning and considering the purpose of learning. They hardly seek opportunities to practice and improve their English actively. Instead, they rely mainly on compensation strategies that were the most favoured strategy by males in this study to make for their limited English knowledge, which has been proven by a male interviewee:

*'It is not necessary for me to pay attention to the way natives speak because I can use my own way and the words I know to express myself as long as they can understand me. Sometimes even body language can help a lot'.*

Parallel to many previous investigations, [8, 21, 23-25] female participants in this study also reported significantly more use of social strategies. Social strategies, according to Oxford, containing asking questions, cooperating and empathizing with others, are used to help learners to acquire the language through interaction with others. [6] Females are generally considered to 'excel at establishing strong relationships and building vast social networks'. [26] They tend to use social support system in the language learning context with greater consistency than the male participants. This is in order to facilitate the language acquisition and obtain their learning goals. [21] In the current research social strategies were the most preferred by female participants, which means that they employ this category of strategies most frequently during their learning process. They seek and utilize opportunities to practice and develop their English through asking for correction, collaborating with peers and promoting cultural understanding. Many female students expressed the similar preference for social strategies in the interviews, for example, one stated:

*'I attend social activities purposely and speak English as much as possible. I ask native speakers about how to express some ideas and to correct my pronunciation when I am talking with them'.*

The variation in strategy use by gender may be interpreted from several aspects. First, learning context is still crucial to the selection of strategies used by these Chinese EFL students in this study. Compared with previous learning setting, these students are offered an authentic and natural language exposure, which is the prerequisite for applying such strategies as social strategy. Second, learners' personality types may also influence their strategy choice. While it is not universally agreed by scholars, some studies have illustrated that 'extroverts are more successful at acquiring fundamental interpersonal communication skills than introverts'. [17] Generally, female participants in the current investigation have shown a more extrovert personality trait than their male counterparts at whatever language proficiency level, which has been reflected from the interviews. As one female interviewee mentioned:

*I like chatting with them (foreign classmates)...for formal occasions such as presentation and group discussion, I will make enough preparation; for less formal occasions like casual conversation, I will let them (foreign classmates) write down what I don't understand and then look up in a dictionary by myself'.*

In contrast, another male interviewee reported:

*I feel fear when I am speaking English with them (foreign classmates) and I am afraid of losing face even though I know speaking may be more helpful for my language improvement'.*

Although the differences in strategy use between male and female students in this study are pronounced it does not necessarily mean that female Chinese EFL students are more expert at learning English than their male counterparts. The reason for the variation may be complicated and related to many other factors; hence multiple studies across various contexts are needed.

## 5.2. Pedagogical Implications for LLS Instruction

The findings in this study have certain implications for LLS instruction in the target language learning contexts. The overall use of LLSs reported by the participants in this study is in the medium range, which indicates these Chinese EFL learners would, therefore, profit greatly from the instruction in the use of all learning strategies. According to the analysis results, the most frequently used strategies by Chinese EFL students in this study were compensation and metacognitive strategies rather than such strategies typical of Chinese educational system as memory strategies, which implies that the English curriculum design should be compensation and metacognitive strategy based, rather than memory based. [27] However, it has also been revealed by the statistic analysis that the least used strategies by this group of students were affective strategies, which means effort should be made to help these students to develop affective strategies. As Stern suggests, an important part in language learning is played by affect. [2] Oxford also emphasizes that affective strategies are crucial to foreign language acquisition. [6] However, since some of these strategies seem to be novel and maybe even unnatural to some learners, teachers should have to be very sensitive to the existing mindsets of learners. In addition, students need to be offered a great deal of guidance in order to experiment with these new strategies and decide on the types of strategies that suit them. [10]

Also apparent in the findings is that strategy use of these Chinese EFL students may be impacted by variables such as gender. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to identify that some strategies may be more applicable to some learners than to others because females and males use different strategies. The more the teachers know about such parameters, the more closely they approach the nature of individual differences in the classroom. [8] According to Lessard-Clouston, 'when teachers have adequate knowledge

about the students, their goals, motivations, language learning strategies and their understanding of the course to be taught, the language teacher, then, could provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to fulfil different learning styles that meet the needs and expectations of the students who possess different learning styles, motivations, strategy preferences, etc'. [28]

Intervention from the teacher can enable less successful students benefit from the strategies exploited by more successful students, and even the more successful learners can be offered opportunities to improve their strategy use. [29] Learners of different gender have varied demands with respect to teacher intervention during their learning process. [28] In addition, male students may need more directions from the teachers on how to manage their language learning and how to deploy more cognitive and social strategies during the learning process than females.

It has been illustrated that foreign language learners can be instructed to employ strategies in systematic ways and such formal acquiring of the strategies has the expected impacts on foreign language proficiency. [30] Peacock and Ho also confirm that such strategies are ready to teach and that many programs have succeeded in strategy training. [13] Therefore, several procedures could be suggested to fulfil the instruction in language strategy use.

First, it is to raise the learners' awareness about learning strategies. It has been reflected from the interviews that some students were still not clear about the notion and types of LLSs. As one participant mentioned:

*'Maybe I am using some LLSs during my English learning process but I am not aware of that and I don't know how to make them more helpful for me and which methods are more suitable to me'.*

Through increasing the introduction to the concept of LLSs the students will come to recognize the desired effects of these strategies on EFL learning and will certainly actively and consciously deploy them more during their learning process. [14] Becoming aware of their favoured learning strategies could enable learners to be more autonomous and efficient in fulfilling the task of L2 acquisition. [31] Moreover, awareness training should be interesting and encouraging so that the learners will be inspired to expand their strategic knowledge in the future. [6] In addition, students of different gender may be developed with different awareness on diverse learning strategies according to their personal characteristics.

Second, explicit instruction should be provided in classroom to these students. According to Chamot, explicit instruction includes models of strategy teaching, identification of the strategies, provision of opportunities for practice and self-evaluation. [32] Cohen, Weaver and Li emphasize that 'explicitly describing, discussing, and reinforcing strategies in the classroom can have a direct payoff on student outcomes'. [33] As the explicit strategic knowledge grows the learners will become relatively autonomous thus the teachers will change their role from

instructor to facilitator, who identifies the appropriate strategies for different learning tasks and individuals. This finally could enable learners to become more independent and increase confidence, which, in turn, will promote their language proficiency. [33] Park suggests that strategy training performed in classrooms may enable students to become independent L2 learners outside the classroom where much of L2 acquisition occurs. [34] The remark of one interviewee has proven the benefit of explicit instruction of learning strategies:

*I like to read aloud to make myself heard when I am reciting new words because I was taught that the more senses involved the more impressive the words will be.*

Furthermore, teachers need to select more effective LLSs for learners with different features in the classroom and concentrate on instructing these strategies to the learners in order to enhance their learning behaviours. Effective LLSs are believed more easily obtained than less effective LLSs because the learners can benefit more directly and rapidly from the former in L2 learning, which leads the learners to be motivated to acquire the strategies being instructed and to deploy them later more eagerly and frequently in L2 learning tasks. [34]

Third, language strategy training should be incorporated with appropriate training materials as well as activities in language learning classrooms. Instructional materials for language strategy training have been developed by researchers. [35] These materials are designed to assist students to become more capable and more responsible language learners, to offer the language teachers a model for learning training, and to demonstrate the teachers how to incorporate learner training with language teaching according to the specific requirements of different learning contexts. Direct training in strategy use has also been provided through these materials, which make the students aware of the value and aim of strategy instruction. [5] In addition to training materials, a range of classroom activities have also been suggested, including concise explication of language acquisition processes, instances of strategy applications, examples of strategy use for various tasks, identification of one's own language learning progress, and pair and group activities. [5] Only when these instructional materials are integrated appropriately with the suggested activities and are applied to address specific learning purposes or tasks can they really achieve the objective of enhancing the learners' language strategy use. As Peacock and Ho confirm, teachers and materials' designers should combine a variety of tasks and activities, which target strategies that teachers consider as crucial for successful L2 learning. [13] The reality that students may apply language strategies differently according to various learning tasks must guide the development of instructional materials.

Fourth, language strategy instruction should aim to promote learner autonomy. As Ellis points out, 'the idea of strategy training is attractive because it provides a way of helping learners to become autonomous (i.e. of enabling

them to take responsibility for their own learning)'. [36] Cohen also believes that a further goal of strategy instruction is to enhance learner autonomy and learner self-direction by allowing students to select their own strategies and to do so spontaneously, without consistent prompting from teachers. [37] Wenden emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy by pointing out that helping learners learn how to learn could not only enable them acquire learning strategies and the knowledge of learning but also could make them use these strategies and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. [38] Students should be instructed to be aware of their abilities, the progress they are making and what they can achieve with the skills being taught. In order to promote learner autonomy, self-regulation training should be included in strategy instruction. The provision of self-regulation training is likely to increase the possibility of strategy maintenance and transfer, which is considered as the criterion of the success of any type of skill training. The absence of such training will lead to the students' continued dependence on their teachers in strategy use despite the relevant instruction before. Thus, the learners will fail to become autonomous. [38]

In conclusion, these Chinese EFL students might benefit from strategy instruction that makes them more competent at using learning strategies and more proficient in the language. Both male and female students should be made aware of the importance of active use of strategies involving naturalistic practice, particularly in a context where the opportunities for such practice are ideally provided. [8] These students should also be informed of the broad range of strategy choices along with strategy learning materials available to them that are suitable to the various learning activities. In particular, the male students should be instructed how to employ more strategies such as cognitive strategies and social strategies in order to improve their learning performance. In addition, these Chinese EFL students should also be trained to learn autonomously in order to maintain and transfer the strategic knowledge they acquired for future study.

## 6. Conclusions

The current research was designed to examine the strategy use of Chinese EFL students in a British university in relation to gender. However, the findings identified in this study may be mirrored in other UK universities although extended research is still needed to examine the assumption. Significant differences in the use of strategies have been identified between female and male students with females reporting more strategies use than males, particularly in the application of three categories of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Several reasons may help interpret these findings such as the shift of learning context, cultural differences and the learners' characters. Meanwhile, some implications could be indicated from the results, instruction in the use of strategies that are suitable to



different learners as well as various learning tasks may be beneficial to these Chinese EFL students in that the strategy use of these participants is in medium range. The students should be made aware of strategic knowledge first then should be taught how to employ different strategies addressing diverse learning activities. Finally they should be developed to be autonomous in strategy use in order to learn independently.

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