LEARNING STRATEGIES USE BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FROM TAIWAN IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY

A Thesis
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to the Faculty of California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in Teaching International Languages

by

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Summer 2011
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DEDICATION

For my parents,
Chun-Pei Wu
&
Huei-Ho Shiu
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

LEARNING STRATEGIES USE BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FROM TAIWAN IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY

by

©I-Ju Wu 2011

Master of Arts in Teaching International Languages

California State University, Chico

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There are increasing numbers of international students from Taiwan who choose to advance their higher education and English learning in the United States. However, the academic language that is required in the university classroom is more cognitively demanding than the proficiency level the Taiwanese students develop through prior English education. Therefore, this study addresses the academic challenges that international students face in American universities. It examines how they overcome these challenges, the language learning strategies they use and their effectiveness.

This study investigates the use of language learning strategies and their use in academic learning by six Taiwanese international students at CSU, Chico. Like previous studies, the results show some similar patterns of learning strategy use among participants. The participants frequently use compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies to support their academic learning, but use fewer memory and affective
strategies at the university level. However, each participant had different past learning experiences, motivations and academic difficulties which interacted with their strategy use. The findings suggest that learners, instructors, and administrators of language institutes should emphasize learning strategy training in order to support the increasing numbers of international students from Taiwan. The instructors and administrators in universities within the United States should also address international students’ difficulties in academic learning and take steps to facilitate their success.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

"Some 671,616 international students attended U.S. institutions in 2008-9, an increase of almost 8 percent from a year earlier. First-time-student enrollments grew even more robustly, by nearly 16 percent” (Institute of International Education, 2009, para. 1). The number of international students attending U.S. universities or colleges has kept growing in the past eight years. According to data from the Institute of International Education (2008), around 583,000 international students attend American universities, and 70% of these students come from less English-spoken countries. These students might attend language institutions in America or in other countries in order to pass English proficiency tests which are a basic requirement for admission to American universities.

English proficiency has been highly emphasized in Taiwan in particular for decades. The expectations of learners, parents, and employers make English proficiency an essential requirement for members of almost every generation. In 2001, Taiwan’s Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to move English instruction officially from seventh grade to elementary school (Lee, 2009). The desire for language and knowledge acquisition resulted in around 28,000 Taiwanese international students to come to the U.S. every year during the past ten years. According to the Institute of International Education, in 2008-9, the number of Taiwanese students ranked sixth among the
international students in the United States. Compared to the population of Taiwanese (23,000,000), this was a significant number.

The major reasons why international students study abroad are to pursue higher education and to advance English proficiency. Language proficiency refers to the ability to use language in both social and academic contexts (Bifuh-Ambe, 2009). For English as second language learners, being able to succeed in their home countries is different from studying in English speaking countries. However, there are two main goals for English education in Taiwan. One is to achieve basic English communicative skills, such as the ability to communicate with native speakers in the social contexts. Another is to pass the entrance exams for senior high schools and universities, where the focus is mainly on writing and reading skills. Therefore, the formal school systems and private language institutes provide little or no attention to survival in English instructional environments. They largely ignore in academic settings in which the language is need, such matters as how to participate in classes, and read English textbooks. This causes difficulties for international students who study abroad.

Statement of Problem

Students need to have enough knowledge and academic language proficiency to generate and receive information in classroom settings. However, the practice of literacy at school is very different in each culture and country. Different levels and cultures have different requirements. As David Olson pointed out, literacy is functional to different purposes and different subjects (Olson, 1994). At the university level, the literacy skills required in class are also called academic language and have specific
features. For international students, this includes academic literacy skills to succeed in a United States classroom. International students at the university level have learned English for at least 6 years in Taiwan; some of them also attended private institutions before or after they applied to American universities. However, these institutions mainly help students pass the standardized test of English proficiency or focus on communicative language instead of literacy skills. Most students are unable to anticipate what really happens in an American classroom. They don’t know how they should prepare for academic classes before they come to the United States.

The increasing numbers of Taiwanese international students who enroll American universities with limited English literacy proficiency face difficulties in their academic lives. In order to overcome these challenges and get used to a new environment, international students need to adjust their learning styles and learning strategies. This can be very different from their first language learning and the language learning strategies they used when they were in their own countries. Therefore, international students have a greater need and more opportunities to use language learning strategies.

Statement of Need

According to Brian Street (1984), literacy is the “specific social practices of reading and writing” (p. 1), which can’t be isolated from social context and cultural background. International students who bring prior literacy experience in their native language from Taiwan have certain difficulties achieving the requirements in American university classes. In order to catch up with other students in the United States
universities, international students need to understand what kind of literacy skills are needed in American university classes and how they can overcome these difficulties.

To overcome difficulties in second language learning contexts, international students need to use more learning strategies more often. Language learning strategies are used by learners to facilitate their own learning, so learners need to have some degree of awareness and consciousness. However, language learning strategies are teachable and “easier to teach and modify. This can be done through strategy training, which is an essential part of language education” (Oxford, 1990, p. 12). Therefore, the groups that really needs training is the international students.

Purpose of Study

In order to support the increasing numbers of international students from Taiwan, the goal of this study is to investigate the learning difficulties these EFL learners face in American universities and how they can be overcome. The purpose of this study is as follows:

1. To examine the language learning strategy use of international students from Taiwan in an American university.

2. To promote the academic learning of future and current international students in American universities.

3. To offer recommendations to language institutions in both Taiwan and America, so they can provide appropriate learning strategy training in their courses.

4. To help university instructors to adjust their own teaching and interaction with international students.
Research Questions

This study addresses four main research questions:

1. What learning difficulties do international students face in the American universities and what do they do to overcome these challenges?
2. What kinds of language learning strategies do international students use in American universities?
3. What kinds of language learning strategies are most effective? Why?
4. Which language learning strategies are not effective? Why?

Limitations

The subject pool of this study was limited to international students from Taiwan at California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico) during the 2010-11 Academic Year. This eliminated any students who had graduated from school and resulted in a rather small participant pool. According to the official record, there were 11 students from Taiwan in the 2010 Fall semester. Therefore, these students may be influenced by unidentified variables either in Taiwan or the United States.

This study was based on self-reports from the participants and the observations of the researcher. The strength of self-reports is that participants know their difficulties and learning strategies well. The weakness is that the participants may not report everything accurately for subjective reasons. In order to compensate for this weakness, the researcher also observed and examined the participants using different measures. However, since the researcher is also an international student from Taiwan, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The translations might not fully capture the
content of interviews because of language differences. Also, the researcher might subjectively translate the interviews into English or unintentionally convey her personal perspective.

Definition of Terms

**Academic Language**

Academic language, which is commonly considered in contrast to social language, is more complex and abstract. Academic language is usually used in the school context and deals with higher-level thinking processes. People build up the foundation of academic language from home and community since childhood. Based on Zwiers’ (2008) definition, “Academic language is the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts” (p. 20).

**EFL Learners (International Students)**

English as foreign language (EFL) refers to a language being learned in a community where the majority of people don’t use the language to communicate in their daily lives (Lan, 2003). Learning English as second language is very common and important in many countries all over the world. English education is required in public school in Taiwan from elementary school to the university level. Traditionally, English education in Taiwan focuses on grammatical, reading, and writing skills in order to pass the entrance exams. More recently, many educators “Consider communicative goals as the most important, and language education reform is occurring at all levels” (Klassen, 1994, p. 33).
Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are generally defined as the tools that language learners consciously use to support their comprehension, learning, and recall of the new information (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to research studies, successful learners tend to have more learning strategies, so they can use appropriate learning strategies depending on the situations (Adams, 2006). Language learning strategies facilitate second language acquisition.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review is comprised of three parts. The first part addresses the educational system and English education in Taiwan. Previous studies investigating the learning of English by Taiwanese learners, as related to the current study. In the second part, the researcher reviewed relevant research studies on English as foreign language (EFL) learners who studied abroad for higher education and the difficulties they faced in academic environments. In the last part, the researcher examined the definition and the classification of language learning strategies (LLS), the features of language learning strategies, and previous studies of learning strategy variables which were related to second language acquisition.

English Education in Taiwan

English education has been highly emphasized for decades within the educational system in Taiwanese society. The policy of English education has had several crucial reformations in the past ten years in order to satisfy public needs.

The English Education in Taiwan

In Taiwan, Mandarin has been the official language since 1945. Besides Mandarin, there are other dialects, like Taiwanese, Hakka, and aboriginal languages which are used in people’s daily life. When the government started to promote Mandarin as the official language, it was forbidden to use any other dialects at school. Students
might have received punishment if they spoke Taiwanese in the classroom. However, in the past ten years educators and policymakers started to notice the value of local cultures. The Ministry of Education has tried to combine other dialects and regional cultures in elementary education since 2001. However, generally speaking, Mandarin is still viewed as having higher status in Taiwanese society.

In Taiwan, the goals of the English curriculum in elementary school are “Developing basic communication skills in English, getting students’ interested in learning English, and understanding both local and foreign cultures” (Lee, 2009). Parents in Taiwan believe that it’s better to let their children learn English as early as possible. They hope their children will be able to communicate in English like native speakers in order to have higher status in future. Due to the high expectations of parents, the Ministry of Education changed the starting point of official English education in Taiwan from the first year of junior high (7th grade) to 3rd grade in elementary school. Therefore, formal English education starts in 3rd grade and ends with the first year of university, for a total of 9 years. Though the Ministry of Education has already advanced the time of official English education, some parents still send their children to private English institutes even at the preschool level. In addition, it is common that students have additional English classes in private English institutes or cram schools after their official English classes at school in Taiwan.

The objectives of English education in elementary school in Taiwan focus on listening and speaking skills in order to build up students’ oral communication (Lee, 2009). However, when students shift to junior high and then again to high school, they need to learn English mainly for passing entrance examinations. The curriculum mainly
emphasizes grammar, reading, and writing skills. The transition from oral, casual, and fun English education to formal, academic English education makes many students lose their motivation for learning English. According to Lee’s (2009) study, “The problem of current English language policy is the lack of systematic and comprehensive direction for the whole learning process”. In order to make the transition smooth, Hung (2007) suggests that English education instruction in elementary school should also provide writing and reading skills.

Another issue of English education in Taiwan is the lack of consistency of materials. In Taiwan, the Ministry of Education specifies a list of approved textbooks for schools to select and the list contains a wide range of materials. Therefore, each school can have different textbooks for English education. This causes a problem for teachers choosing appropriate materials according to students’ level and styles, because there are no clear guidelines for materials and content. Based on Lee’s (2009) study, this is one of the reasons that parents send their children to cram schools to have continuing and more complete English instruction.

Moreover, the content of English classes varies considerably at the university-level. At some universities, professors choose English editions of textbooks for their classes, even for non-English majors. However, classes are still instructed mainly in Chinese. Most students find translations or notes in Chinese instead of reading English editions. In this case, some students just memorize terminology in English during their university education. Therefore, these students have nearly no access to English after graduating from high school.
Studies of English Learners in Taiwan

Taiwanese culture, which is influenced by traditional Chinese culture, emphasizes collectivism. Traditionally, education in Taiwan discourages individuality and tends to have more focus on rote memorization (Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2005). In recent years, the Ministry of Education adopted new methodologies from Western education, like communicative approaches that make English education more practical and effective for students. In order to facilitate English learning in the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, there are many new methodologies that emphasize an authentic and cultural approach. In Sun’s (2003) case study of Taiwanese college students, she stated that it is better to use authentic materials than use artificial materials to teach English learners. She used think-aloud activities to collect data from students who use authentic and sorted language examples while they were doing a proofreading activity. The findings showed that four factors have influenced English students’ strategy use and learning procedure: learner’s prior knowledge, cognitive strategies, intervention from teacher, and concordance skills. One important suggestion is that language is traditionally taught deductively in Taiwan. For example, English class usually provides rules and forms at first. Therefore, instructors should provide more guidance and training in using inductive thinking strategies with students.

Integrating culture and language teaching in language classrooms is crucial to language teachers in EFL settings. However, some language teachers in Taiwan still feel that it is difficult to combine the target culture and language in their teaching, because of limited knowledge, time, methods, or materials (Tsou, 2005). In order to improve the cultural instruction on language learning, Tsou examined two elementary classrooms in
Taiwan to see the effects of cultural instruction. He compared the proficiency test and culture knowledge questionnaire results for the treatment and control classes. The findings suggest that the effect of culture instruction on language learning was positive: the language proficiency of the students in the treatment group increased more than the control group after one semester. Based on the finding, Tsou argued that EFL instructors should provide more cultural input in the language classroom. Additionally, the study also discovered that when culture was integrated in the lessons, students had greater interest in language learning. Therefore, the effects of cultural instruction cannot only improve students’ language proficiency, but also increase their motivation in language learning.

Researchers also are interested in studying the language learning strategy use in Taiwan. In Lan’s (2003) study, she studied Taiwanese young English learners about their English proficiency, learning strategy use, and motivations of strategy use. She used the SILL to collect data from 379 6th grade elementary students in Taiwan. The study showed significant relationships between the frequency of strategy, proficiency, and motivation, just like most of the previous studies. The study also pointed out that the young learners had already used some affective strategies to assist their learning in the EFL setting, like lowering their anxiety. The researcher also noticed that there is little cooperative learning in the classroom practices. As mentioned before, learners are more passive in the Taiwanese educational system. They depend on a teacher-direct style more than autonomous or cooperative learning. In order to facilitate students’ opportunities in practicing English actively, Lan suggested encouraging young learners to work in pairs
or groups. In this case, students can promote their communicative interaction and learn English more effectively.

Another study investigated the relationship between grade levels, learning strategies, and learning style among 390 Taiwanese junior high students (grades 7 through 9) (Chen, 2009). The findings of this study showed significant relationships between the use of cognitive, metacognitive, memory, social, and affective strategies and student’s grade level, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. However, the results showed that junior high school students did not use affective and cognitive strategies often. Chen suggested that language instructors need to provide strategy training in order to promote use of these strategies. The results of this study also emphasized the importance of evoking students’ awareness of learning styles and strategy use to develop more effective learners. Another finding in Lan’s (2003) study is that Taiwanese junior high students preferred the group learning style. They liked to work with at least one other classmate and cooperated on activities together. However, Lan claimed that instructors in Taiwanese elementary classrooms didn’t use enough group work tasks. Hence, language instructors need to provide more opportunities for students to engage in group work tasks.

English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners in the American University Contexts

The desire to pursue higher education and develop proficiency in English makes many non-native English speakers want to study abroad. This includes many Taiwanese learners. These learners become international students in the foreign
countries, and face various cultural and language differences in their academic and social lives.

**Definition of International Students**

As mentioned earlier, English as foreign language learners learn English in a non-English speaking context. Many EFL learners start their learning in their native countries, and then come to an American university to further their education as international students. Therefore, they don’t have an academic background in the American educational system context. Some students need or choose to attend language institutions before they enter university programs (Bifuh-Ambe, 2009). Additionally, one significant goal of tertiary education is to develop students’ ability and interest to become autonomous lifelong language learners (Gan, 2009). For EFL learners from other educational backgrounds, the perspective of self-directed learning or autonomous learning can be unfamiliar and challenging.

**Challenges of EFL Learners in American University Context**

Due to the increasing number of international students, researchers have investigated the phenomenon of study abroad. Bifuh-Ambe’s literature review (2009, p. 25-26), concludes that there are four factors which make learning English at the university level challenging for English learners:

1. Students’ English proficiency and prior educational experience, especially academic skills, such as reading textbooks, taking notes, and writing papers for courses.

2. Students’ background knowledge is related to the course subjects, such as cultural information. For example, an American historic hero in a textbook may not carry meaning to an English learner.
3. Students’ experiences in their first languages. Previous courses taken by learners can help them comprehend more easily even if they have taken them in other languages.

4. The learner’s age. For example, the critical period hypothesis states that learners can acquire language more easily during the critical period. However, language acquisition may become more difficult for learners after this period. Some individual learners can never completely acquire a language after the critical period (Lee, 2009).

Next, Bifuh-Ambe identified four broad categories of difficulties faced by the participants in her case study (2009, p. 27-30):

1. Receptive and expressive language difficulties, such as lacking vocabulary for participation in the class.

2. Difficulties in writing, such as note taking skills.

3. Difficulties in understanding materials from content courses, such as the inability to understand the internal structure of texts.

4. Differences in comprehending objectives in learning, teaching, and assessment, such as different expectations from instructors in assessment.

Researchers have studied the factors associated with international students’ academic achievement. Stoynoff’s (1997) study examined the proficiency, strategy use, and academic performance of 77 international students at university. Like the studies mentioned earlier, the results of this study found that language proficiency and strategy use were correlated with students’ academic performance. Additionally, the students who had higher achievement used social assistance, spent more time studying, had better
academic skills, and were good at selecting and catching main ideas from spoken and written discourse.

Many studies focus on different language skills that EFL learners face in the academic environment. For example, Huang (2005) focused on academic listening in ESL university students’ academic success. In this study, 78 Chinese students who were studying at an American university reported that the instructional factors influenced their academic listening were organization and summary of lecture, illegible hand writing in the class, and expectation of students’ participations and group works.

Another study by Berry and Williams (2004) showed that the challenges encountered by Hong Kong Chinese learners studying English as a first language were mainly language problems. Hong Kong was bilingual under the British Empire; English and Chinese were both official languages before 1997. There were, however, also social, cultural and affective aspects. These factors were often associated and interacted to the learners’ learning problems, especially in linguistic aspect.

Yan and Berliner (2009) studied the most stressful aspects of Chinese international students’ academic lives. These students felt stressful about cultural and educational differences, lacking opportunities to use English with their same language friends, ineffective interactions with school faculty, and their motivations to be successful. Based on McLachlan and Justice’s (2009) study of international student well-being in higher education, the international students suffered from stress and tried to negotiate academic, cultural, and social differences in the first 6-12 months. After 6-12 months of living in the U.S., 95% (nineteen out of twenty) students in this study overcame the stress and started to set new goals for their lives and education.
Features of Academic Language

Academic language has complex structures and involves higher level thinking to describe abstract concepts. Even first language learners may need time or specific instruction to get used to receiving and generating academic language in school settings. It becomes even more challenging to second language learners (Zwiers, 2008). The well-known perspective of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), as defined by Cummins (1979). BICS viewed social language as less complex and accompanied by clues, like gestures, pictures, and real objects in less formal settings. CALP viewed academic language as more complex and lacking supportive clues. Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain (1990) stated that if learner wants to develop BICS at least need to spend two years and five to seven years for CALP. A student needs to develop both BICS and CALP well to achieve the proficiency which is required to be successful in the classroom.

The important features of academic language include grammar, vocabulary, and higher order thinking (Zwiers, 2008; Butler & Hakuta, 2009). Academic grammar uses longer and more formal sentences to state concepts. In academic speaking and writing, a common verb structure is the passive voice, especially in science and mathematics (Zwiers, 2008). Higher order thinking can be identified by different disciplines, such that mathematics requires more analytical skills than history. Generally, higher-order thinking skills can help students express their thinking and comprehend and solve problems easily. It contains a series of cognitive processes (Zwiers, 2008).

These special features of academic language create challenges for many English learners, especially learners whose first language is totally different from
English. Bowers, Fitts, Quirk, and Jung (2010) investigated 108 teachers to determine their strategies for academic-language instruction, and then suggested four categories of strategies to English instructors for teaching academic-language skills: teaching learners more explicit, providing comprehensible input, building learners’ background knowledge, and more opportunities for practice.

Language Learning Strategies

Academic language causes difficulties, even for some native language speakers, not to mention second language learners who have limited language proficiency. Therefore, in order to employ a second language for academic purposes, international students need more learning techniques, like language learning strategies.

Defining Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as the methods or techniques used by language learners to improve their own learning. (Oxford, 1990; Ellis, 2000) When learners face learning a second or foreign language, they use some specific ways to help them understand, memorize and generate language better and more easily. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) mentioned that language learning strategies are, “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p. 1). Because language learning strategies emphasize a more self-directed style in terms of language learning, the idea of an autonomous learner often combines with language learning strategy use. Learners who utilize more learning strategies well can manage their language learning effectively in almost any context. The ultimate goal
of every language instructor is to develop students as lifelong learners, and learning strategies can facilitate this goal.

In order to perceive and interpret language by using language learning strategies, most theorists and researchers agree that language learning strategies must involve some degree of awareness, consciousness, and intention from learners. (O’ Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Lan, 2003) Some researchers assume that learning strategies are not necessarily conscious. For example, in Kohonen’s (1992) study, he stated that learning strategies would become automatic and without conscious effort after learners get used to performing them. Therefore, to language learners, especially beginners, it is significant to start by promoting awareness of the strategies they have already been using before they can generate and employ them automatically. Awareness of learning strategies is important to every learner, because the “awareness of the strategies and the ability to match the strategies with language situations and learner’s personal styles could facilitate the process of second language acquisition” (Boyarkina, 1999, p. 51). Knowing which learning strategy is being used can help learners face their challenges in situations without instructor’s direction both inside and outside of classroom (Cohen, 2003).

**Classification of Language Learning Strategies**

The strategy system provided by Oxford (1990) which is used in this study includes six strategy groups:

1. Memory strategies help learners remember and generate new information effectively. For example, the learner places new vocabulary into a sentence in order to memorize more easily or more quickly.
2. Cognitive strategies enable learners to comprehend or create language using mental processes. For example, the learner skims and scans to get the main idea quickly while reading textbooks.

3. Compensation strategies allow learners to guess or fill in the gaps caused by insufficient language proficiency. For example, the learner uses gestures to express his or her own feelings.

4. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to organize and evaluate their language learning. For example, the learner sets specific goals for language learning.

5. Affective strategies support learners to aware their feelings, motivations and anxiety, and then learners can adjust into better ways. For example, the learner encourages himself or herself before an oral presentation in the target language.

6. Social strategies allow learners to interact with and learn from others. For example, the learner cooperates with more proficient friends while doing assignments in the target language.

Oxford named the first three strategies direct strategies because they deal with the target language. The last three strategies are indirect strategies which manage learning without directly involving the target language.

As mentioned before, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is a structured questionnaire based on Oxford’s strategy system for assessing learner’s frequency and profile of strategy use. The results are “Helpful for understanding the general or typical frequency of strategy use by an individual or, when data are aggregated, by a group” (Oxford et al., 2004, p. 2). Because of the measure’s high validity and reliability, most studies adopted the SILL to collect data. However, each
assessment has advantages and disadvantages. The weakness of the SILL is that it cannot provide detailed, task-related information (Oxford, 1996a). Therefore, researchers should identify the strengths and weaknesses of assessment techniques in order to provide more detailed explanations of data analysis. Besides the SILL, there are still many assessment techniques, such as interviews and think-aloud procedures, observations, surveys, and so on.

**Features of Language Learning Strategies**

There are a variety of different features associated with language learning strategies. Some were previously mentioned, like enabling learners to be more self-directed and autonomous. Language learning strategies involve learners’ conscious and intent. Therefore, if learners can be more aware of the strategies they are using and practice how to use the strategies appropriately, they can become more successful learners.

Some features are particularly significant to this study. One is problem orientation and action basis. Because language learning strategies are techniques, they are the tools learners use when they want to complete tasks or solve problems. Therefore, strategy use usually develops to address clear purposes or problems. After setting goals, learners set out to accomplish their purposes. These actions may not always be observable, as they are cognitive processes in a learner’s mind.

Another feature is that learning strategies are teachable. While learning style or personality can be difficult to change, learning strategies are teachable and easier to modify (Oxford, 1990a). In Carson and Longhini’s learning styles and strategies study (2002), they stated that strategy use is often affected by learning style. However, a
learner’s learning styles remains relatively constant compared to strategy use which is more variable over time. Providing strategy training can help learners take more appropriate actions to improve their learning and is more effective.

Variables of Language Learning Strategies

Many researchers studied “good language learners” to identify their language learning preferences, and to find the best way to learn languages. In Lightbown and Spada’s study (2006), they addressed the features of a good learner, such as intelligence, aptitude, motivation, learning styles, and academic skills. For example, motivated students usually participate actively in class. All of these factors interact together and influence learning outcomes. In terms of the current studies, the researcher reviewed the crucial variables that are related to language learning strategies.

Over the decades, researchers found significant positive associations between the language learning strategy use, language proficiency, and achievement (Phillips, 1990; Bremner, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Lan, 2003; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Ni, 2008). Previous research found that more proficient learners use more overall language learning strategies compared to less proficient learners, and proficient learners also utilize strategies more appropriately. Ni’s (2008) study investigated the successful and unsuccessful EFL students at a Chinese university. The results show that the successful students employ more and different strategies from the other group. However, the unsuccessful students also use strategies, but tend to use more surface, rote memory, and gesture strategies instead.

The difference between learning a second language and learning a foreign language depends on where the language is learned. A second language has social and
communicative contexts in which learners can learn the language within the community in which it is spoken. By contrast, a foreign language doesn’t have the same degree of social and communicative contexts (Oxford, 1990a). Therefore, strategies used in foreign or second language contexts are different depending on the learning environments. ESL learners can use some learning strategies more easily than EFL learners because of the environment. In Green and Oxford’s study (as cited in Lan, 2003, p. 341), second language learners are in the target language environment, so they must use the target language in order to survive. Foreign language learners don’t need to use the target language in the daily life circumstances, and they often don’t use or develop as many learning strategies. An interesting study by Gan (2009) investigated English learners among university students in mainland China and Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a settlement of the British Empire from 1839 to 1997. Now, Hong Kong is one of the special administrative regions of China and has a different education system from mainland China. Although mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students share a similar cultural background, for example Confucian tradition, they have different social environments and contexts. The findings of this study suggest that social environments and contexts are more important than cultural traditions in learning strategy use and motivation.

In academic contexts, the students’ need to use learning strategies depends on different types of tasks and disciplines. Peacock and Ho (2003) investigated students who use English for academic learning at a university across eight disciplines and tried to discover the relationship of learning strategy use, learner’s age, gender, and proficiency across those disciplines by using the SILL. They reported there is a positive
correlation between learner’s proficiency and strategy use. The most often used strategies are cognitive, metacognitive, and compensation strategies as found in previous studies. Humanities students used strategies more often than engineering and science major students in this study. They interviewed the computing students who generally used some important strategies less frequently, and indicated that it was because they lacked an interest in English and did not think English had importance to their field.

Motivation is always a main topic in language learning studies. When we think about successful second language learners, “Motivation involves the attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn a second language” (Ellis, 2000, p. 75) Therefore, motivation is crucial in language learning but also complicated to discuss. Feng (2010) studied the correlation between English learning strategies and motivation of Chinese undergraduate students who were not English majors. The results of the study show that motivation has a significant correlation with strategies. The students who have strong motivation generate a wider array of more appropriate strategies. Another important finding discovered in this study is that Chinese EFL students use affective, memory, or social strategies less often. According to Feng’s interpretation, the reason for this may be attributed to “The Chinese ideology of education, culture, circumstances, teaching methodology, and learners’ psychological and emotional characteristics.” (Feng, 2010)

In terms of culture, the cultural features associated with Asian learners tend to be more teacher-directed and passive. Rao (2006) suggests that EFL teaching and learning in China is strongly influenced by Chinese educational system and culture background, as well as the use of strategies by Chinese students. Though he found that
Chinese students use affective strategies most, which is opposite to Feng’s study (2010), Rao suggests the results are related to Chinese culture, like highly accept authority and power, socialization, and collectivism. Therefore, Rao argues that English teachers in China should not totally adopt the teaching methods in Western classrooms, but seek appropriate learning strategies for Chinese learners.

One thing that needs to be mentioned is that most studies examine language learning strategies using the six broad categories mentioned before. In Larsen-Freeman’s study (2001, p. 23), she stated that “proficiency varies with the use of certain strategies, not all strategies.” Therefore, Peacock and Ho (2003) claimed that research needs to consider and discuss the individual strategy use which makes the findings more significant for learners. The important thing is not just how many strategies are used, but also how appropriate and flexible strategies are used by learners for different purposes.

Summary

In terms of English education in Taiwan, the starting age of English learning is earlier and earlier. This shows that English education is highly emphasized in Taiwan. However, the content of materials and the policies of the educational system lack a united and consistent direction. This is a problem for current English education. International students who come to an English university environment will face challenges in academic learning because they lack language proficiency and background knowledge. Therefore, they need to have more varied learning strategies to overcome obstacles in their academic lives in both academic situations and social contexts.
Many studies try to identify these factors. However, how learners overcome the challenges and how instructors support them remains an issue for further study. In previous studies, researchers claim that language learning strategies have a close association with learners’ language proficiency, achievement, cultural background, and motivation. Learners share some common patterns in using learning strategies. However, most studies view the classification of learning strategies as a whole, so there is seldom information about the individual use of strategies. In addition, learners have different developmental patterns in using learning strategies because of different language contexts. Therefore, a learner’s second language acquisition and learning strategies involves complicated factors which are significant and not fully understood.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Statement of Research Design

The purpose of this study is to take an in-depth look at the language learning strategies and the difficulties of six international students from Taiwan. The selection of language learning strategies is affected by individual differences, cultural background, education, and other factors. It’s impossible to think of language learning strategies without considering contextual conditions. For this reason, this study analyzed each participant’s language learning choices and learning situations using rich and vivid descriptions to provide a better overall understanding of each case’s language learning circumstances.

In order to assess international students’ difficulties in using language learning strategies, this study used different techniques to approach each individual’s case’s language learning. Each participant had six individual interviews with the researcher, and each interview lasted about an hour. There are many different types of language learning strategy assessments, but each tool has its advantages and disadvantages. Based on the comparison of strategy assessment types in Oxford (1996b, p. 35-36), this study chose both strategy questionnaires (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, SILL) and interviews adapted from A.U. Chamot and L. Kupper (1989) in order to compensate for each assessment’s strengths and weaknesses. In addition, this
study utilized think-aloud activities for each participant in order to address the inadequacies of instruments relying on introspection.

The decision to use the SILL for strategy questionnaires was made because it is a structured survey which makes it easier to diagnose learning strategies of participants in a limited time frame. The SILL shows high validity and reliability, and has been translated into different languages to assess learners’ learning strategies (Oxford, 1990, p.199). But in order not to miss the important information generated by questionnaires, the interview guide from Chamot and Kupper (1989) was chosen to compensate for insufficiencies in the structured survey. Therefore, participants could also use their own words to provide information which they think is important in their use of learning strategies. In addition to these three instruments, this study adapted the major difficulties identified in Bifuh-Ambe’s case study as one of the questions in the questionnaires. The question was included as part of the background information at the end of the questionnaires.

Through collecting data by using different techniques, this study sought to achieve triangulation and capture the kinds of language learning strategies international students are using in American universities and the effects of these learning strategies in a more complete view.

Participants

The participants in this study were all full-time international students in an academic undergraduate or graduate program for at least one semester at CSU, Chico. This population did not include any international students who are just in the language
program affiliated with the university. According to the information from the international student advisor at CSU, Chico, there were 11 Taiwanese students officially enrolled in the 2010 Fall semester. Among these 11 students, the researcher contacted most of them through the international student association, and then found 6 students who conformed to the requirements and were interested in participating in this study.

The participants certainly have a high level of English proficiency, since the required TOEFL score for international students at the university is 61 points for undergraduates and 80 points in the graduate program. If the students don’t have acceptable TOEFL scores, they must finish the intensive language classes in the American Language and Culture Institute (ALCI) and receive recommendation letters from the instructors and directors. The reason for this is that the mainstream curriculum which international students face is different from the language institution curriculum. Because the study is not focused on gender and program differences, the selection of gender and program are random.

Among the six participants, there was only one undergraduate student, named Lily. She was 21 years old and studied in the nutrition program. Of the graduate students, the two males, Po and Nick, and one female, Michelle, were all in the business program and 26 years old. The two other females were from the education program; Angelina was 31 years old, and Mary was 27 years old. Lily came to America after graduating from high school; the others were educated in Taiwan until they graduated from universities. (All of the participants’ names have been changed to fictitious names.)
Instruments

Background Questionnaire

The background questionnaire which was adapted from Klassen’s case study in 1994 (p. 122-124) had 14 items (see Appendix A). The background questionnaire was used to generate information from second language learners in Taiwan in Klassen’s research. Therefore, the adapted version collected information about their learning experience both before and after the international students arrived in the United States, and included questions such as “Question 8: Had you ever traveled or lived in an English speaking country before you came to study in the United States?”

Difficulty of Language Learning

The case study by Bifuh-Ambe (2009) identified major difficulties which international students face in the U.S. university context. These challenges were adapted into questionnaires in order to gather the participants’ perceptions of their own difficulties (see Appendix A, Q 15). Participants could select the most challenging difficulties, or they could provide open-ended answers.

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is a structured questionnaire designed by Oxford. The SILL can discover the type and frequency of language learning strategies generated by second language learners. The results of the SILL fall into six parts of language learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Version 7.0 has 50 questions and the learner needs to use a five-point scale to rank from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The SILL has been demonstrated to be highly valid and reliable for being used
for research and classroom practice. (Oxford, 1990) There are many language versions of the SILL. This study adopted the English version, since the participants are proficient in English.

**Oral Interview Guide**

The interview guide is adapted from A. U. Chamot and L. Kupper (1989). This interview guide approached the language learning strategies in different areas, like pronunciation, vocabulary, and listening (see Appendix B). It also accessed situational communication in social situations (Q 8, 9), which was neglected in the SILL. The prompts in the interview guide were based on the context of language learning. However, it was not as related to the university context this study focused on. Therefore, this study adapted the prompts in order to give participants a more introspective connection. The oral interviews will be conducted in Chinese to allow participants to clarify their thinking accurately, easily, and effectively.

**Think-aloud Activities**

There were two think-aloud activities for each participant focused on reading and listening skills (see Appendix C). The researcher assessed the cases by following questionnaires as a guideline which included different language learning strategies, but also discussed open-ended questions with participants depending on individual situations. For example, Question 9 asks if the participant tries to manage emotions or not. The researcher evaluated the cases while they were thinking aloud, and then asked for clarification after the activities. These semi-structured interviews could be cross-checked with other results and also evoked significant information. The guideline was adapted from the website of National Capital Language Resource Center at Georgetown
University. The guideline was designed to gather information on students’ language learning abilities.

Procedure

The researcher wanted to interview international students from Taiwan who were studying at CSU, Chico. After contacting available and qualified Taiwanese students through emails and phone calls, there were six students who agreed to participate in this study. For each participant the interviews took place six times during two semesters. The participants had interviews individually with the researcher, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each participant received a schedule and signed the informed consent at the beginning of the first interview. The schedule was as follows:

**Interview 1: Orientation and Questionnaire. (1 hour)**

The main purpose of this interview was to introduce the processes and goals of this project to the participants. The research also explained the general ideas of language learning strategies to the participants. Each participant signed the informed consent form and received the schedule of interviews (Appendix E & F) at the beginning of this interview. After the orientation, each participant needed to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire included background information (Appendix A, Q1~14), difficulties of language learning (Appendix A, Q15), and the SILL questionnaires (Appendix B). The researcher gathered their answer sheets, and then analyzed the answers before the next interview with the individuals.
Interview 2: How Do You Learn English? (50 minutes)

The researcher discussed how the participants employed different strategies based on the questionnaires from interview 1, and the participants had a chance to explain and expand on their answers. In addition, the researcher also provided a brief introduction to different strategies, and explained how each strategy might work in different situations. In this case, each participant understood his or her utilization of language learning strategies, and noticed what might be useful, but overlooked. Then, the researcher started using the interview guide (Appendix C) to discuss each participant’s strategy use in terms of different language areas in university contexts.

Interview 3: Think-aloud Activity - Reading. (50 minutes)

This activity was designed to collect data on each participant’s reading strategies. The participants provided a piece of reading from their classes before this interview. The researcher selected an appropriate passage from the reading and arranged a think-aloud activity. The researcher assessed the cases by using questionnaire guides (Appendix D), while the cases were doing think-aloud. After the activity, the researcher and the participants discussed the difficulties and strategies used or not used in their think-aloud activities.

Interview 4: Listen to the Tape. (50 minutes)

The objective of this interview was listening strategies. Each participant listened to a 3 minute lecture which was related to the individual’s major. Then the participants reported on the strategies they used while they were listening. Next, the researcher discussed the difficulties and strategies with the participants.
Interview 5: Presentation and Written Paper. (50 minutes)

The two main objectives of this interview were to discover how each case prepared and performed an oral presentation, and how they wrote their written assignments. Each participant needed to bring materials from one of their current presentations, like a handout or PowerPoint. The participants did a brief presentation of about 3 minutes. After the presentation, the participant explained how he or she prepared this presentation, and how he or she felt after it was finished. Next, the participants shared the written assignments with the researcher. The participants discussed their methods of writing papers and their difficulties.

Interview 6: Do You See Any Changes? (1 hour)

The purpose of this last interview was to gather information on changes in each subject’s language learning strategy use. After five meetings and discussions about their English learning, each participant developed different insights into learning strategy use. The participants did the SILL again in this interview, and then the results were compared with the previous one. The researcher discussed similarities or differences between the results with each participant, and asked what the reason was for the changes, or why no changes occurred. In the end, the participants provided their reflections on this project.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires for the 6 international Taiwanese students gave a very general sense of their background, difficulties and language learning strategy use. The data from the SILL was categorized into the six types of strategies to see if there were
any significant variations between or within individual learners. The background characteristics also were compared with the SILL results to see if there was any intervention or causal links from other factors. However, the results of these questionnaires can’t provide generalized information for the whole group, since the size of the group was too small.

After collecting the data from the six participants, the researcher cross-checked the results for each participant and identified possible connections to the research questions. The learning strategies were coded into Oxford’s six types of strategies and the difficulties were coded into Bifuh-Ambe’s four types of difficulties. The researcher examined and discovered each case’s patterns in language learning strategies. The researcher also compared cases to find similarities and differences. For example, the participant reported his or her difficulties and the most frequently used learning strategies in the questionnaires. Then, when he or she did the reading think-aloud, he or she actually used a certain kind of strategy while facing difficulties. What might be the possible explanations for this situation? Was the strategy use appropriate and effective?
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary objectives of this study were to discover the major difficulties and strategy use of Taiwanese international students at CSU, Chico in the United States. Each of the six participants had six interviews with the researcher individually during one academic year. The first section in this chapter compares the six participants, looking at similarities and differences of strategy use, learning difficulties, and how they overcame those difficulties. The second section describes each participant’s English learning experience in detail and examines their language learning strategies independently. In the last section, the researcher connected the results from the study directly to the research questions.

Similarities and Differences of Strategy Use Among Participants

Background Variables

The six participants in this study came from different parts of Taiwan and had various reasons to become international students in the United States. However, they still had similar backgrounds which were significant to their language learning and strategy use.

The six participants all completed their regular English education from junior high to high school for a total of six years. Except Lily, who came to America as an
undergraduate student after her high school education, the other participants all passed the entrance exam for colleges and universities and completed their education at universities in Taiwan.

Before they came to study in the United States, most of them had some experience with study abroad, such as study in short-term language institutes. Most had attended the language program affiliated with the university before they enrolled in the graduate school. Therefore, with the exception of Mary, the other participants all had transitions or past overseas learning experience before they came to be formal students at the university. Mary was the only participant who did not have any overseas study experience and transition before entering her graduate program.

Among the five participants in the graduate programs, most of them changed their majors from their previous universities. Though they had different reasons for the changes, this caused them to have limited terminology in English or less prior knowledge in their fields.

**Results from the SILL**

The original data of the SILL is presented in Table 1, and the averages of the six groups of strategies are illustrated in Figure 1. Based on the results of the SILL, there were some distinct findings of strategy uses among the participants. The results of the most frequently used strategies were compensation and cognitive strategies, which were supported by the previous studies of EFL learners, such as Ni’s (2008) study of Chinese EFL university students. Memory and affective strategies were reported with comparatively lower usage than the other strategies.
Table 1

Collected Data from the SILL

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The average use of memory strategies was the lowest in this study. After cross-checking the responses, most of the participants didn’t use rhymes or flashcards to help them learn new English words. A possible reason for not using rhymes may be the influence of their native language and education. Usually, when Taiwanese speakers learn a new word in Chinese, they focus on the meaning and not the word’s pronunciation. Because there are so many characters pronounced the same in Chinese, plus different intonation, remembering new words by using rhymes would be very difficult and impractical. Therefore, using rhyme to teach English to Taiwanese learners can be more exhausting.

All of the participants had experience using flashcards. However, most of them stated that the time they spent in creating the flashcards was more than the time they spent in actually reviewing the cards. One interesting finding is that most of the

**Figure 1.** Group averages of the SILL scores
participants didn’t review English lessons often. One possible explanation is that they took their core courses prior to learning English after they entered graduate programs. Also, some of them didn’t have specific English classes at the time of interviews.

The participants in this study reported comparatively high usage of compensation and cognitive strategies. They reported almost evenly high usage on No. 10, 21, 24, and 29. During the following interviews with each participant, all of them agreed that most of the compensation and cognitive strategies were basic demands in order to survive their academic learning. Like one of the participants, Po said,

While you are speaking or reading, there are so many words you don’t know. You can’t know every word in the most of cases. You have to guess the meaning, or change the word you forgot….If you can’t do this, you can’t do anything in your classes.

One important finding here is that all of the participants said they had learned the way of dividing unknown words into parts for guessing meaning some time during their regular English education in Taiwan. This suggests that English teachers do train students to use some strategies in Taiwan to help their learning. However, the participants generally didn’t have explicit and systematic training in learning strategies.

In addition to compensation and cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies were also reported as frequently used among the participants. None of the participants reported “never” to any metacognitive strategies. This shows how crucial metacognitive strategies are to support their academic learning at the university. For example, the participants were almost evenly high in their motivation to find a better way to learn English.

The average use of affective strategies was comparatively low among the six groups of strategies. However, after checking the original data from the participants, it’s
easy to realize how different the scores were. Even though the overall usage of affective strategies was low, some affective strategies were still effective. For example, most of the participants encouraged themselves to speak English, even in situations where they might make mistakes. However, the participants seldom, if ever, wrote down their learning feelings.

Though the average of social strategies was high, the usage of social strategies varied among individuals. Some participants used social strategies to assist their academic learning a lot, but some didn’t. However, all participants argued that as international students, they had more opportunities to put social strategies into practice and to benefit from using them. Therefore, they all agreed that they used social strategies more than before they came to America.

To sum up, among the participants in this study the most used strategies were compensation and cognitive strategies, and the least used strategies were memory and affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies were also reported as high usage among the participants. Some of the less commonly used affective strategies, were still frequently used by the participants. This suggests that affective strategies were not totally ineffective for the participants. Social strategies had high usage among the participants, but this was very different across individuals in this study.

Case stories

The following section reports each participant’s English learning experience, strategy use and their difficulties in terms of academic learning at the university. The reports have been transcribed from the recorded interviews. Since the interviews were
conducted in Chinese, the quotations sometimes may not be totally accurate, but still keep the original voices as much as possible. Additionally, the selected information discussed here was based on the frequency or emphasis by the participants and the researcher. The averages of personal strategy use are illustrated in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Personal averages of the SILL scores](image)

Po’s English Learning Story

Different from other participants in this study, Po’s first language is Taiwanese. He had used Taiwanese more than Mandarin with family and friends in his daily life before he came to the United States. Therefore, English could be viewed as his third language at school. He had two years learning experience in English private schools - one year during elementary school and one year during high school. However, he thinks these experiences didn’t help his English learning very much, even just for
passing exams at school. Po started to take English seriously after he had graduated from the university. His major was engineering, but he wanted to have higher English proficiency and business knowledge in order to find a better job in the future. Therefore, he decided to apply to a business program in the United States.

Although Po was strongly motivated to learn English for his career in business, he thought his English was insufficient to enroll in a graduate program directly. Therefore, he attended the American Language and Culture Institute (ALCI) on the campus for almost two years. Compared with other international students, spending two years at ALCI was very long time. Po explained,

I think I had a worse starting point than others. My English was so poor in the beginning, especially with speaking. I could not speak even a complete sentence when I just arrived here….and I decided to change my major. So I decided to take some prerequisite courses in the second year after I finished formal language courses in the institute.

After taking prerequisite courses, Po feels more confident in his graduate learning now. He stated the transition from language institution to university class gave him more preparation for developing his learning strategies, learning background knowledge, and getting used to American education:

Some international students have problems in translating terminology from the native language to English, but I don’t have [the problem]. Because I learned these things in the prerequisite courses in English, I can understand the words more easily than other international students while I’m listening or speaking in the class.

Po used social strategies most often, based on his results from the SILL questionnaire. He preferred and attributed his effective learning to using social strategies. He argued that using some memory strategies, like prefix or suffix, could help only short-term memory. He would easily forget after a period of time or not use words authentically. For Po, the way to really remember vocabulary long-term and naturally
was by using the language in real life. This was supported by the think-aloud activities. Po’s courses required lots of teamwork for assignments, so he was used to cooperating with and asking questions of team members, especially for writing papers and preparing presentations. If there was a group paper, usually there would be an editor to check every team member’s contribution. He would work with this person on his part. However, if the assignment was for individuals, he would use the tutoring service at the university. In terms of oral presentations, Po usually spent lots of time preparing, and teamwork or individual, he would find a friend to listen his presentation rehearsal:

I usually practice my whole presentation with one of my team members or if there’s individual presentation, I will ask a friend. The person can check my content and how much time I had spent, then give me some suggestions even ask me questions…. I think it’s the best way to prepare for oral presentation for me. I have to actually run through the whole presentation, because I can’t just practice in my head. It’s not real enough to me.

Po spent a lot of time preparing for his writing assignments and oral presentations because he thought his major difficulties were writing and speaking in the university contexts. Even though he had spent two years at the language institute, he still thought his writing ability was not sufficient enough for writing long essays, especially for exams. He stated that the long-essay questions on exams were very difficult and unfair to international students. He said, “It’s just testing our English proficiency, but not what we have learned exactly in the class.” Based on his self reports and the observation, his major challenge in academic learning was the difficulty of written assignments.

Compared to other strategies, Po didn’t use affective strategies frequently. He usually encouraged himself, but most of the time he said, “You can only force yourself to keep going. If I have time to write a learning diary or reward myself, I would rather just take a rest.” He argued some of the affective strategies in the SILL were not so
useful for him, though he admitted that affective strategies are important in learning languages. As he reported, he never gave himself any reward for learning English, but he frequently tried to lower his stress in learning English. Because he uses or studies English everyday now, he also said he noticed, but didn’t mind, his anxiety as much. He said that even if he often realizes his own anxiety, it doesn’t help anything in fact.

Comparing the two results of the SILL, Po changed most in using compensation strategies (see Table 2). During all the interviews, Po and the researcher discussed the advantages and possibilities of using other strategies. Although Po didn’t attribute the change to learning more about compensation strategies during the discussions, he noted that the discussions gave him the chance to be aware of his usage of learning strategies. He said,

Before, I didn’t think about what kind of strategies I was using or how frequent I used them. But after we talked about learning strategies, I started to check myself when I was using strategies and asked myself what this strategy is or whether it is appropriate or not….I suddenly realized I used so many compensation strategies in my learning, I just didn’t notice before.

Table 2

The SILL Means for Po

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<th>Six strategy groups</th>
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Nick’s English Learning Story

Compared to other participants, Nick had more experience learning English, both in Taiwan and in English speaking countries. He studied in English private schools from elementary school through high school. In addition, he had short-term English learning in Canada, New Zealand, and the United States during summer vacations in high school and at the university. About his learning experiences, he said,

I really need to appreciate my parents. They have the thinking that English is very important, so they spend lots of money to develop my English ability, even now….Though I don’t think studying in the language institute is as same as studying in the graduate program; my previous experience did help me not be so nervous when I first came here.

Nick also changed his major from nutrition to business in the graduate program. Unlike Po’s motivation, Nick said he likes the English language, business, and the cultural variety in America, so he chose to study abroad. Therefore, even though he had no prior knowledge in business, he spent more time studying textbooks for his courses. He is an active learner, especially motivated to learn content which is interesting to him. Though Nick had many experiences studying overseas, he still felt the challenge of insufficient cultural knowledge in the classroom setting.

For example, the professor might use some slang as an instance in the class. Every classmate was laughing, but I was totally out of the discussion….If I have the chance, I usually ask classmates about the meaning. But sometimes there’s no time for me to ask questions during the class, I have to let it go.

According to Nick’s results on the SILL and activities, he used compensation strategies more often than other strategies (see Table 3). This appeared to be related to his learning style and course content. Most of his courses provided actual examples in class, so reading textbooks could be self-studied outside of classes. He concentrated on listening to the content in his classes, and he studied the textbooks at home for every
course. While he was listening or reading, he used all possible clues to guess the meanings he was unsure about. He said,

> When I listened to the instruction or read any article, I would keep guessing the possible meaning and tried to connect to what I already knew from the previous contents…. Therefore, I love to read clear textbooks. They have clear outlines and are very logical….The most difficult class I’m taking now has no textbook. The professor just provides different articles for specific topics each time. To me, I still can’t understand what the objectives are. Those articles are not logical and clear to me.

Table 3

**The SILL Means for Nick**

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When he did think-aloud activities in reading, he did a lot of logical guessing using prior knowledge or context. He said he used to look up every word he was unsure of in the dictionary, but he has learned to give up knowing every single word in the textbooks in order to save time for meaningful comprehension.

> I used to feel nervous about words that I didn’t know, so I tried to look up every word. However, if I keep looking up words in the dictionary, I lose the meaning of the context easily and I actually can’t remember every word I checked. Now, I just skip or guess the meaning by using some clues. It works better for lots of reading assignments.
Nick also used pictures or illustrations to help him comprehend content when reading or listening. He said illustrations were easy to understand and remember, and then he could use the illustrations as clues to help him comprehend other content. Therefore, though he usually reads articles by following the order without skipping any information, illustrations in the content usually attract his attention more while he is reading.

Nick used very few affective strategies and he claimed that these strategies were not useful. He thought that the affective strategies are not suitable for international students and especially those from the Taiwanese cultures. Based on his thinking, in most cases, international students need to push themselves to study. If the results are good, they can feel satisfied and keep going. As for characteristics like “lowering stress” or “encouraging self”, he said usually there’s no time to think about these issues in real situations. Therefore, in the first results of the SILL, he marked all affective strategies as “never” options. He said, I can tell affective strategies are useful in some cases, but not to me and not in this situation. How can I encourage myself before my presentation every time? I have no time to think about encouragement….After one semester, I even stopped talking to my friends about my feelings of learning English. Because I need to use English every day, there’s no time to judge or encourage my representations every time.

Nick paid most attention to listening to the instruction in class and reading textbooks at home. By comparison, he spent less time and employed fewer strategies in preparing for oral presentations and writing assignments. In terms of oral presentations, he didn’t prepare speech notes, but usually brainstormed some new words or phrases right away during the presentation by following his PowerPoint. However, because his presentations were usually unscripted, sometimes he got stuck or used inappropriate words. In his writing assignments, he only depended on the editor in his group. If it was
an individual assignment, he didn’t cooperate with any classmate or work with a tutor to check his paper.

Nick had slight growth in terms of his results in the second SILL. However he said his strategy use was well established. Like his initial results, the highest and lowest usage of strategies remained the same. Though he had strong beliefs of useful and suitable strategies for himself, he said the interview gave him a chance to identify what his weaknesses were. After the discussion, he would want to try some strategies he had neglected before.

Michelle’s English Learning Story

Michelle has never learned English outside of her formal English education at schools. Her major in Taiwan was tourism, but she changed to the business program in graduate school because of her interests and also because of the expectations from her family. Her family has a wine business, so they expected her to have business knowledge and also to know other languages, especially English. Therefore, Michelle tried hard to pass the TOEFL requirement and studied at the ALCI at the university. However, she took the TOEFL exam five times, before and during her studies in the ALCI. Her reading scores were always too low and influenced the total score. In the end, she finished the intensive language classes in the language institute and entered the business program.

When she talked about this, she said,

I still don’t understand why I always got low scores in reading part in the TOEFL exam. I mean I can study in the business program now…. I am taking courses and read textbooks like the other students. I sometimes have reading comprehension questions like the others, but I am not the worst student in my classes.
Though she believed her reading skills were not as low as the scores reflected, she admitted that she needed more time and support to complete her reading tasks, compared with other international students in her classes.

Michelle said she usually felt that her insufficient English proficiency made her learning in the business program very hard. There were many reading tasks and many exams after the readings. She needed to prepare for a long time, but the results were sometimes disappointing. For example, she felt that she understood the instances and definitions from the textbooks; however, when the professor changed the descriptions in the exam, she became confused by the meaning in the questions.

According to her results on the SILL (see Table 4), she used compensation strategies most. During the following activities in the interviews, she used a lot of guessing, gestures, and substituted words to compensate for what she didn’t understand. She thinks these strategies are very basic, but helpful in order to survive in academic learning settings in the United States.

Table 4

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</tbody>
</table>
However, in terms of the most useful strategies, she stated that social strategies are the most effective for her. She worked with team members and classmates, and frequently asked professors questions after classes. Like reading tasks, she would try to explain the main ideas and asked other classmates for clarification. If there was a quiz or exam, she also asked to have study groups with other classmates pro-actively. She likes to work with other classmates:

I have less confidence of my English proficiency, especially reading skills. I’m easily confused about the main point, support ideas, and so on. I want to make sure that I’m on the right track or not….I ask everyone who can help me, if I have questions. I visit professors during their office hours, often. I really need to work with others to help do my works done.

In comparison, Michelle didn’t use memory strategies very often. She claimed that memory strategies required a great deal of English knowledge, but she barely remembered the grouping of prefixes or suffixes, connection, or using materials to help her learn new words. The only strategy she used to help her remember new words was using phonetic cues. She tried to repeat and copy the sound of the new words in her mind several times, instead of memorizing the spellings.

When she prepared her oral presentations, she used similar strategies. She used index cards to write down the main points and unfamiliar words in her presentation. She would rehearse the presentation several times and remember the content through practice.

In order to improve the content of my oral presentation, I usually used some terminology or phrases that made my presentation sound more well-prepared and academic. I practiced how to speak these words fluently several times before my presentation. Usually they worked well….Oral presentations are the only thing I can get compliments on or make contributions to my group in the class.

Michelle has strong confidence in her oral presentations, and she did spend a lot of time in preparation. Compared with other participants, she would check her listeners’
reactions while she was making oral presentations. Moreover, she tried to adjust her speed or clarify by monitoring her listeners’ responses. This demonstrated her strength in preparation and her confidence.

Michelle’s change on the two results for the SILL was not extreme. However, she said she gained more confidence and interest in knowing her language learning strategies. She said,

When I shared the strategies I used in the interviews, I suddenly realized that actually I’m using some strategies for my learning. And some strategies I’m using now sound really good… I also tried to discover my strategy use while I’m studying, maybe this can help my English get better.

She started to make some small changes after knowing her strategy use; in particular, she tried to use some affective strategies to lower her anxiety and stress. Like some other participants, she thinks that some of the affective strategies are not appropriate for her. However, she picked up on some strategies, like sharing her feelings with friends, and using more positive words to encourage herself. This was one of the reasons she displayed more interest in learning language and learning strategies.

Angelina’s English Learning Story

Except for regular English education at school, Angelina learned English in private English institutes over a five year period during high school and after graduation from a university before she decided to study in America. She worked in a law firm as an assistant, at first. However, she was interested in pursuing English learning, so she decided to study in the English institute and teach children English at the same time. She said,

I have a strange perspective that if I want to learn the language well, I have to use it. The best way to use the language is to teach the language….But after a few months, I realized the learning and practice were still not enough for me. My English compared to other teachers or even friends was still poor. Sometimes I
could not answer some questions from elementary school kids, so I decided to learn more.

She came to the United States to study in the ALCI for one year. At first she didn’t consider applying for the graduate program. She was just encouraged by friends at the language institute, because they were applying for undergraduate programs at that time. Then, because of her previous experience and interests, she enrolled in the graduate program in education.

Based on Angelina’s scores from the SILL and the following activities, her use of compensation and cognitive strategies were relatively high. She used clues to guess the unknown words in reading, and substituted words to represent what she wanted to express in speaking. She also stated that these strategies are critical for international students to survive in the university. For example, when she read an article, she checked the title first. Then, she read the first few paragraphs in detail in order to find the main ideas and to connect the information to prior knowledge. When she started to feel that she had gotten the main ideas of the article, she would skip and scan the rest of the content.

I’ve learned how to scan and skip during reading when I was in the English institute. They taught us some methods, like just read the first few sentences from each paragraph and guess the main ideas. But I think for a student who has limited English proficiency and background knowledge, these strategies can’t work well.

Therefore, she said she adjusted the strategies she had learned from the English institute into what she could employ well. Because she can’t identify the main ideas just by reading a few sentences from the articles, she reads and checks her understanding rather than trying to read a few sentences or every sentence. She made a good point when she explained that some struggling students keep using their old learning styles after strategy training. She said, “Some students could not use the
strategies well, therefore, they gave up on using any strategy. But they don’t need to totally follow the way the teacher taught them, they can adjust to their learning styles like I did.”

Though she reported that she used social strategies frequently, she didn’t ask friends or use the tutoring center to help her with her written papers or oral presentations. She explained that she usually completed her assignments without stable schedules, so it was hard to ask for help or suggestions in this situation.

Angelina used comparatively fewer memory strategies (see Table 5). Though she usually used connections from new words to old knowledge to help remember new words, she never used mental pictures, connecting sounds and images, or rhymes to help learn new words. She explained that because she doesn’t have to memorize as many new words now, she just needs to learn the content in the courses. Therefore, she said most memory strategies were not as effective in her learning now.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The SILL Means for Angelina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six strategy groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generally speaking, Angelina didn’t change her strategy use explicitly during this study. One possible reason may be that she had already developed most of her learning strategies in the English institutes or her educational courses. Therefore, she had already settled on her frequently used strategies. She instead just selected and adjusted the strategies which were suitable and useful for her. Another reason may be the context of her present learning environment. She said,

I think the purpose of my learning, now, is getting further knowledge; learning language itself is less of a priority. Therefore, I don’t spend so much time memorizing new words or practicing speaking, because these are not necessary for my graduate program learning.

Mary’s English Learning Story

Unlike other participants in this study, Mary never attended any language institute outside of school. Therefore, most of her learning experience was from self study. However, she had very strong motivation to learn English because of her love for American culture. For example, when she was in Taiwan, she bought imported American fashion magazines. In order to understand the words or slang inside the magazines, she would look them up in a dictionary or on the internet. Her strong motivation made her decide to transfer her major into teaching English.

Mary used lots of materials to approach American culture and the English language. She read English magazines and novels, listened to English broadcasts, and watched dramas and movies with English captions. The most special strategy was having penpals on the internet.

I love to make friends through some language learning and cultural exchange websites. I can get to know lots of people who are willing to chat with second language learners….I can practice my English speaking and writing in more natural ways with them.
She could chat with native speakers and share language learning experiences with other learners. Through penpals, she could access more communicative opportunities, and authentic language and culture. She also had a chance to make new friends.

The major reason she decided to pursue higher education was because of parenting problems in the school where she worked. She was a public elementary school teacher in teaching English. Mary was ambitious to study in the United States. She chose a university that was not in a big city in the United States, because she said,

I don’t want to choose a school with lots of Chinese speakers. Most of Taiwanese students go to famous schools in the big cities but don’t study hard and still speak Chinese together….I want to enjoy real American university life and learn something really useful.

After she came to America, however, she could not get used to the academic life in the beginning. She said,

I didn’t know how to prepare reading tasks, how to write papers based on the requirements, how to do my oral presentations, and so on….I was totally lost the first semester. I spent lots of time writing a paper longer than the requirement, but the content was not what the professor expected. So I just revised and revised.…

After one semester of transition, Mary started to use more strategies to support her academic learning. Like most of the participants, she used compensation and cognitive strategies most often. Mary said that in her first semester, she was in a total panic and lost her strategies in learning English. However, she started to manage her learning and tried to look for more effective ways to learn academic content. For example, she stopped looking up every word in her reading tasks and tried to guess more in order to read more effectively and efficiently.

Unlike Mary did in Taiwan, she used fewer social strategies in the first SILL questionnaire (see Table 6). She explained that she still likes to make new friends and
has lots of friends who are native speakers at the university. She just didn’t discuss or ask them language learning questions directly.

I share my feeling of learning in the graduate program with my friends, but not the feeling of language learning. It’s strange to keep asking friends to correct you or complain how poor your English is all the time to friends….I just want to relax and share my other things with my new friends.

Therefore, although Mary didn’t use social strategies as frequently, and had concerns, she was still supported indirectly in her language learning within social circumstances. In addition, Mary didn’t use the tutoring center for checking her written papers either. She said the main reason was because she hoped the tutors could change her words and make her wording more academic and professional, but they were just mainly checking her grammatical errors. Therefore, she seldom used the resource to support her written assignments.

Table 6

*The SILL Means for Mary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six strategy groups</th>
<th>12/18/10</th>
<th>4/14/11</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>+1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>+2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>+1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>+2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>+1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>+2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>+1.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mary had major changes between the results of the SILL. The most probable reason she said was because she gained more confidence in her ability to achieve
academically. For example, she gradually understood what should be included in her oral presentations, and how to prepare more effectively, like rehearsal with friends several times. If she got compliments from her classmates and professors, she would work harder and find more effective ways to learn. Without panicking, she gradually found her motivation and brought learning strategies back to her academic learning.

Lily’s English Learning Story

Lily is the only undergraduate student in this study. She had studied in private English institutes outside of her regular school education from elementary through junior high school, for a total of eight years. She decided to come to America to continue her education after high school, mainly because her siblings were already studying in the United States. Therefore, she came to the United States and attended a community college for three years, then transferred to the university.

During the time Lily attended college, she took some courses that helped her develop academic learning skills, such as a public speaking course. She learned how to prepare oral presentations in this course, and she still uses the methods she learned in preparing presentations now. For example, she would write down speech notes, and almost memorize everything in her presentation during practice. She learned how to maintain eye-contact with listeners and she would check listeners’ reactions during her presentations.

Compared with the other participants, Lily had more academic learning experiences in the United States before she entered the university. She took English classes with other native speakers in college, and she also prepared for and took the
Scholastic Assessment Tests (SAT). Outside of school learning, however she seldom used other materials to learn English, such as watching television or listening to radio. Personally, I don’t like to watch American dramas or TV shows, so I don’t use these ways to learn English….The best way to learn English is talk to people and use the language in real life situations. If I just memorize words and practice in the classroom, I still don’t use and don’t know how to use the language.

Though Lily accessed academic English earlier than the other participants in this study, she still experiences difficulties in academic learning, especially with written assignments and test preparation. She said that it’s hard to memorize content from the textbook, and when she reads test questions paraphrased from the content, it takes her longer to comprehend them during a test. When engaged in note-taking, she also finds it hard to listen to the instructors and take notes at the same time; especially when some professors don’t provide transparencies or speak very fast.

Like Lily mentioned before, she used social strategies the most. She always asked classmates or professors when she had some reading or listening comprehension questions. She thought the best way to learn was to directly ask native speakers for clarification and verification about English. Except for social strategies, she used compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies almost equally. Compared with other participants, Lily also used every group of strategies more equally. She said,

I think American education has more emphases on language strategy training. Though my English teachers in Taiwan also mentioned some strategies before, they just introduced them. We didn’t practice at all….I have learned most strategies in my language class, here.

Although Lily stated that she learned most of her learning strategies in the United States, she used memory and affective strategies less often than the other strategies, just like most of the other participants. Lily provided her own explanation for this. She said she could not get used to using flashcards nor rhymes to remember new
words; it was because of age and cultural differences. She used her younger brother as an example. He came here the youngest among her siblings; therefore, his ways of English learning were more “American styles”, such as using flashcards.

Lily’s change during the study was not obvious (see Table 7). The reason probably is because she had already acquired learning strategies before, and got used to certain strategies that match her learning style and academic environment. Therefore, there was very slight change.

I think I have steady learning strategies already. I have learned a lot of strategies before, and selected useful strategies for me….After all, I think the types of strategy use is still related to individual differences. Not every strategy is useful to every person.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six strategy groups</th>
<th>12/11/10</th>
<th>4/1/11</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>+0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>+0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through these in depth interviews, the participants provided more clear details of their language learning experiences, academic difficulties, and strategy use. They had different strengths and weaknesses in academic learning, so they chose different learning strategies to support their academic requirements. Some of them
acquired learning strategies from language institutes, and several had developed learning strategies on their own. Whether the participants were aware of their use before this study, language learning strategies had an important role in supporting their academic achievement at the university.

Results for Research Questions

Results for Question 1: What learning difficulties do international students face in the American universities and what do they do to overcome these challenges?

International students have various difficulties in the American university system. According to the results of this study, the participants faced the most challenges in written assignments, receptive, and expressive language. The written assignments included writing papers, written exams, and note-taking. The international students need more time to comprehend and generate their second language. This becomes a disadvantage when they try to meet instructors’ expectations in a limited time period or after changes in the tasks on the syllabus, such as Po’s complaints about long-essay exams in his classes. In addition, class participation and oral presentations are viewed as challenges for most of the participants. One reason is that international students lacked the specialized vocabulary required to participate in the classes. Another reason may be that the educational requirements were different in the Taiwanese classroom. The requirements for participation and presentations from students are fewer than in American universities. For example, Mary felt considerable stress when she found out that she needed to use her second language do oral presentations at least twice in each
class during her first semester. She had made only a few presentations during her entire undergraduate experience.

Results for Question 2: What kinds of language learning strategies do international students use in American universities? As was found in previous studies, the participants used compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies most often in the American university. Based on the interviews, these strategies were viewed as basic survival skills in academic learning. Even having passed the requirements of English proficiency exams, international students still have limited academic language in the classroom settings. However, these international students have the advantage of longer language learning experiences and higher thinking skills. Therefore, most of the participants were skillful in using clues, substituting words, analyzing and summarizing content, evaluating learning, and so on. For example, Lily had developed most of her learning strategies at college and practiced with some effective strategies in her academic learning at the university.

Results for Question 3: What kinds of language learning strategies are most effective? Why? In addition to compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies which are crucial, basic skills in terms of academic learning, social strategies also contribute to international students’ learning. Though social strategies were highly related to an individual’s learning styles, the context provides learners the use of social supports more often in the language environment. They have more opportunities to ask questions, practice and cooperate with native speakers, and understand the target language culture. These are crucially supportive to international students’ language and academic learning. For example, Nick had the lowest level of social strategy use among
the participants. He still claimed that he used more social strategies in the United States and felt that these strategies were effective in his academic learning.

Results for Question 4: Which language learning strategies are not effective? Why?

Compared to the other strategies, memory and affective strategies were viewed as less effective to the learners in this study; one reason is because of the influence of their native language and cultural background. Some strategies were awkward or difficult for Taiwanese learners, like rhymes, flashcards, rewards, or a learning diary. The participants didn’t use these strategies frequently in either a Taiwanese learning context or the American context. Another reason is that some memory and affective strategies are not functional in their academic learning, like Angelina’s example. The main purpose of her learning was not remembering new English vocabulary, so she used fewer memory strategies to help memorize, but more compensation strategies to comprehend content.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

In recent years, many researchers have studied the relationship between second language acquisition and language learning strategies (Bremner, 1999; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Gan, 2009; Feng, 2010). Most of the studies indicated that the frequency and timing of strategy use have a positive correlation with language proficiency. Additionally, the use of different strategies varies with differences in contexts and functions. Given their limited academic language proficiency, the international students from Taiwan need more learning strategies in order to succeed in their core courses in American universities.

This study investigated the English learning strategies and academic challenges of international students from Taiwan at an American university. Six international students studying at California State University, Chico participated for one academic year. The data gathered through structured questionnaires, interviews, and think-aloud activities documented six international students’ learning experiences, use of language learning strategies, and academic difficulties. The data was analyzed and compared for individuals and the group as a whole in order to reveal similarities and differences in English learning strategy use and the challenges students face in using
Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, the greatest challenges for the international students were written assignments and receptive and expressive language in the classroom contexts. Results also indicated that the participants used certain strategies frequently to support their academic learning at the university, such as compensation, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Social strategies were also viewed as crucial to international students’ learning. However, the usage of social strategies varies across individual learners. Comparatively, memory and affective strategies were used less often or viewed as less significant in international students’ academic learning at the university level.

The findings of this study indicate that language learning strategies are significant for language learners at the university level, especially compensation, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. International students should have more opportunities to receive learning strategy training in their academic preparation before they study abroad. Universities in the United States should also provide appropriate and effective support to help the increasing numbers of international students overcome their learning difficulties. This includes language teachers give more direct learning strategies instruction, language institutes develop learning strategy curriculum, and universities provide seminars or workshops for international students in both Taiwan and the United States.
Implications and Recommendations

The results provide several recommendations for other English learners, instructors, and language institutes in both Taiwan and the United States. First, language learning strategies need to be emphasized more in the language education system in Taiwan. Though students might access some learning strategies at school, most of the participants did not receive explicit strategy instruction or enough practice in and outside of school. If teachers can provide systematic strategy training and sufficient opportunities to practice strategy use, students will be able to improve their language learning and become more autonomous learners. In this case, students have a better foundation for developing academic language in the future.

English learners at the university level need to become more autonomous learners, especially if they want to study abroad. Language learning strategies are great tools for English learners. English learners can use appropriate learning strategies to improve their learning effectiveness. Additionally, students who are admitted to the university should also develop their academic ability instead of only focusing on communicative language. One common situation is that students usually focus on their communicative language before study abroad, but totally neglect their limited academic language ability.

Although using learning strategies is important in learning language, knowing how to use strategies appropriately is more crucial to learners. Language learning strategies are functional according to learner’s needs. Therefore, language instructors should notice what kinds of strategies are needed by students and provide clear instructions in order to help students employ strategies appropriately and effectively. For
example, beginning learners need to remember more new words, but they don’t have enough prior knowledge. If a language teacher provides effective memory strategies to help students remember new vocabulary, it will be more helpful than teaching these students compensation strategies, such as connecting prior knowledge or substituting missed words.

Because the usage of language learning strategies is influenced by many factors, such as a learner’s learning style, motivation and previous learning experiences, instructors need to understand an individual’s present strategy use in order to provide effective and appropriate strategy training. Therefore, before strategy training, several strategy assessments should be used to identify students’ language learning strategies and then effectiveness. Instructors can also evaluate students’ perceptions of learning strategies and raise awareness through strategy assessment. These are helpful for both language learners and instructors.

In addition, the private language institutes in Taiwan should also consider providing learning strategy training to students who have applied to study abroad. Some students buy English textbooks related to their majors after they are admitted to university programs. They want to prepare for academic learning early, but most of them don’t have clear guidelines or clues about what the academic demands are going to be like overseas. If the future international students can acquire more information about what they will need in the academic disciplines, they can better prepare and achieve their goals more easily.

In addition to learners and instructors in Taiwan, university instructors in the U.S. should notice English as second language learners’ difficulties in their classes and
provide effective support to help them achieve academic success. For example, instructors can help English learners by providing guided notes for their classes, posting schedules before each class begins, using visuals, and minimizing language bias during assessments. If instructors pay more attention to English learners’ academic learning in the class, it will also improve learners’ motivation and encourage their performance in the class. In order to improve faculty’s awareness and knowledge, administrators should provide faculty training every semester.

Most universities provide tutoring centers, workshops, and other resources to help international students’ academic learning at school. However, based on the results of this study, most of the participants did not make sufficient use of these resources in their academic learning. This indicates that administration might need to understand what learners really need and examine the resources in order to provide more effective and useful support for international students.

Directions for Future Research

Since each technique has its strengths and weaknesses, the present study used different techniques in order to achieve triangulation. The questionnaires could capture learner’s learning strategies in a short time. However, the participants sometimes used certain strategies unconsciously, especially their most well-practiced strategies. For example, during the think-aloud activities, the researcher found out that the participants actually used compensation strategies more frequently than they had reported on the SILL questionnaire. In this case, the think-aloud activities provided another chance to examine participants’ real strategy use.
Researchers should include different techniques in order to assess learner’s real strategy use, or it’s easily to over generalize the results. Therefore, future research should employ alternative assessments to evaluate learners. In order to compensate for the limitations of self-report, one possible option is to use real tasks to evaluate learners’ strategy use in academic contexts.

Given the limitations of this study, future case studies should include more participants, allow for a longer duration, or identify clear variables that influence language learning strategies in order to address more specific factors and their implications. For example, this study didn’t examine the gender and discipline differences. However, these factors are also very important in discussing language learning strategies. Therefore, future studies should include more participants from similar and distinct populations with a longer duration and encompass more variables to allow for comparisons across languages and cultures.

Since this study was primarily qualitative research, future research should expand to include empirical studies or action research with larger numbers of subjects. The design of this study did not provide formal training in language learning strategies for the participants. Therefore, language instructors in future studies should explore learners’ usage of language learning strategies by providing appropriate training for specific strategies. In this case, researchers could provide more details of strategy use and effectiveness for each strategy.

This study focused on the students’ perspective on learning difficulties. However, teaching and learning are complementary. Future studies should include the perceptions of instructors and administrators in language institutes and universities.
Future studies should also consider the essential features of effective faculty training to support the increasing numbers of international students in the United States.
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REFERENCES


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PART I

Background Questionnaire

The questions below are for research purposes only, and your individual answers will not be made available to anyone. Please answer the following questions or mark the proper answers.

1. Your sex: a) male b) female
2. Your age: ___________ years old
3. Your major: __________________________________________
4. Years of study: ______________________
5. Besides Mandarin and English, what other languages do you use?
   a. Taiwanese
   b. Hakka
   c. Other(s) _______________________________________
6. Have you ever studied English in a private school or with a private tutor?
   a. Yes.
      How long? _______ years _______ months
   b. No.
7. How long have you learned English? (including self-study and taking private English courses)
   __________________ years _______________ months
8. Had you ever traveled or lived in an English speaking country before you came to study in the United States?
   a. Yes.
      i. What country?
      ii. How long?
9. How do you rate your overall proficiency in English as compared to the proficiency of other international students you know here?

   poor  not good  average  good  excellent
   1     2       3       4      5

10. How much do you want to learn English? (How strong is your motivation to learn English?)

   not at all  not much  average  much  very much
   1     2       3       4      5

11. How much effort do you spend in learning English?

   not at all  not much  average  much  very much
   1     2       3       4      5

12. How good do you feel you are at learning English?

   poor  not good  average  good  excellent
   1     2       3       4      5

13. In relation to how you learned Chinese, how do you try to learn English?

   completely  seldom  sometimes  usually  almost  the same way
   differently  the same  the same  the same  always
   1     2       3       4      5

14. Outside of your classes at university, in what situations do you encounter English, and how much?

   seldom  sometimes  often
   a) take language classes  1     2       3
   b) self study  1     2       3
   c) with native English speakers  1     2       3
   d) radio  1     2       3
   e) television  1     2       3
f) movies 1 2 3

g) playing games (computer or other) 1 2 3

h) reading for enjoyment 1 2 3

i) other ______________________ 1 2 3

15. Here are some difficulties you might encounter learning in a U.S university context because of language. Please choose three of the most troublesome for you.

   a) Context of communication
   b) Purpose of communication
   c) Complex internal structure of texts
   d) Term papers
   e) Tests
   f) Memorization
   g) Lack of vocabulary knowledge
   h) Complex syntax/patterns of written language
   i) Time-consuming of reading questions
   j) Note-taking
   k) Lack of prior knowledge

   Other ______________________________________

   ____________________________________________

APPENDIX B
LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. **Pronunciation**
   In the class, your professor pronounces several new words or phrases. You know the new words or phrases will be the key point in the course. You might need to use the new words or phrases for group discussion, participation or presentation and so on.
   - What do you do to copy the teacher’s pronunciation?
   - How do you remember the pronunciation later?

2. **Vocabulary Learning**
   In your class, there are several new words which are important to your discipline. You need to use the new words in your class note and assignment.
   - Do you have any special tricks to help you learn and remember the new words and their meanings?

3. **Listening to the Teacher Speak the Target Language**
   Your professor suddenly asks you some questions in the class. There are several words you do not know in what your professor says.
   You have to guess at the meaning of these words.
   - How do you figure out the meanings of the new words? Do you have special tricks or ways that you understand what the teacher says in the target language?
   - What’s your general approach to listening to the target language?
   - What do you do if you don’t understand what you hear?

4. **Reading Comprehension in the Target Language**
   Your professor asks you read two chapters in your textbook for the discussion in the next class.
   - As you are reading, what do you do that helps you to understand the meaning of the reading passage? Describe your general reading approach.
   - As you are reading, what do you do when you come to a new word?
   - What do you do that helps you answer the comprehension questions?

5. **Written Composition in the Target Language**
   You need to write a 5 pages paper for one of your classes.
   - Do you do anything before you start to write? What? How does this help you?
• As you are writing what helps you to write better? Describe your general approach to writing in the target language?
• Do you do anything after you have written? What?

6. **Student Oral Presentation**
You have to give a 10 minutes oral presentation in one of your classes.
• How do you prepare for the oral presentation?
• What helps you to present the report well?
• What advice would you give another student on how to give a good oral presentation in the target language?

7. **Functional/Situational Communication in the Target Language**
In your daily life, such as ordering a meal in a restaurant, ordering a plane ticket, or asking for directions.
• Do you have any special tricks that help you prepare for the task before you actually have to do it?
• Do you have any special tricks that help you complete the task using the target language appropriately?
• What do you do to help yourself speak? What do you do if the person to whom you’re speaking does not understand you?
• What do you do if you do not understand what the person says to you?

8. **Communication in a Social Situation**
You encounter a few classmates in the cafeteria. You greet them with smile and want to join their conversation. You need to listen to what they say, understand the meaning, and speak to them as intelligently and appropriately as possible.
• How often have you had to do this?
• What do you do that helps you understand the target language you hear?
• What do you do that helps you remember new words or phrases?
• What do you do that helps you to talk?
• What do you do if you don’t understand what the native speakers say?
• What do you do if the native speakers don’t understand you?

APPENDIX C
THINK-ALOUD ACTIVITY
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Reading

When you read your reading assignment (textbook or article) from your class,

1. What is your sequence for reading? Do you read topic, subtitles, pictures, figures, or the first few sentences of each paragraph first?
2. Before you read, do you think about what you already know about the topic?
3. Before you read, do you decide specific information to look for?
4. Before you read, do you predict what the text will be about?
5. While you read, do you periodically check your understanding of the content?
6. While you read, do you take notes?
7. While you read, do you imagine scenes or draw pictures of what you are reading?
8. While you read, do you act out the situation described in the reading?
9. While you read, do you encourage yourself?
10. Do you work with classmates for solving reading comprehension problems?
11. Do you use reference materials to help solve reading comprehension problems?
12. Do you use the context, familiar words or content to help you guess the meaning of the reading?
13. After you read, do you summarize in your head or in writing important information that you read?
14. After you read, do you evaluate your understanding of what you read?
Listening

When you listen to your lecture in the class,

1. Before your class starts, do you think about what you already know about the topic?
2. Before your class starts, do you decide specific information to look for?
3. Before your class starts, do you predict what the text will be about?
4. While you are in the class, do you periodically check your understanding of the content?
5. While you are in the class, do you take notes?
6. While you are in the class, do you imagine scenes or draw pictures of what you are hearing?
7. While you are in the class, do you encourage yourself?
8. Do you work with classmates for solving listening comprehension problems?
9. Do you use reference materials to help solve listening comprehension problems?
10. Do you use the context, familiar words or content to help you guess the meaning of words you hear?
11. After your class, do you summarize in your head or in writing important information that you have heard?
12. After your class, do you evaluate your understanding of what you have heard?

APPENDIX D
Informed Consent

My name is I-Ju Wu. I am a student at California State University, Chico, and I am looking for 8 students who are willing to be subjects for the research I am doing on how international students from Taiwan learn English in the American university. The research is for my master’s thesis. It is required to complete my M.A. in Teaching International Languages.

The interviews will take place six times during the semester. Each interview will be about one hour. We can work together to find a convenient time and place for each interview.

Your participation is completely voluntary. There is no penalty if you do not want to participate or if you choose to stop participating in the middle.

There is no anticipated benefit or risk if you choose to participate. The interviews will help you know more about your English learning, introduce you new ideas to learn English, and help you face your difficulties. I will provide some feedback that might help you to better understand your English learning processes, and learn English more effectively.

Our interviews will be recorded. However, your responses will be kept confidential and not linked to your name in any way. The recording will be erased upon completion of the study by December 31, 2011.

If you need to contact me, please do so by email at <ijuwu51@gmail.com>. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study.

___________________      ________________________          ________________
Signature of participant            Print name of participant                      Date
The Plan for Interviews

Interview 1: Orientation and Questionnaire. (1 hour)

The questionnaire has two parts. The first part includes general questions on your background and English learning experiences. The second part is about how you learn English and use language learning strategies. This questionnaire will take about 40 minutes.

Interview 2: How do you learn English? (50 minutes)

Review your responses on the questionnaire and provide clarifications as needed. Talk about your English learning strategies in response to interview prompts.

Interview 3: Think aloud activity - Reading. (50 minutes)

Bring one textbook from your current class. Let’s discuss how you read this textbook by using think aloud activity.

Interview 4: Listen to the tape. (50 minutes)

Listen to a short article selected from your textbook. What do you do to help you better understand the content?

Interview 5: Presentation and written paper. (50 minutes)

Bring some materials from one of your present presentations, like handouts or PowerPoint. Present all or part of your presentation for about 3 minutes. Please bring a written paper from one of your class. It can be the written paper for your presentation or any other paper. Let’s talk about how you deal with written papers.

Interview 6: Do you see any changes? (1 hour)

Having talked about your language learning strategies on several occasions, try to do the SILL again. Do you see any changes in your use of language learning strategies? Do you use any new strategy? Why and why not? How do you think about our activities?