UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE ESL TERTIARY LEARNERS

TULUHONG

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VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE ESL TERTIARY LEARNERS

By

TULUHONG

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts

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To all my family members and friends

for their unceasing support and encouragement.

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Chairman: **Associate Professor Shameem Rafik Galea, PhD**

Faculty: **Modern Languages and Communication**

Language learners at all level use strategies. Effective use of learning strategies leads to more effective language learning. Though much research has been done in field of ESL, studies of vocabulary learning strategies are still a new area of ESL research in Malaysia.

The purpose of this study is to describe the vocabulary learning strategies of proficient and less proficient Malaysian Chinese ESL tertiary learners. Two hundred and twenty-three Chinese students from thirteen Faculties at Universiti Putra Malaysia were involved in this study. A questionnaire of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and a semi-structured interview were used to collect the data. The interviews were audio taped. Data was analyzed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Science. The interview data was analyzed qualitatively by identifying patterns in the responses.

The analysis revealed that Malaysian Chinese ESL learners do make use of a variety of learning strategies in English vocabulary learning. Learners most actively use meta-cognitive strategies, such as use of English language media (internet, newspaper, TV etc.). Cognitive and memory strategies are also actively used in learning English vocabulary. However, social strategies are the least used strategies type. In learning English vocabulary, Chinese ESL learners commonly use English-language internet, take note in/out of class, guess from textual context in reading, use a bilingual dictionary and use English-language media. Both proficient and less proficient Chinese ESL learners most actively use more meta-cognitive strategies while least actively use social strategies. In addition, less proficient learners use a less number of strategies in learning English vocabulary. Factors that affecting choice of Chinese ESL learners' vocabulary learning strategies are learner' proficiency level, gender, age, programme (major) that learners enrolled in, and their first language.

This study has provided an understanding of Malaysian Chinese students' vocabulary learning strategies. It has also shown that Malaysian ESL Chinese learners do not use the same type of vocabulary learning strategies as other Chinese ESL learners in China or Taiwan.

Abstrak tesis dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

STRATEGI-STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA BAGI PELAJAR IJAZAH SARJANA MUDA ESL CINA MALAYSIA

Oleh

TULUHONG

Julai 2006

Pengerusi: **Profesor Madya Shameem Rafik Galea, PhD**

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Para pelajar bahasa pada semua tahap menggunakan pelbagai strategi. Penggunaan strategi-strategi pembelajaran yang berkesan akan membawa kepada pembelajaran bahasa yang lebih berkesan. Walaupun terdapat banyak penyelidikan yang telah dilakukan dalam bidang ESL namun kajian terhadap strategi-strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata merupakan sebuah bidang kajian yang masih baharu bagi ESL di Malaysia.

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menghuraikan strategi-strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan oleh para pelajar Cina ESL yang mahir dan kurang mahir dalam pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata. Sebanyak dua ratus dua puluh tiga orang pelajar Cina daripada Fakulti-fakulti yang berlainan di Universiti Putra Malaysia telah terlibat

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dalam kajian ini. Sebuah soal selidik tentang Strategi-strategi Pembelajaran Perbendaharaan Kata dan temuduga separa tersusun telah digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Temuduga-temuduga tersebut telah dirakamkan. Data dianalisis secara kuantitatif dengan menggunakan Pakej Statistik bagi Sains Sosial. Data temuduga pula dianalisis secara kualitatif dengan mengenal pasti bentuk-bentuk dalam maklum balas.

Analisis menunjukkan bahawa pelajar ESL Cina Malaysia didapati menggunakan pelbagai strategi pembelajaran dalam mempelajari perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris. Pelajar-pelajar menggunakan secara paling aktif strategi-strategi metakognitif seperti penggunaan media bahasa Inggeris (internet, surat khabar, Televisyen dan lain-lain). Di samping itu, strategi-strategi kognitif dan memori juga digunakan secara aktif dalam pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris.

Walau bagaimanapun, strategi-strategi sosial merupakan jenis strategi yang paling kurang digunakan. Dalam mempelajari perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris, pelajar-pelajar ESL Cina lazimnya menggunakan internet dalam bahasa Inggeris, mengambil nota di dalam/luar kuliah, membuat jangkaan daripada konteks tekstual dalam pembacaan, menggunakan kamus dwibahasa selain menggunakan media bahasa Inggeris. Golongan pelajar ESL Cina, yang mahir dan kurang mahir, kedua-duanya menggunakan secara aktif strategi-strategi metakognitif akan tetapi kurang aktif menggunakan strategi-strategi sosial. Akan tetapi, para pelajar yang kurang mahir menggunakan lebih sedikit strategi-strategi dalam mempelajari perbendaharaan kata bahasa Inggeris. Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi strategi-strategi pembelajaran

perbendaharaan kata para pelajar ESL Cina ialah program-program (major) yang diambil oleh para pelajar, gender pelajar, usia, Bahasa Pertama dan tahap kemahiran para pelajar.

Kajian ini menyediakan sebuah kefahaman tentang strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata para pelajar Cina Malaysia. Ia juga memperlihatkan bahawa pelajar Cina ESL Malaysia tidak menggunakan strategi-strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata yang sama seperti para pelajar ESL Cina yang lain di China atau di Taiwan.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 11th July 2006 to conduct the final examination of Tuluhong on his Master of Arts thesis entitled " Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Malaysian Chinese ESL Tertiary Learners" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the degree in Master of Arts in English Language.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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Date: 20th June 2008

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EFL   English as a Foreign Language

ESL   English as a Second Language

L 1   First Language

L2   Second Language

LLS   Language Learning Strategies

VLS   Vocabulary Learning Strategies

MUET   Malaysia University English Test

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, purpose of the study and significance of the study. In addition, it presents and discusses the theoretical framework and limitations of the study and defines key terms.

1.2 Background of Study

In the English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) context, learning strategies are steps or actions taken by language learners to enhance any aspects of their learning: accession, storage and retrieval and use of information (Oxford, 1990). Language learners at all levels use strategies (Oxford, Crookall, 1989). Effective use of learning strategies according to research appears to lead to more effective language learning (Chamot and Kupper, 1989; Oxford and Crookall, 1989). Researchers such as Chamot and Kupper, (1989), Oxford and Crookall (1989) claim that learning strategies have great impact on language learning.

In the context of vocabulary learning, language learners also employ a variety of learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). By learning effective strategies, learners can cope with learning of vast amount of vocabulary (Nation, 1990). According to Selger, Pain

and Sorace (2002), vocabulary learning strategies constitute a subclass of language learning strategies which are applicable to a wide variety of language learning tasks.

There has been numerous research on learning strategies in language learning (Barnett, 1988; Nayak, Kansen, Krueger and McLaughlin, 1990; Woolley,1999, etc). However, studies in vocabulary learning strategies have not been intensively carried out. Vocabulary learning has traditionally been neglected in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Selger, Pain & Sorace, 2002). After decades of neglect, vocabulary learning is now recognized as central to any language acquisition process (Laufer, 1997). Compared to other aspects of vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning strategies is a relatively new area of research (Kudo, 1999). In Malaysia, many studies have been carried out in the area of language learning strategies (Sarjit and Salasiah, 1998; Amin Embi, 2000; Shameem and Wong Bee Eng, 2004). However, little research has been carried out to identify ESL learners' vocabulary learning strategies. It is therefore, necessary to investigate vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian ESL learners.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Before discussing the vocabulary learning strategies of Chinese ESL learners, we need to know their learning culture. As Gu(2005:80) mentioned that members of a cultural community grow up with the belief and behaviour systems of the social group consciously or unconsciously, and gradually learn to behave in accordance with its norms, and learning strategies. Thus, the ways in which Chinese learners learn English

vocabulary should be understood through the culture of learning in which they grow up (Gu, 2005).

The Chinese civilization has a long and continuous history of formal learning (Gu, 2005:79). In imperial China, the basic education curriculum whether formal or informal was the Chinese classics. Teachers played a role as possessor of wisdom and interpreter of knowledge. Teaching meant passing knowledge from teacher to learner. Learning was the reception, memorization, and understanding of the classics. On the other hand, the Chinese culture of learning was influenced by the long tradition and elaborate development of the civil examination system. This system gave commoners the only chance for upward mobility and ultimate social status. One of the important effects of such examination culture was the emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of knowledge rather than its application.

Currently, repetition and memorization that are usually associated with rote learning are very much part and parcel of meaningful learning (Lee, 1996; Marton, Dall'Alaba & Tse, 1996). The saying that demonstrates the integration of repetition and meaning in the Chinese learning culture says that 'meaning reveals itself after a hundred times of reading'. Therefore, Gu (2005:84) suggests that the infamous Chinese emphasis on rote learning and memorization in terms of learning strategies has to be understood against this cultural background.

However, it is also unavoidable that one would over simplify or stereotype a learning culture such as the Chinese learning culture. Thus, when seeking cultural explanations to learning strategies, individual, geographical variations and historical differences need

to be taken into consideration (Stephens, 1997). At this point, it is necessary to understand the cultural background of the Chinese learners and English learning in Malaysia in order to understand their learning habits.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural country consisting of three major ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. The majority of the population is Malay. The Chinese consists of about 25 percent of the whole population. In earlier time, the Chinese migrated from China to Malaya to trade. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a huge influx of Chinese labours who settled urban areas or in tin mining towns of the interior(Embi, 2000:3). Among them were some enterprising ones who eventually set up business of their own.

Since the time Malaysia was colonized by the British, the English language had a high status in education. At that time, there were two kinds of English medium schools: mission schools and free schools. These schools were established in towns, making them easily accessible to Chinese and Indian pupils. When Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, emphasis was placed on the learning of the Malay language. It was promoted to the status of national language with the implementation of the Education Act in 1961 (Government of Malaysia, 1961), and used as medium of instruction in primary schools. In 1967, the Malay language became the official language of Malaysia as well as the main medium of instruction in secondary schools. English was retained as a compulsory school subject. Consequently, the Chinese encouraged their children to learn their own language (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, etc.) as well as the Malay language. At the same time, parents who had attended English medium schools passed their language on

to their children at home. Many of these parents realised that being bilingual or trilingual meant better job opportunities (Embi, 2000:5).

Recently, the importance of English as signaled in Vision 2020 which is a programme for Malaysia's future development (Malaysia, 1991). It is recognized that English is important for economic development of the country. Thus, this affects the Chinese learners who mainly study in Chinese schools.

Currently, English is a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools in line with its status as a second language (Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris KBSM, 2000). The Cabinet Committee Report on the Review of the Implementation of the Education Policy 1979 states that the teaching of English is to enable school leavers to use English in everyday situations and work situations as well as pursue higher education in the medium of English.

In line with the education policy, English is widely used in or out of the classroom. At primary schools and secondary schools, the medium of English teaching is English. Both teachers and learners speak English in classroom and rarely speak other languages, such as Malay and Mandarin. Learners are encouraged to use English in and out of class. During teaching, teachers use communicative based methods to interact with learners in English. Exercises or activities are designed to enable students to use English in their daily lives. Such activities include speaking intelligibly using correct pronunciation, observing correct stress and intonation, writing appropriately with good grammar, drawing conclusions, solving problems, making complaints and responding to

complaints, mapping out ideas, interpreting charts, diagrams, tables or graphs, etc. Out of class, teachers are free to prepare their own materials based on learners' English levels, though textbooks are available. Teaching materials are totally in English. In addition, there are lots of English materials are easily available in the mass media, such as TV/radio programmes, English newspapers and reference books. Learners also can easily access English language Internet at schools or in Internet cafes.

In local universities, English is encouraged to be the medium of instruction for technical subjects, such as engineering, medicine and computer science. Learners are expected to be able to read textbooks written in English in a number of subjects (Embi, 2000). In some of the subjects, such as law and English literature, learners are expected to show a high level of proficiency in spoken and written English.

Regarding vocabulary teaching and learning, it is considered as the word-stock of English language (Compendium, 1993). Learners at different levels are required to master certain amount of words in minimum. Teachers are encouraged to teach other relevant words based on the levels and ability of their learners. Since the aims of English teaching is to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet learners' needs to use English in daily life, for knowledge acquisition and for future workplace needs (Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris KBSM, 2000), vocabulary teaching and learning also serve to reach these aims. Thus, in the English classrooms, new words are not presented in a word list but within contexts. Teachers do not spend much time on introducing and explaining the new words but on the understanding of whole texts. Learners learn to understand and use new words rather than memorize their meaning. In

universities, learners are expected to be proficient in the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus, recognising, understanding and using a large amount of vocabulary is a must for all learners including ESL Chinese learners.

Regarding English vocabulary learning and teaching, vocabulary is often considered as the most important aspect of EFL/ESL learning and teaching (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).Chinese EFL/ESL learners believe in effort and active study and use of new words, and these learners use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies in English vocabulary learning(Cortazzi and Jin,1996; Gu,2005).Chinese seem to emphasize more on rote-learning based learning culture. Memorising and regulation of knowledge is seen more important than application. However, the context of Chinese EFL learners in Malaysia is unique in terms of status of English, teaching materials, teaching methods, teaching aims and language environments, thus, the Chinese learners in Malaysia have a unique background in English learning as well as in use of the learning strategies.

Vocabulary learning strategies is a relatively new area of English as a Second Language (ESL) research. This is especially true in the Malaysian context. Some researchers (Nambiar,1998; Sarjit and Salasiah, 1998; Amin Embi, 2000; Shameem and Wong, 2004) have investigated the learning strategies employed by Malay university students in learning English and foreign languages. However, emphasis was not on vocabulary learning. The current study will fill the gap in ESL research and vocabulary learning in Malaysia.

ESL teachers are generally not aware of the learning strategies used by their students. As