

Language Learning Strategy of Hong Kong Putonghua Learners

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Introduction of Putonghua learning to the Hong Kong school curriculum began in 1984. There have been many discussions on Putonghua curriculum, material development and on teaching methodology, but to date, little research has been carried out on how students learn Putonghua. This survey focuses on the Putonghua learning strategies of Hong Kong students from three schools. More than five hundred Form 1 students are included in this project. Questionnaire is used in the survey. Survey of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford 1990) has been adapted and translated into Chinese. The findings show that the average of strategy use falls in the medium range. Three categorical strategies used frequently by Hong Kong Putonghua learners are identified:

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compensative, metacognitive and affective. Focus group interviews are also conducted to validate the findings. Implications to Putonghua instruction are discussed.

Key words: Putonghua, language learning strategies, learner autonomy

Introduction

Putonghua (PTH), which is the national language of China, is not the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people. According to statistics from the Hong Kong 2006 Bi-Census (Census and Statistics Department, 2008), 90.8% of the local people reported that they use Cantonese most of the time. To most Hong Kong students, PTH is not their mother tongue and it occupies the status of a second language (黃月圓、楊素英, 2001).¹

In view of the rapid development of China, and Hong Kong's change of sovereignty in 1997, PTH was introduced into schools as an elective subject in 1984 and became a core subject in both the primary and secondary school curricula in 1998. The Putonghua syllabi of both primary and secondary schools were prepared by the Curriculum Development Council in 1997. Textbooks were developed according to the guidelines of the syllabi. Evidently, students now have greater exposure to the language, but this generally does not appear to have led to a satisfactory advance in the levels of Putonghua proficiency because the social environment (including media, daily business transactions, social life, political debates and education, etc.) is not conducive to the learning of PTH.

A few studies have been conducted in Hong Kong, comparing the structures of PTH and Cantonese, describing the pronunciation of PTH by local students, the possibility of using PTH in teaching, and the different developmental stages of children in learning PTH (何國祥, 2000; 何偉傑、林建平, 2000; 唐秀玲、司徒秀薇、莫淑儀、鄭銳強、張壽洪, 2001; 程相文, 1996; 黃月圓、楊素英, 2000; 衛士翹、

莫漢輝、張靜雲, 2002). However, no study on how students learn PTH in dialect-speaking areas has ever been conducted. Do variables such as the amount of language exposure, learners' attitudes towards the language, and their language proficiency, affect the students' choice of language learning strategies? This study surveys the language learning strategies of Hong Kong PTH learners in order to understand how dialect speakers learn PTH, and its pedagogical implications. It is hoped that this study will ignite greater interest in researching the process whereby students learn language, with a view to "employing ways of empowering language learners to become more self-directed and effective in their learning" (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006, p. 78).

Background of the Study

Studies on Language Learning Strategies

The interest in studying language learning strategies was sparked by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975)'s work on "good language learners". Both studies generated a list of characteristics or strategies used by successful language learners. The "good language learner studies" have inspired a considerable amount of empirical research on identifying strategies used by successful language learners. This indicates that the research focus on language learning has shifted from the product of learning to the process of learning (Drożdżiał-Szelest, 1997). This concern for process implies a concern for the learners' strategies with regard to the acquisition of language skills (Oxford, 1990).

Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Tudor (1996) described language learning strategies as the purposeful actions learners engage in, either consciously or unconsciously, with the goal of enhancing skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing of a foreign (or second) language. In this article, language learning strategy is defined as actions taken by learners to enhance their language skills. Based on their research conducted on the

language learning strategies and behaviours exhibited by learners to improve their second/foreign language abilities, Oxford, Lavine and Crookall (1989) have developed a framework that defines specific strategies and divides them into two types of direct and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies include: memory, cognitive and compensation strategies.

Indirect strategies include: metacognitive, affective and social strategies. They assist the learning of a language effectively.

Based on this framework, a questionnaire that asks learners to report the degree of their strategy use has been developed. It is known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990). Many recent studies on language learning strategies use the SILL to measure the frequency of strategy use by ESL or EFL students (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Riazi, 2007; Taguchi, 2002). According to Ehrman and Oxford (1995), the 80-item questionnaire has been used with over 5,700 language learners. In addition to their use in research on patterns of language learning strategies, some researchers advocate the instruction of these strategies to help less successful language learners, and to enhance learners' effectiveness in learning by consciously applying these strategies (Chamot, 2005).

Language Learning Strategies Employed in Learning Chinese Language

Studies on the language learning strategies of Chinese learners in Hong Kong are few, and most of these studies are on learning of Chinese language as the mother tongue. They focus on the strategies of reading and writing (Chan, 1996; Lau & Chan, 2003; So & Siegel, 1997; 羅燕琴, 1998; 蘇月華, 1995). However, the learning of Putonghua in Hong Kong aims to promote the speaking and listening proficiency of the students. Development of reading and writing ability of Chinese is assigned to the Chinese language class.

More studies investigating the language learning strategies of foreign students of Chinese were conducted. Chen (1995) looked at the language learning strategies used by beginning students of Chinese in the U.S. Data were collected by questionnaire (SILL), interviews, class observations and case studies. The results showed that the least successful students used more affective strategies than the most successful students. Female students reported using more social and compensation strategies than male counterparts.

More foreigners have come to China to study Chinese language. In recent years, many studies on language learning strategies are conducted in Mainland China. For example Jiang (江新, 2000) used SILL to survey foreign students studying Chinese in Beijing. He found that many foreign students used social strategies since they were staying in China. The language was needed in everyday social life. He also observed that the senior students used more strategies than year one students. Metacognitive strategies had a high correlation with language proficiency in his study.

Language Learning Strategy Employed by Chinese Learners

The number of studies on the learning of English by Chinese speakers is growing in number in China, Taiwan and in the U.S. (T. H. Chen, 2006; Holt, 2006; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001; Yang, 2000; 文秋芳、王立菲, 2004a, 2004b). In these studies, they look at Chinese students learning English in China, Taiwan or in the U.S. by employing Oxford's SILL or other surveying instruments. Wen and Wang (文秋芳、王立菲, 2004b) suggested that other factors, such as learning environment, learners factor, learning styles and gender should be considered in addition to the learning strategies.

Three studies on language learning strategies have been identified in Hong Kong, but these are related to the learning of English. Bremner (1997, 1999) asked 149 university students in Hong Kong to report their use of strategies in learning English. The results showed that compensation and metacognitive strategies were the most used, while affective and memory strategies were less preferred. The second study

was conducted by Lee (1999) on the correlation of motivation and learning strategies of successful and unsuccessful EFL Learners in Hong Kong primary schools. The results showed that although the unsuccessful EFL group used more compensation strategy than their successful counterparts, the latter made overall greater use of language learning strategies. The proficient group was also more motivated, revealing a positive correlation between students' motivation and strategy use. The third research conducted by Peacock and Ho (2003) investigated students' language learning strategies across eight disciplines. Apart from administering Oxford's SILL, in-depth interviews were also conducted with 48 students to explore why they did or did not use certain strategies. A positive association was found between 27 strategies and language learning proficiency. English major students used the most strategies and students from Computer Studies used the fewest. They suggested that language teachers need to be aware of the sharp disciplinary differences in strategy use. Specific strategy training for students in different disciplines was recommended. Although there is some research related to English language learning strategies, research exploring PTH learning strategies in Hong Kong is nonexistent. To date, research on Putonghua is restricted to curriculum design and teaching approaches.

Research Questions

This study intends to answer the following questions:

1. What is the general pattern of language learning strategy used by Hong Kong PTH learners?
2. Are there significant differences in language learning strategy use among groups of PTH students that have different amounts of exposure to the language?
3. What are the commonly-used strategies among Hong Kong PTH learners?
4. What are the implications for Putonghua teaching?

Method

Participants

Form 1 students from three secondary schools were invited to participate in this study, with a total of 502 students (282 boys, 219 girls and 1 of unreported gender). The subjects were around 12 years old. The majority spoke Cantonese at home (92%). Due to the length of the questionnaire, it might not be suitable for primary school students to participate in this survey. Form 1 students were chosen because they had some exposure to PTH at primary school. Generally, some schools offer two periods of Putonghua per week, while some arrange only one period (each lasting 35–40 minutes). The study of PTH continues into the secondary school curriculum. The schools have the liberty to arrange the number of PTH learning hours in the school curriculum, hence affecting our choice of participating schools in this study.

We chose three schools according to the different mode of how PTH was used. School A offered PTH learning one period a week as a language subject.² The total number of students from School A was 163 with 106 boys and 55 girls, with 2 cases of unreported gender.

School B used PTH as the medium of instruction in all subjects (except English). It is the language of the school. No PTH language class was offered since the students were using the language in learning. The total number of students from School B was 183 with 105 boys and 74 girls, with 4 cases of unreported gender.

School C offered PTH learning one period a week as a school subject. All Form 1 Chinese language class was conducted in PTH. The total number of students from School C was 165 with 71 boys and 90 girls, with 4 cases of unreported gender.

Instruments

The most frequently used method to elicit students' language learning strategies is by conducting a questionnaire study. The sample population

was measured through the administration of SILL (Oxford, 1990). The reliability for the SILL is reported as .93–.98, depending on whether the respondents take the SILL in their own language or in an L2 (Green & Oxford, 1995). Since the questionnaire was administered on a group of Chinese students learning Putonghua, the SILL version 5, which was designed for English speakers learning other language, was modified and translated into Chinese with a total of 63 items. The students responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (“never or almost never”), 2 (“usually not”), 3 (“sometimes”), 4 (“often”) and 5 (“always or almost always”). The questionnaire was structured according to the six categories of strategy use: memory (11 items), cognitive (16 items), compensation (8 items), metacognitive (14 items), affective (7 items) and social (7 items). A pilot test was conducted to check for clarity and comprehensibility. Some minor changes were made before administration of the questionnaire.

The SILL was accompanied by a demographic questionnaire, in which information about students’ mother tongue, previous PTH learning experience, interest in learning the language, perception of difficult level, self-rating proficiency and expected level of proficiency was elicited. We were aware of the limitation of self-report instrument, but in order to conduct a medium-large scale survey, questionnaire remains the best instrument.

Three focus group discussions were also conducted with the students from Schools B and C for an in-depth understanding of what strategies they employed and what they actually did during the learning of PTH. School A refused attending the discussion. The discussions were video-taped. This data was used for comparison with the information collected via the questionnaire.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey data was collected during the period of May 2006 to November 2006. The questionnaire was administered by the teachers of the schools in accordance with the guidelines. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the school principals and the teachers before administration. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary.

Analysis of the questionnaire was conducted using SPSS 15. The mean score of strategy use was computed to answer questions 1 and 3 to survey the general pattern of language learning strategy use of Hong Kong PTH learners; and to identify the frequently-used strategies among Hong Kong PTH learners. As for significant differences in language learning strategy use among groups of PTH students who had different degrees of exposure to the language, a multivariate test was used.

Results

Cronbach alphas were used to examine the reliability of the SILL (Chinese version). The reliability of the overall scale is very high ($\alpha = .97$) and the alpha values of various subscales were also satisfactory and reported in Table 1. The SILL was therefore considered a reliable instrument for its intended purpose. The data related to the four research questions is analyzed in the following sections.

The General Pattern of Language Learning Strategy Use of Hong Kong Putonghua Learners

The overall mean score of strategy use of three schools was 2.79. School A ($N = 161$) had an overall mean of 2.75. School B ($N = 179$) had an overall mean of 2.84, while School C ($N = 162$) had an overall mean of 2.79. The classification of the level of strategy use was based on Oxford's suggestion (Oxford, 1990). The overall total of strategy use scores was averaged for each participant. Participants whose scores were above 3.5 were classified as high level of strategy use, those between 2.5 and 3.4 as medium level and those below 2.4 as low level.

As Table 1 indicates, compensation strategies ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.69$) were frequently employed by students, followed by metacognitive ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.81$) and affective ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.79$). The least used strategies belonged to the cognitive category. All categories fell in Oxford's medium strategy use range of 2.4 to 3.4 (Oxford, 1990). The overall mean score was on the medium use range, indicating that these strategies were only sometimes used.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of SILI Among Students In Three Schools and of Various Levels of Strategy Use

Variables	Memory Strategy		Cognitive Strategy		Compensation Strategy		Metacognitive Strategy		Affective Strategy		Social Strategy		Overall Strategy	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Overall (N = 502)	2.72 (0.67)	2.68 (0.68)	2.92 (0.69)	2.86 (0.81)	2.80 (0.79)	2.78 (0.81)	.89	.90	.76	.85	.93	.86	2.79 (0.65)	.97
School														
A (N = 161)	2.68 (0.63)	2.60 (0.62)	2.91 (0.67)	2.82 (0.82)	2.73 (0.78)	2.75 (0.76)							2.75 (0.61)	
B (N = 179)	2.78 (0.78)	2.74 (0.78)	2.88 (0.76)	2.94 (0.86)	2.87 (0.84)	2.83 (0.91)							2.84 (0.74)	
C (N = 162)	2.70 (0.58)	2.70 (0.63)	2.96 (0.64)	2.80 (0.73)	2.79 (0.74)	2.77 (0.75)							2.79 (0.59)	
F	3.49*	1.06	1.00	3.02*	0.43	2.14							2.38	
η^2	0.014	0.004	0.004	0.012	0.002	0.009							0.010	
Painwise Comparison	B > C**			A > C*		A > C*							B < C*	
Level														
Low (L) (N = 154)	2.07 (0.48)	1.97 (0.43)	2.29 (0.58)	1.94 (0.47)	1.97 (0.53)	1.92 (0.58)							2.03 (0.36)	
Medium (M) (N = 272)	2.85 (0.40)	2.83 (0.39)	3.05 (0.44)	3.07 (0.41)	2.96 (0.44)	2.96 (0.41)							2.95 (0.25)	
High (H) (N = 76)	3.59 (0.54)	3.60 (0.49)	3.73 (0.51)	3.95 (0.43)	3.88 (0.50)	3.89 (0.49)							3.77 (0.31)	
(Mean)	2.72	2.68	2.92	2.85	2.80	2.78							2.79	
F	300.45***	389.26***	220.27***	601.05***	420.73***	455.51***							929.03***	
η^2	.55	.61	.47	.71	.63	.65							.79	
Painwise Comparison	L < H***	L < H***	L < H***	L < H***	L < H***	L < H***							L < H***	
	L < M***	L < M***	L < M***	L < M***	L < M***	L < M***							L < M***	
	M < H***	M < H***	M < H***	M < H***	M < H***	M < H***							M < H***	

Note. School A (one period of PTH lesson per week); School B (all subjects are taught in PTH, except English); School C (Chinese Language lessons are conducted in PTH and also one period of Putonghua per week).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2: The Most Frequently Used Strategies by Students of the Three Schools

Item	Strategy	Category	Mean
33	If I do not know how to say something in PTH, I find a different way to express the idea.	Compensation	3.44
32	If I do not know how to say something in PTH, I switch back to Cantonese.	Compensation	3.39
28	When I do not understand the word I hear, I guess the general meaning from the context or situation.	Compensation	3.34
62	I understand and make allowances for my classmates when they have difficulty in using the language.	Social	3.16
24	I translate the PTH that I heard into Cantonese in my mind.	Cognitive	3.15
1	When learning PTH, I create associations between new material and what I already know.	Memory	3.09
51	I encourage myself so that I will continue to try hard to learn PTH.	Affective	3.08
48	I learn from my mistakes in using PTH.	Metacognitive	3.08
50	I try to relax whenever I feel anxious about using PTH.	Affective	3.06
57	If I do not understand, I ask the speaker to slow down or say it again.	Social	3.05
52	I encourage myself to try using the language even though I might not speak very well.	Affective	3.04
37	When someone is speaking PTH, I try to concentrate on what the person is saying and put unrelated topics out of my mind.	Metacognitive	3.03
44	I prepare for a PTH assignment, e.g., a talk, by understanding the nature of the task, and my current PTH competency.	Metacognitive	3.02
38	I decide in advance to pay special attention to specific language aspects, e.g., tones, intonation, etc.	Metacognitive	3.00

Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use Among Groups of PTH students Who Have Different Amount of Exposure to the Language

Results of MANOVA test showed that the overall model was significant in terms of school effect, Wilks' lambda = 1.90, $p < .05$, and group effect, Wilks' lambda = 98.62, $p < .001$, as seen in Table 1. A significant interaction effect of school and level was found in the memory strategy, $F(4, 491) = 4.42$, $p < .01$. A close examination of the degree of strategy use in each school revealed that there were some minor differences. Two significant school effects were found in the metacognitive strategy, $F(2, 493) = 3.02$, $p < .05$, and the memory strategy, $F(2, 493) = 3.49$, $p < .05$. A main effect was found to be significant in metacognitive strategy, with School B's mean score (2.94) being higher than School C (2.80) and School A (2.82). Another significant school effect was again found in memory strategy, with School B's mean score (2.78) being greater than School C (2.70) and School A (2.68). Participants in the high strategy use group scored significantly higher than those in the medium use group and the low use group in all the strategies.

Commonly-used Strategies of Hong Kong PTH Learners

After determining the general pattern of language strategy use, we further identified the commonly-used strategies by Hong Kong PTH learners. Fourteen individual strategies (above the mean of 3.00) were identified (see Table 2). The popular choices were under the compensation, metacognitive and affective strategies. These findings were also in agreement with the mean scores of the three top categories as illustrated in Table 1 (Compensation 2.92, Metacognitive 2.86, and Affective 2.80)

None of the individual items had a mean of over 3.5. Those items that had mean scores of 3.00 or above were considered moderately-used.

School A had 3 items from metacognitive. The students also liked to use the compensation and affective strategies. School B had the highest mean of strategy use. The students from School B showed a preference of the metacognitive and compensation strategies. School C had 3 items

from compensation and two from affective. However, the difference in the average use of different strategies in each school was small. It was noticed that there were altogether 4 items from the metacognitive category among the 14 items. School B students' choice of metacognitive strategies ($M=2.94$) contributed significantly to the mean of this particular strategy.

Focus Group Discussion

Three focus group discussions were held in July 2006 to April 2007. Two were held in School B. One was attended by 3 students and the other was attended by 4 students. Each discussion lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. The third one was held in School C where 3 students participated in the 45 minutes discussion. School A did not participate in the focus group discussion.

All students were recommended by their PTH teachers according to their PTH proficiency of high, mid and low. The students were not native speakers of PTH. They had attended primary education in Hong Kong and thus had a six-year PTH learning experience. During the discussion, the students were free to choose the use of PTH or Cantonese, or even a mix of the two.

Since both schools used PTH in Chinese language class, we started the discussion by how difficult they perceived PTH. They were first asked if they were used to learning in PTH. They all replied that they were not used to it at the beginning, but after a few months, they had no difficulty in listening. In case they could not understand, School B students said that they would ask their classmates. This indicated that the students employed social strategy frequently when they had difficulty in understanding the language. School C students prefer to ask the teacher. Usually they were encouraged to ask in PTH but they would switch to Cantonese if they could not find the appropriate expressions. Students in School B used more compensation strategy.

The discussion was followed by their general attitudes towards PTH and what their motivation was in learning this language. They all had a positive attitude towards PTH. Two students said PTH sounded melodic. They like to hear the sound of PTH than Cantonese. One girl said one

seemed to be very cultured when speaking PTH. They also loved to sing PTH songs, especially those from Taiwan. When they were asked why they should learn PTH, they showed very instrumental motivation, such as: for future career in China, for travelling in China or Taiwan, for communication among Chinese. One boy from School B said that his writing improved from learning PTH. Since they showed positive attitudes towards PTH, they were asked if they would use the language after school when they were not under the teacher's supervision. They admitted that they seldom used PTH to communicate with fellow students after class because they preferred to use Cantonese, which was their mother tongue and this sounded more natural among Cantonese speakers. Putonghua was not their language for socializing. There were a significant number of migrants from Mainland China in School C, and the students were willing to talk with them in PTH. In this case, they learned PTH from the new migrants and the migrants learned Cantonese from them. The students from School C used the language for socializing with new comers. Some students joined PTH related extra-curricular activities, e.g., PTH recitation, drama club. They told the interviewer that their PTH teacher was quite active. She always organized some PTH activities. In School C, PTH was used in more social contexts. However, this categorical strategy did not have a mean score ($M = 2.77$) in the survey. Students from School B admitted they did not use PTH after school. However, they would listen to PTH channel and like singing PTH songs and watching PTH movies and soap operas. This helped them to remember some of the vocabularies and expressions that they learned in class. In this case, they were employing the memory strategies.

They were asked to evaluate their PTH proficiency. Most said they were good in listening. Two boys from School B said that they were good in speaking. When they were asked how to overcome the difficulties in listening or speaking, they were very quiet. They were all positive about the progress that they made in PTH and they expected that they would speak better PTH when they graduated from Form 5.

All students were asked if they were nervous in using PTH in learning, they said that they were not worried at all, but they admitted they were not confident to speak in PTH in front of the class since they

were afraid of making mistakes. This showed that when they were learning the language in a passive way (listening, comprehending), they were more relaxed, but they became nervous when they had to use the language. This may indicate that they did not know how to use the affective strategy to become more relaxed when using the language.

The students were invited to suggest how to improve their PTH. In School B, one girl said she would talk more in PTH with her relatives in Mainland China. She said she would learn the way they talked. She wanted to speak like the native speakers. A boy said he would write down the Pinyin, but he had no habit of checking the words in dictionary. One student from School C said that she used to keep a glossary book to record the different vocabulary between PTH and Cantonese, but she was too busy to do so then. They were also asked how to prepare their speaking tasks. The more proficient students said that they would practise at least once for the presentation, talk or speech. While practising, they would pay attention to the proper use of words (avoiding Cantonese expressions) and pronunciation. They had employed metacognitive strategies. The less proficient ones said they did not do anything at all.

This indicated that the better language learners monitored their learning better than the less proficient ones. They were more certain on how to improve their learning of PTH.

Discussion

Difference Among Schools and the Mean Use of Language Learning Strategy

This is the first study of Putonghua learning strategies in a dialect-speaking area. SILL is used to survey the general pattern of strategy use. It is found that the use of language learning strategies by Hong Kong PTH learners situates in the medium range of use ($M = 2.79$). Although School B conducts most of its teaching in PTH, and the students have the highest mean score of using the different categories of strategy (except compensation), the overall mean score difference among the three schools does not show any statistical significance. The medium

mean score may reflect that many Hong Kong PTH learners are not aware of the application of strategies in their learning process. The employment of learning strategies is still new to many junior and senior high school students in Hong Kong secondary school students, who often do not develop or use many learning strategies (Green & Oxford, 1995).

Although PTH has been introduced into the Hong Kong school curriculum, the time allocated to the subject is around 35 minutes to 80 minutes per week, depending on individual schools. The use of PTH is on the rise, but the language environment is not conducive to its learning. Students do not feel any urgent need to learn or use PTH, thus the motivation for learning Putonghua is low. A survey, conducted by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (2003) in 2002, showed that 75% of students (both primary and secondary) have low motivation for learning PTH. This may account for the comparatively low use of strategies in the learning of PTH.

Choice of Strategies

Among the six strategy categories, compensation strategy has the highest mean score ($M = 2.92$), followed by metacognitive and affective, then social, memory and cognitive. The ranking is similar to the two studies on English learners in Hong Kong (Bremner, 1997, 1999; Peacock & Ho, 2003). In these studies, compensation and metacognitive strategies are frequently used. The ranking also runs very close to the studies by Yang (1992, 1994) (except memory and cognitive), that focus on the use of learning strategy by Taiwanese college students learning English in Taiwan.

After analysing the strategy use of PTH learners in Hong Kong (Table 1), the individual strategies are grouped according to their category. Again, the dominant strategies belong to the three categories of compensation, metacognition and affection. Hong Kong students are aware of their inadequacy in the use of PTH. They use compensation strategies to bridge the gap, such as: "If I do not know how to say something in PTH, I switch back to Cantonese". This is confirmed in focus group discussions when School C students admitted they used

Cantonese in asking questions. This is not encouraged by the teachers, and often the students are asked to express again in PTH. Some students become anxious when they have to speak in Putonghua. This indicates that many students do not develop affective strategies to relax themselves when speaking in the target language.

School B students chose more items from metacognitive strategies. These include learning from their mistakes in using PTH, concentrating on the relevant information in PTH, trying to understand the nature of any PTH assignment, and paying attention to special aspects of language. This indicates that these students are aware of the language objectives and monitor their own learning.

In the focus group discussion, it is observed that the students from School C use a number of social strategies, such as talking with students from Mainland China, for performance, etc., but this is not noted in the survey. This indicates certain limitations in collecting data from questionnaire. Students from both schools were not used to speak in PTH among themselves. Cognitive strategy is seldom mentioned in the discussion.

Metacognitive Strategies and Implications for Language Teaching

It is observed from the discussions that the more proficient PTH speakers employ more metacognitive strategies than the less proficient students. Metacognitive strategies seem to have a strong effect on learners who adopted more use of language strategies. This is an important ability on the part of the learners to identify (1) what they are trying to accomplish, (2) which strategies they are currently employing, (3) how well the approach is working in their mind, and (4) the alternative strategies they think of using (Kohler, 2002). Some studies indicate that metacognitive strategies help promote learning a second language more proficiently and effectively (Vandergrift, 1999; Wenden, 1998, 1999). The use of learning strategies requires active involvement on the part of the individual learner (Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005). The whole idea of applying learning strategies is “aimed at self-management in language learning and self-reliance in language use—in other words, autonomy” (Oxford, 2001). Language teachers in Hong

Kong have to consider how to enhance autonomous learning in students. Training in learning strategies could be included in the language curriculum. Some principles for conducting strategy training suggested by Oxford (1994) have been implemented by Y. F. Chen (2006) in a Chinese language class in the U.S. It is suggested that:

1. Training should be integrated into regular L2 activities over a long period of time rather than taught as a separate, short intervention.
2. Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes.
3. Strategy training should be explicit, overt and relevant.
4. Strategy training should not be solely tied to the class at hand; it should provide strategies that are transferable to future language tasks beyond a given class.

The essence of providing language learning strategy training to students is to raise their awareness in managing their own learning, as well as to offer ample opportunities for practising both the strategies and the language. Such model can be built into the language class in Hong Kong to enhance the self-learning ability of our students.

Conclusion

The medium mean score in strategy use reflects that Hong Kong students are not familiar with the use of strategy in their learning. Asian students are reported to use fewer learning strategies than European students (Griffiths, 2003). Some learners may know certain strategies but they do not know which strategies work for their tasks, situations and characteristics in order to best develop their communicative competence (Nunan, 1999). Teachers may not really understand how their students learn. This study sheds light on to what extent the students master the strategies in learning language(s). Teachers may design tasks to promote or develop strategies that would help students learn effectively. In addition to paying attention to language instruction, strategy teaching could be integrated into the language class to suit the needs of individual learners.

Compensation strategies are popular among Hong Kong PTH learners. As Taguchi (2002) suggests, as learners advance in their language development, teachers should encourage them to avoid using compensation strategies which may have a negative impact on vocal communication, and to use those strategies which play a more positive role, such as those that help learners to review their progress, learning tasks and future directions. Oxford (1993) found that the use of metacognitive strategies distinguishes successful learners from less-successful learners. This is echoed by Vandergrift (1999) that “metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate, or direct the language learning process. These strategies, which involve thinking about the learning process, include planning, monitoring, and evaluating” (p. 170). As learning strategies overlap partly with the concept of learner autonomy, particularly with regard to self-management and self-reliance, it is suggested that the current approach in language teaching should be more student-centred by allowing the development of learners’ autonomy to enhance learning motivation and self-esteem.

This study can be regarded as a pilot in the field of PTH learning. The use of SILL in surveying PTH learning strategy is a first attempt in Hong Kong. We are aware of the limitations in using questionnaire for quantitative data and the items of SILL. We have adapted certain questions to suit the language situations in Hong Kong. We are also limited by a lack of access to the performance scores of students. Therefore we cannot make definitive conclusions about the use of certain strategies by more successful language learners. However, the inclusion of self-rated items in the questionnaire helps identify those proficient Putonghua speakers with their strategy use. Similar studies can be planned for larger target groups, on teaching strategies to students and monitoring their language progress, and the correlation of more learners’ variables with learning strategies. Finally, classroom observation should be conducted to observe the dynamics in class.

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Notes

1. There are controversies on the criteria between language and dialects. Trudgill (1986, p. 1) contends that dialects are “varieties of language that are mutually intelligible.” They are distinguished from each other by differences of grammar and vocabulary. Such criteria present some difficulties in differentiating language and dialects. The line between language and dialects is fuzzy and it is an issue not fully resolved.
2. School A was experimenting in two Form 1 classes with the use of PTH as the medium of instruction in Chinese language lessons. The other three classes were still using Cantonese as the medium of instruction. PTH is a language subject for all Form 1 students. The experiment started in September 2006. The survey was conducted in early November 2006.

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