

EFL Learners' Preferences for English Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Case Study of Chinese Students in Malaysia

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Abstract: Mastery of English is gaining significance in the current worldwide competitive and developmental landscape, particularly in the realm of academic progress. Acquiring vocabulary is an essential and vital aspect of learning English. Drawing from Piaget's cognitive learning theories, this research concentrates on Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia, seeking to investigate their favored methods of vocabulary acquisition and opinions on these varied approaches. This study utilizes a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, encompassing semi-structured interviews and web-based surveys, in line with Creswell's step-by-step explanatory model. The aim of this research is to offer valuable perspectives on choosing efficient strategies for vocabulary acquisition in EFL students.

1. Introduction

Mastery of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is crucial in today's global academic and professional landscapes. The acquisition of vocabulary as an integral part of language learning and of related knowledge have all along been accentuated. Drawing on Piaget's cognitive learning theories, this research highlights the guiding roles of assimilation and accommodation in acquiring new linguistic knowledge. Effective vocabulary strategies, based on various second language acquisition theories, can significantly enhance learners' communicative skills, comprehension, and overall proficiency Hasram, S., & Singh, B. K. A. 2021^[3].

Previous research including studies by Parera, N. R. 2022^[8] and Schmitt 1997^[10], has demonstrated that strategic approaches to language learning greatly impact learners' success. Vocabulary learning strategies are pivotal in language acquisition, affecting both the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. This study aims to contribute by examining strategies used by proficient EFL learners within diverse learning paradigms.

This research investigates the strategic preferences of proficient Chinese EFL students in Malaysia for English vocabulary acquisition. By integrating multiple learning theories with assimilation and accommodation processes, the study seeks to understand how adult learners integrate new information into existing cognitive frameworks and adapt these frameworks to accommodate new linguistic stimuli Cummins, J. P. 2019^[2]. As Magogwe, J. M., & Oliver, R. 2007^[4] suggested, memory and cognitive processes are crucial in language learning, influencing how learners assimilate and

accommodate new vocabulary. The study aims to:

Research Aim 1: Identify the preferred strategic choices of Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia for English vocabulary acquisition and learning.

Research Aim 2: Explore these learners' perceptions and evaluations of their vocabulary development based on their selected learning strategies.

The research questions are:

1) What are the preferred English vocabulary learning strategies among proficient Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia?

2) What are Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of the strategies they employed for vocabulary learning in Malaysia?

Through a mixed-method approach, the study first analyzes quantitative data from an online survey to identify participants' strategic inclinations. Qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews then provide a deeper understanding of learners' choices and evaluations.

This research has significant implications for EFL learners. Effective vocabulary acquisition strategies, such as repetition, note-taking, and contextual guessing, can enhance learning and retention. These strategies help students organize their learning, set clear objectives, and consistently assess their progress. Engaging in conversations and applying new vocabulary in practical contexts further solidifies learning outcomes.

The study aims to deepen the theoretical understanding of vocabulary acquisition strategies and provide practical advice for language learners. By identifying effective tactics used by proficient Chinese EFL learners, the research can offer valuable insights to improve vocabulary development and the overall language learning experience. Language professionals, including teachers and researchers, may be motivated to develop and implement more comprehensive and constructive language instruction and research programs.

Furthermore, the study's findings can serve as a basis for creating targeted instructional materials and curricula that cater specifically to the needs of Chinese EFL learners. By understanding the strategies that these learners find most effective, educators can design interventions that directly address their learning preferences and challenges. This research also underscores the importance of cultural context in language learning, suggesting that strategies successful in one context may need adaptation to be effective in another.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategy

Language learning strategy (LLS) is a subcategory of learning strategy. Oxford, R. 1990^[7] defined LLS as conscious steps or behaviors that could facilitate learners' acquiring, storing, retaining, recalling, and using information. Based on her own understanding, Parera, N. R. 2022^[8] proposed her LLS model with categorizing six strategies into two classes, direct strategies refer to the strategies that directly involved in the language learning process, and indirect strategies mean those strategies that do not directly involve in language learning but assist. The elaboration of the six strategies is as follows:

Based on the above classification (as shown in Table 1), Oxford developed Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (1990), which has been widely applied in research on language learning.

Many scholars have realized the importance of choosing a proper vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) and researched proficient language learners' choices of VLSs, aiming to supply references for other language learners. Cummins, J. P. 2019^[2] surveyed a good language learner in Saudia Arabia to find out his VLS choice. The result showed that metacognitive and cognitive strategies were the participant's preferred strategies. Nisbet, D. L., Tindall, E. R., & Arroyo, A. A. 2005^[5] who targeted

three good EFL learners, and he concluded that participants frequently used cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies in their learning process. These studies indicate that successful language learners have different preferences in VLSs, among which cognitive strategies are commonly preferred. However, limited studies investigated the preferences for VLSs of Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia, even less combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Therefore, this study targets at this group, aiming to explore their preferred VLSs as well as relevant considerations and reflections.

Table 1: Direct Strategies & Indirect Strategies

Direct Strategies	Memory strategies for storing and recalling the language
	Cognitive strategies for understanding and using the language
	Compensation strategies for adopting other methods to compensate for the lacked language ability
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning processes
	Affective strategies for regulating emotions and adjusting motivation
	Social strategies for interacting and communicating with others to promote learning

2.2 Assimilation and Accommodation

LLS refers to learners' knowledge of their strategic choices in terms of language learning from the perspective of cognitive theory Wenden, 1987^[11]. Assimilation and accommodation, proposed by Parera, N. R. 2022^[8], are two key concepts in understanding language learning strategies.

Assimilation means the integration of new information into existing cognitive structures. Nisbet, D. L., Tindall, E. R., & Arroyo, A. A. 2005^[5] concluded that relating the new vocabulary with known concepts by using semantic association could facilitate the comprehension of new vocabulary and improve the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition, which revealed the importance of assimilation in vocabulary learning.

Accommodation can be understood as the process by which an individual adjusts the existing cognitive framework to adapt to new information. Schmitt, N. 1997^[9] showed that his research participants applied different strategies when facing different vocabulary types to achieve an efficient learning outcome.

The theoretical foundation established by the concepts of assimilation and accommodation enlightens the significance of making smart choices of LLSs in the learning process based on individual cognitive structure and pattern, hence the guidelines for the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Resorting to a mixed-method approach and according with the sequential explanatory design featuring collecting and analyzing quantitative data before qualitative data Creswell, 2009^[1], this study integrates a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Oxford's SILL 1990^[6] and a subsequent semi-structured interview to achieve the mutual corroboration and complementation between the results of numerical statistics and the targeted participants' personal statements. Moreover, the pattern of inductive reasoning followed by this study can serve the need of identifying the commonalities among advanced EFL learners in terms of their strategic choices for vocabulary learning by focusing on individual cases.

3.2 Participants and Instruments

Through purposive sampling, four postgraduate students majoring in English language studies at Universiti Malaya have been selected as research samples, considering their accessibility and the researchers' familiarity with them. The four participants including two males and two females who exhibit homogeneity in age (between 23 and 25 years old), (originally from China), academic qualification (pursuing a master's degree) and social experience (studying abroad in Malaysia). All of them have obtained an overall IELTS band score of seven or above, with no results of the subtests below six, which makes them eligible for this research on good EFL learners.

Two research instruments, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 50 items and a semi-structured interview containing five open-ended questions contributed respectively to the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The validity and reliability of the adapted questionnaire are assumed as maintained, given the slight change from the original version. A pilot study has also been conducted among the researchers not involved in question design to ensure ethical considerations.

3.3 Data Collection

All procedures involved in data collection were implemented online, assisted by the survey platform "SoJump" or "Wenjuanxing" and two social softwares, WhatsApp and WeChat. The original 7.0 Version of SILL scale developed specially for second or foreign language learners was adapted slightly on SoJump to generate the questionnaire needed, the copies of which were then distributed to the participants through WhatsApp or WeChat for quantitative data. Furthermore, the online interview was conducted based on online chatting to access qualitative information. Informed consents were provided before the study and guidance from the researchers was available for participants during the whole research process.

3.4 Data Analysis

For quantitative data, descriptive statistics involving the calculation of the means which can reflect the central tendencies of a chunk of data and inferential statistics, specifically, Pearson correlation analysis and one-way ANOVA and were performed by using the statistical software SPSS. The rating scheme for strategy use has been shown below. And for qualitative data, narrative analysis was conducted on the participants' "storied experience" to further explore these participants' perceptions and evaluations of their strategic preferences and learning progress, which has been shown in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Rating Scheme of Usage Frequency

Frequency	Range of Means
High Use	$3.5 \leq M \leq 5.0$
Medium Use	$2.4 < M < 3.5$
Low Use	$1.0 \leq M < 2.4$

(Simplified from Oxford's original rating patterns.)

3.5 Strengths and Limitations

Enjoying the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative research methods such as efficient and rigorous processing of numerical data and rich and insightful interpretation of textual data, this study still possesses the following drawbacks:

- 1) Limited sample source (Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia) and size (four participants only);
- 2) The randomness of the answers to quantitative questions and the discursivity (irrelevance) of the answers to qualitative questions;
- 3) Potential over-interpretation and inevitable personal biases embodied in the analysis of qualitative data.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the four participants' usage frequencies of the six types of vocabulary learning strategies indicating their respective strategic preferences in terms of English vocabulary acquisition and learning, as well as relevant statements and explanations will be presented successively, followed by concrete and detailed analysis. For specific demographic information of the participants and the actual questionnaire and interview questions, please refer to the appendix attached.

Table 3: Participant 1's Situation.

Participant 1	Strategy Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency	Rank
	Cognitive Strategies	4.43	0.646	High	1
	Social Strategies	4.33	0.817	High	2
	Metacognitive Strategies	4.00	1.000	High	3
	Memory Strategies	3.44	1.236	Medium	4
	Compensation Strategies	3.33	1.975	Medium	5
	Affective Strategies	2.67	0.817	Medium	6

Based on Table 3 which depicts Participant 1's use of all the six categories of vocabulary learning strategies, it can be observed that cognitive strategies are generally more consistent with his learning modes, topping the list with the mean value of 4.43, indicating high use of the strategies. In addition, social and metacognitive strategies also turn out to be appealing to Participant 1, as is shown by the corresponding means of 4.33 and 4.00. By comparison, affective strategies of which the average usage frequency is 2.67, despite falling into the range of medium use, still come last on the list. The standard deviations of the statistical results of both the most and the least frequently used strategies are relatively small (being respectively 0.646 and 0.817), demonstrating the stability of Participant 1's preferences for vocabulary learning strategies.

During the follow-up interview session, Participant 1 who claimed to be a competent English learner "since childhood" and "never feel bored or exhausted when studying English" stated that he normally acquired new knowledge (new English words) through "offline courses," "lectures," "article reading," "movie watching and so on," Furthermore, he also paid attention to his understanding in "real conversation and daily practice." Participant 1's answers confirm his preferences for cognitive strategies which include "practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structures for output and input" Oxford, 1990^[7], cited in Parera, 2022, p.72^[8]. Another noteworthy point is that he perceived "rote and repetition" as "the most effective ways" for most learners to master English vocabulary, although he himself didn't "need to memorize a lot of new words" in the current learning stage. The reason may be that good EFL learners tend to focus more on how they absorb, understand and use new knowledge rather than the retention of superficial

structures or common usage. Finally, he prioritized the effectiveness over the suitability of vocabulary learning strategies, evaluating his progress in vocabulary accumulation by checking if he had achieved certain learning goals (e.g. passing an exam) within limited time.

Table 4: Participant 2's Situation.

Participant 2	Strategy Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency	Rank
	Social Strategies	4.50	0.548	High	1
	Metacognitive Strategies	4.00	0.000	High	2
	Cognitive Strategies	3.86	0.363	High	3
	Memory Strategies	3.44	1.014	Medium	4
	Compensation Strategies	3.33	1.211	Medium	5
	Affective Strategies	3.00	1.265	Medium	6

Table 4 illustrates Participant 2's application of six distinct vocabulary learning techniques, revealing a greater alignment of social strategies with his learning approaches, leading to an average score of 3.86. Social and metacognitive tactics also appeal to Participant 2, with averages of 4.50 and 4.00. In contrast, affective strategies, averaging 3.00, remain at the bottom despite being in the medium usage category. The standard deviations for the most and least common strategies are notably minor (0.363 and 1.265), illustrating Participant 2's consistent inclination towards vocabulary acquisition techniques. In the subsequent interview, Participant 2 frequently reflected on the connections between his existing knowledge and new insights in English, aligning with his cognitive strategies. He spoke of incorporating new English words into sentences to aid in memorization and practicing English phonetics, thereby strengthening his cognitive strategy application. Participant 2's extensive use of social tactics is evident in his efforts to initiate English dialogues and engage in English practice with fellow students, indicating a forward-thinking strategy in language acquisition.

Participant 2's metacognitive tactics are reflected in his strategic planning and supervision of the learning journey. He stated that his timetable is designed to allocate ample time for English studies, frequently reflecting on his progress. This tactical method aids in maintaining his organization and focus on language acquisition objectives. Despite employing emotional tactics, Participant 2 mentioned his efforts to unwind during moments of fear towards English and his self-motivation to communicate even in the face of potential errors, demonstrating balanced emotional regulation during the acquisition of a new language. In his own words, Participant 2 mentioned, "I like to accumulate vocabulary by reading English articles every day, which helps me remember them better." This highlights his preference for engaging with English materials daily to reinforce his vocabulary retention. Moreover, he emphasized, "Discussing English problems with classmates not only improves my speaking skills but also boosts my confidence," reflecting his belief in the importance of social interaction for boosting confidence and speaking skills. Such qualitative insights provide a deeper understanding of Participant 2's strategic preferences and their practical applications in his learning process.

Table 5: Participant 3's Situation.

Participant 3	Strategy Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency	Rank
	Metacognitive Strategies	3.78	1.093	High	1
	Cognitive Strategies	3.64	1.008	High	2
	Memory Strategies	3.56	1.333	High	3
	Compensation Strategies	3.00	1.095	Medium	4
	Social Strategies	3.00	1.549	Medium	5
	Affective Strategies	2.17	0.983	Low	6

Table 5 shows detailed information about Participant 3's choice of vocabulary learning strategies. Metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used strategies for Participant 3, ranking first with the mean score of 3.78, which reveals Participant 3's preference for metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies and memory strategies are also preferred by Participant 3, with the mean scores of 3.64 and 3.56, respectively, ranking second and third among the six strategies. Furthermore, the social and compensation strategies are less used in medium frequency, as indicated by the mean scores of 3. The standard deviation of the usage frequency of compensation strategies (1.095) is lower than that of social strategies (1.549), suggesting higher consistency of the choice of compensation strategies. Therefore, the former ranks the fourth, while the latter ranks the fifth. Affective strategies rank sixth with a mean score of 2.17 and are the least frequently used.

In the later interview, Participant 3 perceived herself as a competent English learner, expressing that she had a "great interest in learning English" since she was "in elementary school" and always performed excellently in the "reading and writing parts". In addition, "learning from mistakes" was her best way to internalize new knowledge. She expressed that identifying the mistakes and reflecting on the causes of mistakes could improve the comprehension of new knowledge, "especially in grammar", showing the congruency with the feature of monitoring metacognitive strategies. As for "rote memorization", Participant 3 regarded it as an efficient way to learn English vocabulary. Also, she pointed out that certain learning strategies indeed facilitate her language learning, including "memorizing new words on a regular basis" and "expanding her academic vocabulary". Finally, Participant 3 emphasized the effectiveness of learning strategies rather than suitability. She monitored her learning process and adjusted the learning methods to achieve her desired learning outcome.

Table 6: Participant 4's Situation.

	Strategy Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency	Rank
Participant 4	Cognitive Strategies	4.07	0.997	High	1
	Social Strategies	4.00	1.265	High	2
	Compensation Strategies	3.50	1.643	Medium	3
	Metacognitive Strategies	3.22	0.667	Medium	4
	Memory Strategies	2.89	1.453	Medium	5
	Affective Strategies	2.50	1.225	Medium	6

As shown in Table 6, Cognitive strategies and social strategies are observed to be the top 2 utilized strategies for Participant 4 with mean values of 4.07 and 4.00, respectively, followed by compensation and metacognitive strategies with the corresponding mean values of 3.50 and 3.22, indicating Participant 4's vocabulary learning preference. Conversely, affective and memory strategies of which the average usage frequencies are 2.50 and 2.89 turn out to be less frequently utilized when it comes to Participant 4's learning modes.

In the subsequent interview, Participant 4 considered herself as a consistent competent language learner, stating that she always "remembered linguistic elements faster than peers" and "applied them routinely and actively". Furthermore, building up knowledge schemas and "establishing a relationship between what is already known and fresh" are disclosed as her preference in the cognitive learning process, echoing Oxford's cognitive learning theories where "analyzing and reasoning" stand out as a point. Additionally, Participant 4 perceived "rote memorization and intensive exercises" as an enjoyable learning process for its effectiveness in accumulating knowledge "from quantitative change to qualitative change" despite the toughness and tortuousness there is. Also, the effectiveness of learning strategies was prioritized, with constant progress serving as motivation and positive

feedback for her future direction.

Table 7: Frequency of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
P1	3.44	4.43	3.33	4.00	2.67	4.33
P2	3.44	3.86	3.33	4.00	3.00	4.50
P3	3.56	3.64	3.00	3.78	2.17	3.00
P4	2.89	4.07	3.50	3.22	2.50	4.00

Specification: the score indicates the frequency of strategy use, ranging from 1 to 5.

As shown in Table 7, six variables (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social strategies) are evaluated based on the means collected from the five-point Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 50 items, where 1-9 belong to Memory Strategies, 10-23 to Cognitive Strategies, 24-29 to Compensation Strategies. Participants read each statement and fill in the bubble of the response (1,2,3, 4, or 5) that tells how true the statement is, ranging from 1 to 5 (1-never or almost never true of me, 2-usually not true of me, 3-somewhat true of me, 4-usually true of me, 5-always or almost always true of me). As is shown in Table 8, cognitive strategies still hold the largest share among all six strategies under the evaluation in terms of usage frequency.

Table 8: Person Correlation Analysis

	Mean	Std. Deviation	P1	P2	P3	P4
P1	3.700	0.676	1			
P2	3.688	0.538	0.899*	1		
P3	3.192	0.600	0.695	0.486	1	
P4	3.363	0.619	0.878*	0.754	0.427	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

To further explain, Pearson Correlation Coefficient is adopted to display the strength of the correlation among the strategic choices of 4 participants as shown in Table 8. Statistics include the mean values of six strategies for each participant. The above table shows the result of the correlation test, where positive correlations are disclosed of the strategic choices between P1&P2, P1&P4 ($P < 0.05$), which echoes with the aforementioned perceptions in the common ground of high-achieving EFL learners, as the following Figure 1.

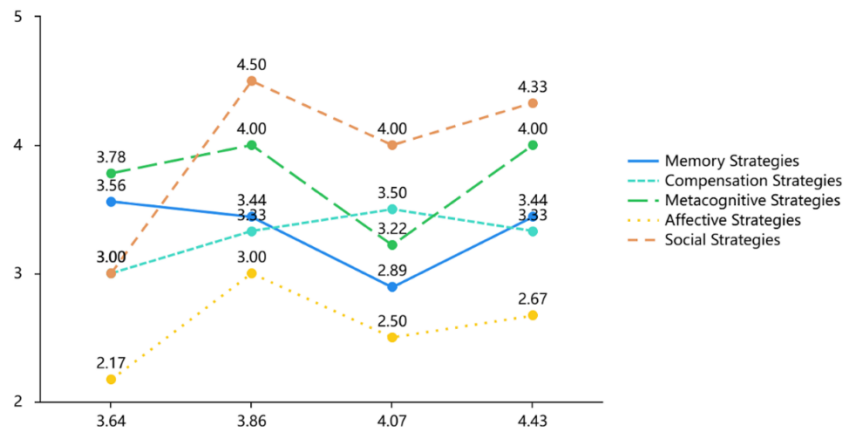


Figure 1: Variance Representation between Cognitive Strategies and Others

	Cognitive Strategies (Mean ± Standard Deviation)				<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	3.64(<i>n</i> =1)	3.86(<i>n</i> =1)	4.07(<i>n</i> =1)	4.43(<i>n</i> =1)		
Memory	3.56±null	3.44±null	2.89±null	3.44±null	null	null
Compensation	3.00±null	3.33±null	3.50±null	3.33±null	null	null
Metacognitive	3.78±null	4.00±null	3.22±null	4.00±null	null	null
Affective	2.17±null	3.00±null	2.50±null	2.67±null	null	null
Social	3.00±null	4.50±null	4.00±null	4.33±null	null	null

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

Figure 2: ANOVA Results

One-way ANOVA was utilized to investigate whether there is significant difference between cognitive strategies and the other five strategies, as shown in Figure 2. From the above table, samples of cognitive strategies do not exhibit particular significant differences in relation to other 5 strategies.

5. Conclusion

Consistently, all those four high-achieving participants are observed as active strategy utilizers, showing their general preference for cognitive strategies. Social, metacognitive and memory strategies follow behind, with high frequency of usage rate, demonstrating the vibrant effort in vocabulary learning. In contrast, affective strategies are much less preferred, but still fall within the range of medium use. Statistical results of standard deviation indicate the relative stability in the target samples. Results of Pearson correlation coefficient reveal the significant correlations between P1&P3, P1&P4, confirming the consistency of these competent learners' strategic patterns in vocabulary learning, although the one-way ANOVA statistics indicate no significance in the differentiation of cognitive strategies among other five strategies, holding the neutral stance with specific evidence.

Qualitative data are collected to further explain, where participants' descriptions correspond to their strategy preferences, emphasizing their accommodation and assimilation process in cognitive layer. Interests and constant progress are the main motivators for their high achievement, and the effectiveness of vocabulary learning is prioritized, constituting the leading reason for their strategic choices.

As for the potential implications generated, the consistency of the strategic choices observed from high-achieving Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia participating in this study sheds light on the common ground of effective English vocabulary learning, providing some valuable experience and inspiration for average learners about how to learn a foreign language better by resorting to the optimal and the most suitable learning strategies. The first-hand statistics may also serve as a reference for educators and researchers in real classroom and research settings and prompt further promising investigations.

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