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Strategic Language Learning

The Roles of Agency and Context

Xuesong (Andy) Gao

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To Tong Mankei (Maggie)

Whatever presentation of the activity of many men or of an individual we may consider, we always regard it as the result partly of man's freewill and partly of the law of inevitability.
(Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*)

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you will not be in danger in a hundred battles.
If you know the Heaven and you know the Ground, the victory is complete.
(Sun Tzu in *Art of War*)

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Chapter 1
Introduction

This book reports on an inquiry, conducted in three phases, exploring mainland Chinese students' language learning experiences with a focus on their shifting strategy use prior to and after their arrival in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. The inquiry was motivated by my personal experiences as one of thousands of students moving from the Chinese mainland abroad to pursue tertiary education in English. Like many others, I faced daunting linguistic and academic challenges as a postgraduate student in English-medium universities or study programmes in the United Kingdom, Belgium and Hong Kong. I therefore became interested in understanding the experiences of students like me.

Although I initially intended to find out how mainland Chinese students coped with these challenges in British universities (Gao, 2003, 2006a), my educational experiences in Belgium and Hong Kong have led me to undertake inquiries into another group of Chinese students' language learning experiences (Gao, 2006b, 2008a; Gao *et al.*, 2008). Unlike their counterparts in British, North American or Australian universities, they do their academic studies through the medium of English in multilingual settings, where English may be a less frequently used language. Nevertheless, they still need to develop English competence for their survival and success in the new learning contexts because in these settings English is often a socially important language. In the case of Hong Kong, Cantonese, a regional version of Chinese, functions as the major medium for socialization in daily life and in most social, cultural and political occasions, while English is one of its official languages and widely used in the business and professional sectors. In addition, Putonghua, or Mandarin, the variety of Chinese spoken on the Chinese mainland, is a language of rising importance due to Hong Kong's increasingly economic, sociocultural and political ties with the mainland since 1997. Thus, Hong Kong presents itself as an interesting setting for an inquiry into learners'

strategic learning efforts in order to gain insights into their pursuit of linguistic competence in a multilingual setting.

At the outset of the inquiry, it was noted that language learners tend to be advised to be efficient language learners in terms of strategy use in many learner development programmes due to a popular belief in the importance of strategy use for language learners' learning success (Chamot, 2001; Cohen, 1998; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994, 2004; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; McDonough, 1999; Wenden, 1987, 1998, 2002; Zhang, 2003). In recent decades, the belief in learners' strategy use as a significant cause of variation in their language learning achievements, confirmed by many studies, has given rise to an explosion of research on language learning strategy (LLS). However, it has also attracted many criticisms, such as the under-theorization of the construct itself (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Macaro, 2006) and methodological inappropriateness in LLS research (Dörnyei, 2005; Tseng *et al*., 2006; for a recent overview of criticisms of LLS research, see Macaro & Erler, 2008), leading to the possible marginalization of LLS research in mainstream language learning research. Moreover, the emphasis on the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of language learning in LLS research has also become problematic as language learning researchers have become increasingly cognizant of the importance of sociocultural contexts in learners' learning (Atkinson, 2002; Block, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Sealey & Carter, 2004; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). This has made it possible to introduce sociocultural perspectives, rarely pursued in LLS research, into research on language learners' strategy use in particular settings (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Oxford, 2003; Palfreyman, 2003; Parks & Raymond, 2004).

Overview of the Inquiry

Drawing on a sociocultural language learning research perspective, the inquiry aimed to understand mainland Chinese undergraduates' language learning experiences and strategy use in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. It addressed the following questions:

(1) To what extent and in what ways does mainland undergraduates' LLS use change during their stay in Hong Kong?
(2) What does this reveal about the relationship between strategy use and context?

'Strategy use' in the above research questions refers to language learners' efforts directed towards success in language learning and/or use (Cohen, 1998). Cohen (1998: 4) further states that 'the element of choice' is a

Table 1.1 An outline of the inquiry

Research	*Research methods*	*Number of participants*	*Remarks*
1st Study (Phase): Baseline (August–September 2004)	Biographical interviews	22	21 interviews transcribed
2nd Study: Follow-up phase (August 2004 to July 2006)	Longitudinal ethnographic-like methods	6	Two dropped out after one year's participation. Another one left Hong Kong for exchange
3rd Study (Phase): Exit (April–July 2006)	Biographical interviews and questionnaires	15	Including six longitudinal study participants

defining characteristic of strategic learning behaviour. Thus, strategy use is related to learners' exercise of agency as it reveals their self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, emotionality and so on (Carter & New, 2004; Giddens, 1984; Sealey & Carter, 2004). While research to date has usually associated learners' strategy use with cognitive and metacognitive processes (Chamot, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005; Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 2003), the inquiry relates strategy use to learners' broader behavioural engagement in acquiring linguistic competence (Deckert, 2006). Consequently, in this book terms like strategic learning efforts are used interchangeably to refer to learners' strategy use.

The inquiry was conducted in three phases, lasting for two years (Table 1.1). The study in Phase 1 dealt with the questions related to the study participants' strategy use on the Chinese mainland. The study in Phase 2, a longitudinal follow-up phase, focused on six case study participants' language learning experiences and shifting strategy use in Hong Kong. The study in Phase 3 involved the same participants as those in Phase 1 and explored their strategic learning efforts in Hong Kong. Such a design aimed to examine the participants' shifting strategy use both as a group and as individuals.

Methodological Approach

The inquiry, which aimed to achieve a rich and contextualized picture of learners' strategy use, resembles a longitudinal ethnographic-like