



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/linged](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/linged)

# Memorisation strategies and the adolescent learner of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language

Michael Grenfell<sup>a,\*</sup>, Vee Harris<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> The Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK<sup>b</sup> Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 16 May 2015

## Keywords:

Language learner strategies

Chinese

Memorisation

Pedagogy

Strategy-based instruction

## ABSTRACT

A combination of powerful political and economic factors has led to increasing interest in learning languages such as Mandarin Chinese and those of the Indian sub-continent. A particular challenge for those from an alphabet-based background can be learning the different script. Whilst there has been considerable research into the strategies adult students use to learn English and other European languages, less is known about learning Mandarin Chinese, and more specifically about the strategies beginner students use to tackle memorising the characters. This paper reports on a study of students aged between 11 and 15 years learning Chinese as a foreign language in an inner London school. Drawing on the results of a 'think-aloud' activity carried out with 10 students, a questionnaire was administered to 190 students to indicate their strategy use. The findings show that as well as using 'generic' strategies, common to learning any language, students develop Mandarin-specific strategies. Principal axis factor analysis suggests that the beginner-students sift through their prior knowledge to identify a 'tag' to memorising the characters. A focus on the shapes in the character as a whole as well as on its individual components constitutes a necessary starting point for this process. The effort involved can, however, leave little cognitive space for the deployment of time-consuming but higher level strategies. The article ends by addressing some pedagogical implications.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

The emergence of India and China as the so-called "new economies" has led to a growing awareness of the importance for trade purposes of learning such non-European languages as Urdu and Mandarin Chinese (MC). According to the Confederation of British Industry, MC is one of the most sought after languages by British businesses (Moore, 2012). In the USA, the number of learners of Chinese as a non-native language has increased by over 18% since 2006 (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010). Take-up of Chinese in English secondary schools has also increased in recent years following a campaign to "diversify" away from the preponderance of French, German and Spanish in a modern multilingual context (see NARIC, 2012). In spite of the fact that learners report considerable difficulty in learning to read and write the language (Bo Hu, 2010; Huang, 2000), little is known of how they go about learning the Chinese characters and of the strategies they use to memorise them. This paper addresses such issues. It begins by situating the study within Language Learner Strategy (LLSs) research. Next, key elements within the conceptual background to the project are set out.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 23 80283766.  
E-mail address: [grenfell@soton.ac.uk](mailto:grenfell@soton.ac.uk) (M. Grenfell).

Strategy research, memorisation processes and Mandarin all involve complex practical and theoretical issues. Although it is not possible to offer a comprehensive account of each of these in the context of a single article, we shall highlight salient themes emerging from existing research. After giving details of population and data collection, we offer the results of questionnaire and factor analysis to identify the principal emerging aspects of the memorisation strategies of this group of learners. In our discussion, we highlight the implications of the results for these learners and explore their significance.

## Research review

This section begins by locating the study within Second Language Acquisition research and more specifically the Language Learning Strategy research tradition, highlighting its pertinence to our concerns. We then turn to actual conceptual issues. The nature of Mandarin Chinese and the challenges it presents to the learner are discussed. The memorisation strategies of languages with Roman alphabets and then those with MC characters are described. Cognitive theory is implicated in each of these areas and will form a common strand across the parts.

### *Language learner strategies*

It is only in the last decade or so that language learner strategy (LLS) research has included the study of MC. LLS research began in the 1970s with the aim of identifying the characteristics of “good” language learners; exactly how they go about reading a text, for example, or improving their speaking skills (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975). Since its inception, this research area has given rise to extensive discussion and controversy, for example, questions of definition and taxonomy, and the extent to which there is an underlying learning theory implied by a LLS approach (see Cohen & Macaro, 2007).

By way of illustration, strategies may range from the rather mechanical skills of “dictionary use” to a broader process-based behaviour such as “inference”. Whilst the distinction between skills and strategies and indeed the ‘unit of analysis’ itself and its relationship to success (Cohen & Macaro, 2007: 278) remain under debate, there is an increasing focus on strategies as a key component of “self-regulated” learning. As Oxford argues (2011: 11) “strategies help learners regulate or control their own learning, thus making it easier and more effective”. They can be viewed as “problem-solving” tools for coping with the challenges of the language learning task. However, the “definitional fuzziness” (Jiang & Cohen, 2012: 10) evident in the number of LLS taxonomies makes cross-study comparison difficult. O’Malley and Chamot (1990), for example, distinguish between cognitive strategies used to handle the language itself and the higher level overarching metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning. Other authors concentrate on particular skill areas such as reading or writing (e.g. Macaro, 2001). Nevertheless, it has proved a fruitful area of research and there is now a large body of literature dealing with the multifaceted aspects of this area of applied linguistics (see Cohen and Macaro op. cit. for overview).

Within the last twenty years, LLS research has been extended to include studies into Strategy- Based Instruction (SBI). It has been argued (Grenfell and Harris, 1999; Rubin, 1990) that it cannot be assumed that learners will automatically develop LLS unaided or know how to deploy them in a way that is appropriate to the task in hand. Hence, the belief that they should be taught explicitly. There is increasing consensus that SBI should be accomplished through a number of steps. The first step is to raise the students’ awareness of the strategies they are already using. The teacher then models new strategies which are extensively practised and in the final step, the learners evaluate how useful they are (Harris, et al., 2001; Grenfell and Harris, 1999; Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Macaro, 2001). However, as Linnell (2001) argues, such insights from Second Language Acquisition research have only just started to have an impact on the training of MC teachers.

There are two aspects of the current study that distinguish it from others in the LLS research field. Firstly, although some studies have explored the strategies of elementary school students (e.g. Chamot & El-Dinary, 1999; Gu, Hu, & Zhang, 2005; Kirsch, 2008), most empirical sources of data have been university students, rather than younger learners. Secondly, English dominates for the most part as the language being learnt. Even where English is not the subject of LLS research, other Roman alphabet languages are investigated, for example, French, Spanish, German. Wharton (2000) argues that the focus on European languages amounts to a form of “cultural imperialism” on the part of linguistics. The current study differs from existing research in the field in two respects since it deals with young learners of 11–15 years of age and the target language is Chinese. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to consider the extent to which what has been discovered from LLS research is applicable outside the context of Roman alphabet languages. In particular, it may be important to explore whether the strategies are the same or if learners need to develop some different ones. Understanding what facilitates this aspect of the acquisition of Chinese may have important implications for the training of MC teachers.

### *The challenge of learning Mandarin Chinese*

In this study, the focus is on learning to read and write Mandarin Chinese characters rather than to speak and understand it. Hence, little reference is made to Pinyin, the system used to transcribe the characters into the Roman script as a stepping stone to help pronunciation, since there is no obvious sound script correspondence in MC.

Although over 90% of Chinese characters are phono-semantic compounds, their components offer few clues since the meanings and pronunciation have changed over the centuries.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/366090>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/366090>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)