



Language Learning Strategies, Motivation and EFL Proficiency: A Study of Chinese Tertiary-Level Non-English Majors

Yufei Gu^{a*}, Wan Nurul Elia Haslee Sharil^b

^a *PhD Student, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA(UiTM), Bandar Puncak Alam, Malaysia, 423000. Lecturer, Faculty of Economics and Management, JiLin Agricultural Science and Technology University, JiLin City, 132101, China.*
Email: raindy17@163.com

^b *Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA(UiTM), Bandar Puncak Alam, 423000, Malaysia. Email: nurulelia@uitm.edu.my*

Received: 21 April 2024 | Received: in Revised Form 22 May 2024 | Accepted 17 June 2024

APA Citation:

Gu, Y., Sharil, W. N. E. H. (2024). Language Learning Strategies, Motivation and EFL Proficiency: A Study of Chinese Tertiary-Level Non-English Majors. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 254-261.
Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.10221>

Abstract

This article investigates the impact of three factors on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' language learning practices in China. Utilizing the Methodology Stock for Language Learning (Ledge), Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the study collected data to analyse these practices. Findings revealed that Chinese EFL learners predominantly employed memory strategies, followed by compensation, metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social strategies. Specific tactics included predicting unfamiliar terms, monitoring their progress in English learning, and seeking improvement methods. Additionally, motivation and anxiety were identified as significant influences on their language learning practices. The study provides valuable insights for enhancing English language instruction and potentially improving performance among Chinese EFL learners. Despite some existing research on Chinese tertiary and middle school EFL learners, there is limited understanding of how variables such as gender, culture, learning style, and motivation interact with language learning strategies. This study examined the effects of motivation and learning practices on EFL competency through two self-report questionnaires based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The results indicate that motivation and learning strategies are linked to students' EFL proficiency levels. While Chinese EFL learners' motivation is comparable to that of learners in other EFL contexts, it also exhibits distinct features. The findings are discussed in relation to the behaviour of Chinese EFL students and academic implications are considered.

© 2024 EJAL & the Authors. Published by Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics (EJAL). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Keywords: Language Learning, Successful Learners, Less Successful Learners, Proficiency, Motivation, Classroom Anxiety. Foreign Language Proficiency, EFL Proficiency.

Introduction

This review was proposed due to the limited research on Chinese EFL learners' strategies related to foreign language learning motivation and proficiency. Recent studies have demonstrated that language learning success is closely associated with learners' adoption of specific strategies when approaching language tasks, and that

* Corresponding Author

Email: raindy17@163.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.10221>

motivation plays a critical role in shaping their choice of learning strategies to enhance language skills or sustain continuous integration. However, Chinese EFL learners have been rarely examined in this context. Motivation, a socio-psychological concept, has gained significant attention in Western second language acquisition (SLA) literature, yet research focusing on Chinese EFL learners remains scarce in English.

EFL proficiency is increasingly vital in today's globalized context, particularly for Chinese tertiary students. Proficiency in English is essential across academic, professional, and social spheres. The variability in English competence among Chinese tertiary non-English majors underscores the need for an in-depth examination of language learning outcomes. EFL proficiency is influenced by both learning methodologies and motivational factors. Understanding how these students utilize specific methods and what motivates them could provide insights into their language acquisition processes in this context. Despite the growing importance of English, existing research often generalizes findings or focuses narrowly on particular educational levels, thus neglecting the distinct challenges faced by Chinese tertiary non-English majors. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the interplay of language learning strategies, motivation, and EFL proficiency among this group. The research seeks to provide valuable insights to enhance English language education, benefiting educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in improving language learning outcomes in Chinese tertiary institutions.

Six Types of Language Learning Strategies

Memory Strategy

Memory techniques enhance information retention and recall by optimizing the brain's processes for encoding, storing, and retrieving data, which is crucial for learning and studying. Common strategies include repetition and association, which employ mnemonics or visual aids to connect new information with existing knowledge. Chunking and hierarchical organization further facilitate the structuring and retrieval of information. Employing stories or analogies to explain concepts can make them more memorable. Teaching others and engaging in discussions also contribute to better understanding and recall. Additionally, multi-sensory experiences, mindfulness practices, effective use of technology, adequate sleep, and overall wellness support memory improvement. Integrating these methods can significantly enhance learning outcomes and memory application.

Cognitive Strategy

Cognitive strategies encompass the processes by which individuals acquire, retain, and retrieve information. These approaches enhance learning and memory through deliberate thinking and problem-solving. Key cognitive strategies include critical thinking, metacognition, and mental rehearsal. Critical thinking involves the active analysis and evaluation of information, thereby deepening comprehension. Metacognition refers to the awareness and regulation of one's own cognitive processes, facilitating more effective management of learning. Mental rehearsal or visualization involves mentally practicing or simulating tasks to improve memory and preparation. These cognitive strategies support learning and problem-solving by promoting intentional and reflective use of information.

Compensatory Strategy

Compensatory strategies are cognitive methods employed to address limitations in specific skills or areas. These tactics are particularly valuable when facing challenges in learning or performance. Rather than directly resolving the issue, compensatory techniques seek alternative approaches to achieve objectives. For instance, a learner with difficulties in reading may utilize auditory or visual aids to enhance comprehension. These adaptive strategies enable individuals to overcome obstacles and enhance performance by leveraging different abilities or resources. In educational contexts, students may implement compensatory methods to enhance their understanding and engagement despite facing difficulties.

Metacognitive Strategy

Metacognitive strategies, which involve the awareness and regulation of one's cognitive processes, enhance learning and problem-solving efficiency. These strategies emphasize understanding and managing the processes of knowledge acquisition and application, rather than merely acquiring information. When engaging in metacognitive activities, individuals plan their approach, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning outcomes. Students who are more aware of their cognitive needs can adjust their strategies, accordingly, often resulting in improved academic performance. Metacognition allows individuals to assess their comprehension, identify areas of weakness, and direct cognitive efforts to enhance understanding and memory retention, which is crucial for effective learning. Moreover, metacognitive strategies serve as powerful motivators, encouraging students to engage in self-directed learning and reflect on their progress.

Affective Strategy

Affective strategies are cognitive approaches that address the emotional and motivational dimensions of learning, influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that impact the learning process. These strategies include emotional regulation, fostering a growth mindset, and enhancing intrinsic motivation. Integrative techniques, such as self-motivation, maintaining a positive outlook, and setting personal goals, align with

individual preferences. Recognizing and managing emotions such as anxiety or frustration can create a more conducive learning environment. Affective strategies are vital in shaping learning experiences by influencing intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement. Adopting a positive emotional attitude can make learning more comprehensive and rewarding, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of cognitive processes.

Social Strategy

Social strategies in learning involve collaborative and interactive methods that utilize social interactions to enhance comprehension and knowledge acquisition. These strategies include group work, cooperative learning, and peer teaching, where individuals learn from and with each other. Engaging with others creates opportunities for exchanging ideas, debating differing perspectives, and motivating one another, thereby fostering a dynamic educational environment. Social learning approaches encompass study groups, seeking assistance from peers or instructors, and utilizing online resources such as discussion boards and social media. These techniques allow individuals to access the knowledge and skills of others, enriching their own learning experiences as well as those of their peers. The collaborative nature of these methods makes learning more interactive and engaging.

Literature Review

Deng (2023) examines differences in perceptions of Native English-speaking Teachers (NESTs), Non-Native English-speaking Teachers (NNESTs), and students on language teaching and learning, and their impact on teaching effectiveness and student achievement. The study, conducted at four mid-tier Chinese colleges, is divided into two phases. Phase One involves developing and testing three Oxford SILL questionnaires and interview guides on student motivation, self-efficacy, learning techniques, and evaluations of NEST and NNEST effectiveness. These instruments are piloted with 19 students and 3 teachers. In Phase Two, data collection is expanded to 511 students and 7 teachers. The study uses descriptive statistics, multivariate, correlation, and regression analyses to explore the relationships between students' motivation, English proficiency, learning strategies, self-efficacy, and perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs. Thematic analysis is applied to qualitative data. Results show that while NESTs and NNESTs are equally effective, they have distinct advantages and drawbacks. Students' views on teaching effectiveness are positively correlated with their motivation, self-efficacy, and learning practices. Regression models predict opinions on teaching efficacy based on these factors. The study offers recommendations for enhancing NEST and NNEST education, notes limitations, and suggests future research directions.

Sari et al. (2023) investigated the English learning needs, attitudes, and strategies of 180 non-English majors across diverse university backgrounds. The study highlights a general deficiency in English skills and usage among students. It suggests that ESP teachers should tailor courses to address these needs, provide relevant materials, and motivate students to improve their English proficiency. Despite students' confidence and motivation, many experienced anxiety and insecurity during classes. The study indicates that effective language acquisition methods vary among students and emphasizes the need for ESP teachers to employ diverse teaching strategies.

Phan & Huynh (2023) underscore the significance of active and self-directed engagement in achieving success in foreign language learning, which is crucial for developing communication competence. Language learning systems enable students to manage their own progress effectively. This study examined the language learning strategies predominantly employed by non-English majors at Nong Lam University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Data was gathered from 725 undergraduates using descriptive quantitative methods, specifically through a Vietnamese adaptation of Oxford's SILL (1990). Analysis was performed using SPSS 22.0. The findings revealed a moderate level of strategy use among non-English majors, with an uneven application of all six strategy types, potentially impeding language development.

Wang & Yang (2023) explore the extensive field of language learning intentions, noting a relative lack of focus on the motivations of Chinese learners compared to their English counterparts. This study investigated the motivations of 256 Turkish learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) across five Turkish universities using a survey adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery. The statistical analysis identified three primary motivational factors: integrativeness, the learning environment, and Chinese language learning, which were found to be the most significant. These were followed by instrumentality and parental encouragement. In conclusion, integrativeness, the quality of the learning environment, and intrinsic interest in the Chinese language are the most influential motivators for learners, with additional support from instrumental goals and parental encouragement playing a secondary role.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The research surveyed 500 first-year students (250 male, 250 female) at a publicly funded university in central China, who were not majoring in English. Participants, representing various disciplines such as Chemical Engineering, Chemistry, Mathematics, and others, completed valid Oxford's SILL questionnaires.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers prepared a consent form in compliance with international ethical standards and requested all participants to sign it. Despite initial reservations, the participants ultimately agreed to participate after being informed of the potential benefits. Additional measures were taken to ensure participant safety and confidentiality, allowing them to complete the survey with confidence that their identities would remain anonymous. Participants could withdraw at any time. Consequently, all participants completed the provided Oxford’s SILL questionnaires, resulting in a perfect return rate.

Research Questions

- 1. What types of motivational tendencies are exhibited by EFL students who are not majoring in English?
- 2. How are learning strategies and motivation for language acquisition related to EFL proficiency?

Results

Motivation Patterns among Chinese Non-English Major Students

The first research question was addressed through factor analysis of the collected data. We utilized the Principal Component Extraction technique to determine the motivational factors of Chinese EFL students. A nine-factor solution was identified using varimax rotation, which accounted for 45% of the total variance (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1: An Examination of Motivating Factors.

Factors	Label	Eigenvalues	Variance	Cumulative variance
1	Intrinsic	7.900	12.875	13.750
2	Anxiety	5.450	8.936	21.250
3	Instrumental	3.468	6.145	26.260
4	Self-Efficacy	3.200	5.364	34.300
5	Sociability	2.136	4.436	36.345
6	Valence	1.368	3.254	39.465
7	Social Responsibility	1.537	3.264	42.561
8	Personal Goals	2.300	2.774	45.321
9	Attitude	2.315	2.364	48.213

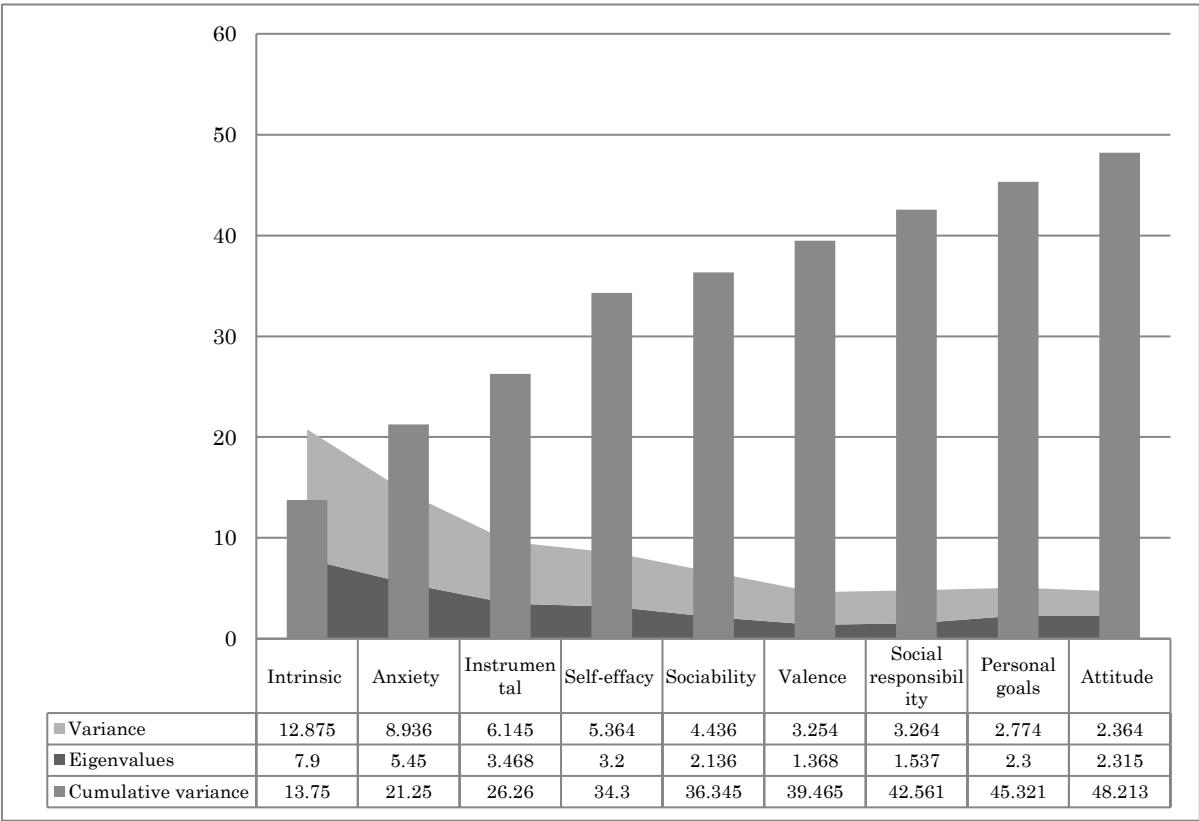


Figure 1: An Examination of Motivating Factors.

*Motivation, Language Learning Strategies and EFL Proficiency***Table 2:** *Learning Strategies and EFL Proficiency Correlation.*

Variables	Psychometric Category	Correlation Coefficient
Memory/Remembering	Strategy	.200**
Cognitive/Using Mental Processes	Strategy	.100
Compensation/Compensating	Strategy	-.150**
Metacognitive/Organizing and Evaluating	Strategy	.290**
Affective/Managing Emotions	Strategy	.140**
Social/Learning or Cooperating with Others	Strategy	.110**

The second inquiry aimed to explore the relationships between intrinsic motivation, learning techniques, and EFL proficiency. While extensive research exists on language learning intentions, less focus has been on Chinese learners compared to English learners. This study investigated the motivations of 256 Turkish CFL students across five Turkish universities using a survey adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Table 2). Key findings include integrativeness, learning environment, and Chinese language learning as main motivators, with instrumentality and parental encouragement also significant. Language anxiety and passive motivation were less impactful. Female students were more motivated than males, and differences were observed between Chinese and non-Chinese majors in several motivational factors.

Table 3: *Motivation and EFL Proficiency Correlation.*

Variables	Psychometrics Category	Correlation Coefficient
Intrinsic Motivation	Motivation	-.129**
Anxiety about Learning the Language and Achievement	Motivation	.450**

As shown in Table 3, only two motivational characteristics—*intrinsic motivation* ($r = -0.129$) and *anxiety* ($r = 0.450$)—were significantly related to EFL proficiency. The correlation between intrinsic motivation and EFL proficiency was relatively weak, whereas anxiety exhibited a moderate correlation with EFL proficiency. Table 4 illustrates the relationships among various components of LLS. The correlation coefficients, which were statistically significant at a p -value of less than 0.01 (two-tailed), displayed positive values. These findings suggest that participants from Chinese universities employ a diverse array of language learning techniques rather than relying on a single strategy.

Table 4: *Correlations between LLS Mem.*

	Cog	Comp	Metacog	Affective	Social
Memory					
Cognitive			.82**		
Compensation		.45**		.55**	
Metacognitive		.50**	.50**	.50**	
Affective	.62**		.65**	.64**	.52**
Social	.62**	.64**	.57**	.59**	.56**

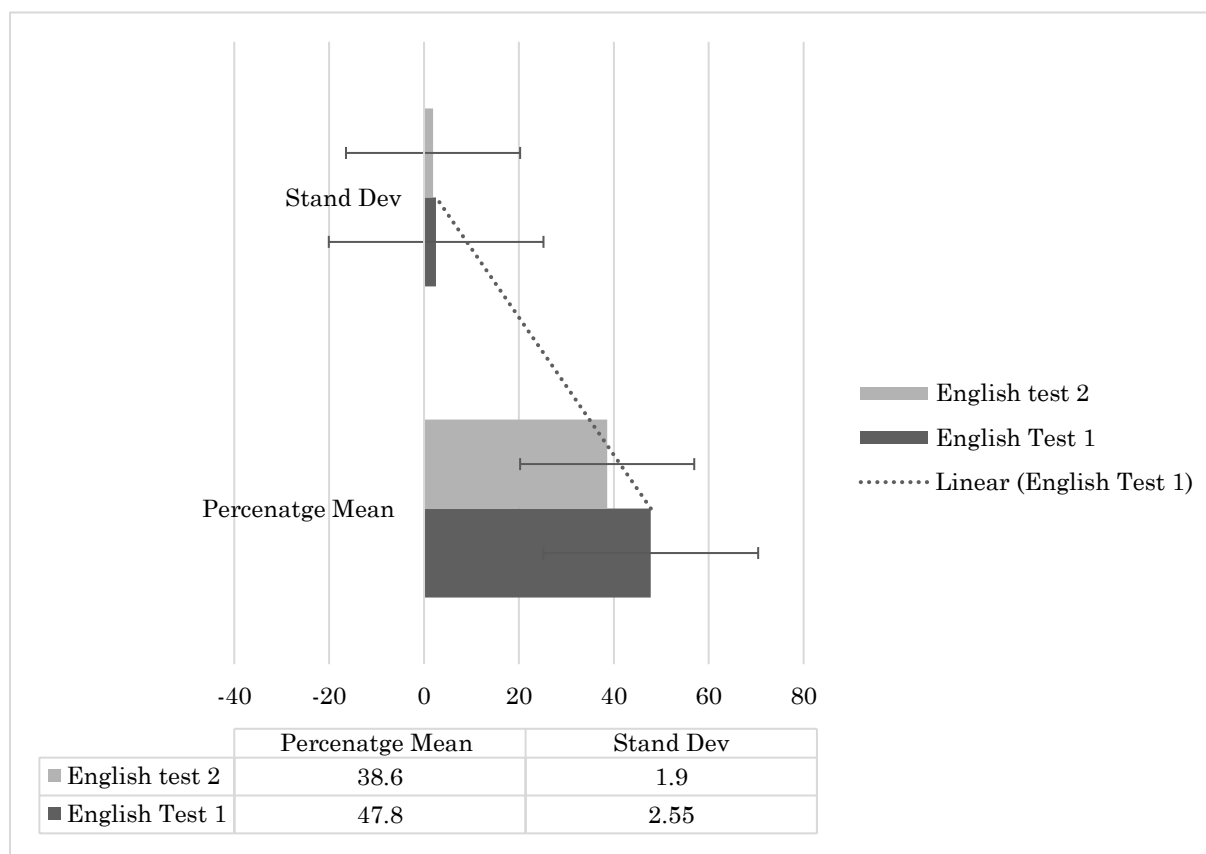
Correlation between Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and English competence

This section explores the correlation between the use of LLS and English proficiency, as measured by participants' scores on English Test T1 and Test T2. Table 5 and Figure 2 display the means and standard deviations for Test T1 and Test T2. The results indicate that participants achieved a mean score of 47.8% on Test T1 and 38.6% on Test T2. These scores suggest a relatively lower level of English proficiency among the participants from Chinese universities.

Table 6 presents the performance of participants on Test 1 (T1) and Test 2 (T2) across different academic groups. The scores of the SS and ST groups were similar, with the SS group averaging scores of 47.8% on T1 and 38.6% on T2, while the ST group averaged 39.0% on T1 and 31.0% on T2. ANOVA analysis showed significant differences between groups on T1 ($F(2, 1670) = 55.2111, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .04$) and T2 ($F(2, 1490) = 54.111, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .03$). Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the SS and HS groups, as well as between the SS and ST groups, with HS participants performing significantly better. However, no significant differences were found between the SS and ST groups. The results indicate that HS participants demonstrate superior English proficiency compared to SS and ST participants, who exhibit comparable levels of English ability.

Table 5: *China University Learners' English Proficiency Test.*

	Percentage Mean	Stand Dev
English Test 1	47.8	2.55
English Test 2	38.6	1.90

**Table 6:** *Correlations Between LLS And English Proficiency.*

Strategies	Mem	Cog	Comp	Metacog	Affective	Social	Overall	
Test 1		.32**	.29**	.19**	.15**	.33**	.20**	.32**
Test 2	.31**	.33**	.20**	.20**	.24**	.21**		.33**

Discussion

Our study investigated Chinese EFL learners' language learning motivation, use of LLS, and EFL proficiency. The findings revealed distinct motivational profiles among the three EFL proficiency groups, with interest-driven learners demonstrating superior EFL performance. The relationship between anxiety and EFL proficiency proved more complex than anticipated. Contrary to common assumptions that anxiety detracts from performance, our study found that higher levels of anxiety were associated with greater EFL proficiency. This might be attributable to the nature of the national English matriculation exam, which predominantly assesses grammar, reading, and vocabulary, with less focus on speaking and listening. Consequently, anxiety might not directly affect written performance, but rather serve as a motivator to tackle this high-stakes exam.

Previous research on anxiety among Chinese ESL students has yielded similar findings. Social psychology has long been a dominant framework in understanding language learning motivation, though it has not fully accounted for all motivational factors. While our findings are modest, they contribute to understanding the language learning motivations of Chinese EFL learners, highlighting the influence of cultural and situational factors. Unlike learners studying abroad, those in China might have different motivations for learning English. Gardner's socio-educational theory posits that language learners are motivated by integration into the target culture; however, EFL learners in China, lacking such opportunities, are driven by various factors. High-proficiency EFL learners exhibited greater use of memory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies compared to those with middle and low proficiency. Conversely, low-proficiency learners relied predominantly on compensatory strategies. Overall, while similar cognitive strategies were used across proficiency levels, variations in strategy usage and motivation patterns were evident.

The diverse characteristics of the findings will be analysed in detail. Advanced foreign language learners tend to utilize Ledge's "immediate" memory components more effectively. This is supported by nationwide studies of Chinese EFL learners. Memory strategies include grouping, associating/expounding, contextualizing new vocabulary; employing imagery, semantic maps, mnemonics, or auditory representations; systematic review; and engaging in activities that involve physical responses or perceptual techniques. However, it is important to interpret the finding that Chinese EFL learners did not extensively use mental strategies—another "immediate" approach—with caution, as it may be misleading. Although LLS classifications, encompass cognitive skills, Oxford's Ledge categorizes memory strategies separately. Memory strategies, which fall under cognitive strategies in other LLS classifications, were indeed used by this cohort of Chinese EFL learners. Further investigation into Oxford's Ledge cognitive approaches may clarify why participants employed cognitive strategies less frequently. Cognitive strategies include practicing, receiving and sending messages, evaluating, reasoning (analytically, interpretively, inferentially, contrastively), and organizing information and outcomes.

Recent data reveal that university students in China, regardless of their academic disciplines, exhibit similar utilization of LLS, with the emotional approach being the most frequently employed. However, substantial differences are observed among academic subject groups, suggesting that the learning environment or context may influence language acquisition. Additionally, the variation in LLS preferences among Chinese university students could be linked to the interplay of various LLS. The findings show a moderate positive correlation between different LLS, indicating that students employ a variety of strategies rather than relying solely on one. The predominance of grammar-focused activities in Chinese language teaching, which emphasizes form over communication, may contribute to the observed strategy preferences.

Chinese university students predominantly utilize affective strategies for learning English, driven by their inherent tendencies. These affective techniques help students manage their emotional responses, attitudes, and motivation. For example, strategies such as emphasizing personal emotions can help manage stress or boost motivation following disappointing test results. Additionally, metacognitive strategies are the second most employed, involving executive processes that oversee and regulate the learning process. These strategies include methods for organizing, assessing, and monitoring one's progress in English studies. Evidence of this practice is observed in the identification of learning gaps and ongoing development efforts.

Participants' responses revealed frequent use of metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring English errors and utilizing this feedback to improve their language skills. They also engaged in collaboration with proficient English-speaking peers, identified effective methods for enhancing their learning, and reflected on their progress. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that learners exhibit strong self-awareness and analytical skills in optimizing their English language learning strategies. The analysis found that compensation strategies were the third most common technique used. These strategies help learners communicate in English despite limited vocabulary, such as using contextual clues or linguistic hints. Chinese EFL university students used these strategies moderately to address vocabulary gaps.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Student motivation and learning practices are the real keys to success in language learning. Educational psychology underlines the role of self-regulation in increasing achievement and closely links it to motivation. The present study reveals early patterns of how motivation and learning strategies impact English proficiency in Chinese EFL learners. Profiling learners' perceptions of these strategies can deepen our understanding of individual learning differences. Further research is needed to investigate culturally and contextually specific motivational factors affecting language learning strategies and proficiency.

While socio-mental perspectives are crucial for understanding language learning strategies and motivation, researchers emphasize the need to consider socio-cultural and contextual factors. This is particularly relevant for Chinese EFL students. Educators and researchers should explore how learners perceive their learning processes within socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. This approach could enhance understanding of EFL programs and inform language teaching strategies in China and beyond. Building self-regulated, independent learners is essential, and increasing learners' metacognitive awareness of language learning strategies in the curriculum can improve language proficiency. Additionally, strategy-based instruction could further enhance language learning outcomes. Educators' effective and consistent implementation of strategies at the metacognitive (planning, monitoring), memory (resource utilization, imagery), cognitive (summarizing, emphasizing), social (collaborating, interacting), and affective (emotion regulation) levels will benefit Chinese EFL learners and those in similar contexts.

References

- Deng, L. (2023). *Students' English Proficiency, Self-efficacy, Motivation, Language Learning Strategies, and Perceptions toward Native and Non-native Speaker Teachers' Effectiveness in Teaching English* (Doctoral dissertation, ResearchSpace@ Auckland). Retrieved from <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/64840>
- Phan, T. L. A., & Huynh, T. C. (2023). Language Learning Strategies Employed by Non-English Majors at Nong Lam University, Vietnam. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, 7(1), 1-14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.52296/vje.2023.248>
- Sari, F., Atmanegara, Y., Manurung, J. E., Ali, H. V., & Amaliah, A. (2023). Analyzing non-English major students' needs, attitudes, and English language learning strategies. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 11(1), 110-127. doi: <http://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v11i1.19423>
- Wang, Y., & Yang, H. (2023). Language Learning Motivations among Turkish Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language: A Survey of Five Universities in Turkey. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(10), 808. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13100808>