English Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use in a Chinese Key Middle School

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Abstract

This paper reports on a mixed method inquiry into the use of vocabulary learning strategies and their development as strategic vocabulary learners in a key middle school on the Chinese mainland. In the inquiry, 475 first year junior secondary school pupils (247 boys and 228 girls) were surveyed about their strategy use in learning English vocabulary. Sixteen pupils (8 boys and 8 girls) participated in paired semi-structured interviews about their experiences of learning English vocabulary. Drawing on socio-cultural perspectives on language learning, the inquiry established the interconnections between the participants' strategy use and beliefs and identified the roles that agency played in their vocabulary learning. The analysis of interview data further revealed that the participants' strategy use emerged from interaction between their agency and the mediation of contextual resources and social agents including parents and teachers. These findings suggest that it is important for language teachers to collaborate with social agents such as parents in their efforts to support young learners' strategic vocabulary learning.

Key words: agency; context; sociocultural perspectives; vocabulary learning strategies; mixed-method study

1. Introduction

The task of vocabulary learning is a challenging but crucial one for English language learners as they must internalize multiple forms, meanings, collocations and usages of a word in order to develop related receptive and productive skills (Barcroft, 2009; Gu, 2003; Nation, 1990). For this reason, vocabulary learning researchers have paid increasing attention to language learners' strategic efforts to improve their lexical competence (Nyikos & Fan, 2007). Researchers have also paid increasing attention to exploring how language learners' strategic learning capacity can be enhanced in educational settings, which requires insights into their development as strategic learners (Wang & Lam, 2010). Since English is being promoted as a compulsory school subject among ever younger learners worldwide, there has been a pressing necessity for researchers to explore how young learners have been learning English and developing learning strategies for particular learning tasks, such as the task of learning English vocabulary.

This paper reports on a mixed method inquiry that examined a group of first year junior middle school pupils' vocabulary strategy use and their development as strategic vocabulary learners on the Chinese mainland. We noted that the use of self-report questionnaires is effective in identifying patterns of learners' strategy use and its correlations with other learner factors such as learning beliefs (e.g., LoCastro, 1994). We were also aware that survey studies often fail to capture learner's strategy use and development as contextually mediated and situated phenomena (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Gao, 2010). Therefore, drawing on socio-cultural perspectives on language learning (e.g., Thorne, 2005), we used a combination of survey and interviews to generate "richer/ more meaningful/more useful answers" to the following research questions (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, p. 122):

1) What roles did "agency" have in these young learners' development as strategic vocabulary learners?
2) How have contextual processes mediated their development as strategic vocabulary learners?

To address these research questions, we shall first present an account of language learning strategy research in the light of sociocultural perspectives and have a brief discussion of vocabulary learning strategy research in relation to Chinese learners. Then we shall proceed to describe how the study was conducted.

2. Sociocultural perspectives and language learning strategy research

In the last three decades, language learning specialists have generated a mass of research on language learners' use of learning strategies driven by the assumption that their

language learning success is at least partially or potentially related to strategy use (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2008). Though a variety of theorizations are endorsed by different researchers, language learning strategies have been widely regarded as "goal-directed, intentionally invoked, and effortful" learning behavior (Weinstein et al., 2000, in Tseng, Dornyei, & Schmitt, 2006, p. 80) or "mental activities" directed towards success in language learning and/or use, whose description comprises "a goal, situation and a mental action" (Macaro, 2006, p. 332). Strategy researchers have developed strategy taxonomies and identified "the types of strategies used by good language learners" in many studies, assuming that such findings will be "beneficial to those who have been less successful" in learning languages (Parks & Raymond, 2004, p. 375; also Donato & McCormick, 1994; McDonough, 1999). They have also devoted concerted research efforts to examining the relationship between various individual learner characteristics such as motivation or beliefs and their strategy use, leading to a much more sophisticated understanding of individual differences in strategy use (Hurd & Lewis, 2008; Macaro, 2006; Zhang, 2003). Moreover, strategy researchers have become increasingly aware of the necessity to develop situated understandings of language learners' strategy use in particular cultural contexts and instructional conditions (e.g., Jiang & Smith, 2009; LoCastro, 1994). This has lent support to the advent of sociocultural perspectives in learning strategy research.

Sociocultural perspectives on language learning refer to a variety of approaches to learning that emphasize the importance of contextual mediation on learners' cognitive and metacognitive processes, including the strategic learning process (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Gao, 2010; Thorne, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In the light of sociocultural perspectives, language learners' strategy use has been associated with their exercise of agency, which is related to a human being's self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, emotionality and so on (Giddens, 1984; Sealey & Carter, 2004). To be an agent, who could act otherwise, "is to be able to deploy…a range of causal powers," which "is very often defined in terms of intent or the will, as the capacity to achieve desired and intended outcomes" (Giddens, 1984, pp. 14-15). Theorized as such, language learners' agency entails their motives and intent in language learning and encompasses more than metacognitive beliefs about and capacity for language learning. Consequently, language learners' strategy use can no longer be regarded as metacognitive and cognitive processes only "pertaining to individual will and knowledge" (Parks & Raymond, 2004, p. 375; also see Norton & Toohey, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003). It also needs to be considered an emergent phenomenon "directly connected to the practices of cultural groups" (Donato & McCormick, 1994, p. 453; also see Gao, 2012). These views on strategic language learning highlight the critical importance of context in mediating language learners' strategy use although such emphasis does not negate the role of their beliefs, motivation or metacognitive knowledge in their strategy use (see Wenden, 1998). In fact, the use of metacognitive knowledge and beliefs in strategic language learning is "closely tied to learners' exercise of agency" and strategic language learning, "indicative of agency, cannot occur without learners' metacognitive operations," such as selecting appropriate strategies for particular tasks according to their learning beliefs (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 28). Nevertheless, sociocultural views on strategic language learning underscore the

emergent nature of learners' strategy use as resulting from interaction of agency and context, deserving further research attention. Such research helps generate insights into how language learners have come to adopt particular strategies in learning languages.

3. Vocabulary learning strategy research and Chinese learners

Like language learning strategy research in general, vocabulary learning strategy research has attempted to develop typologies of vocabulary learning strategies used by language learners, measured the frequency of learners' strategy use and evaluated its impact on their achievements in vocabulary learning (Barcroft, 2009). In particular, vocabulary learning strategy research has addressed questions such as how much time is devoted to mnemonic strategies and how learners' knowledge of linguistic properties such as phonological, morphological and grammatical knowledge can be made to enhance their learning and use of vocabulary (Nyikos & Fan, 2007). Central to these studies has been learners' use of mnemonic strategies or their efforts to "improve memory retention" of targeted vocabulary items (Barcroft, 2009, p. 76).

Memorization of English vocabulary has always been an important part of many language learners' experience in contexts where opportunities to use English are limited, including the educational settings on the Chinese mainland (Ding, 2007). For this reason, language learning research on Chinese learners often portrays them as rote learners, especially with regard to the learning and memorization of English vocabulary. While rote learning is traditionally understood as "[learning] mechanically without meaningful understanding" (Gu, 2003, p.74), recent research has revealed a complex picture of Chinese learners' rote learning. Chinese learners in Gu's (2003) study were found to have conceptualized the learning of English vocabulary as closely related to language use and displayed high levels of metacognitive control including self-initiation and selective attention. They were also found to have adopted repetition and memorization strategies which involved deep processing of meanings and forms (see also Ding, 2007; Jiang & Smith, 2009; Shi, 2006). These studies emphasize the influences of cultural tradition on individual learners' strategic language learning approaches. They also draw attention to the process by which language learners have acquired particular beliefs and adopted strategies in the vocabulary learning process mediated by contextual resources and various social agents' active involvement.

4. The study

The inquiry is a mixed method study on vocabulary learning strategy use of first year Chinese pupils in a key secondary school in Beijing. The school is one of the best rated state schools in the city and attracts academically strong pupils from well-resourced families. While the inquiry examined the first year junior secondary school pupils' strategy use in learning English vocabulary, this paper does not focus on the participants' strategy use per se but explores their development as strategic vocabulary learners.

4.1 The Participants

In the inquiry, 475 first year junior secondary school pupils (247 boys and 228 girls, 12 or 13 years old) from eight class groups participated in a survey on their strategy use in learning English vocabulary. In the survey, invalid questionnaires were identified according to two criteria: (1) random completion of the questionnaire, for example, choosing the same value to all the items of the questionnaire; (2) missing or choosing two values of one item on more than half the items. The resultant 422 participants' questionnaires (209 boys, 213 girls) were tested for validity. Sixteen of them (8 boys and 8 girls) from the eight class groups were recommended by their respective English teachers for paired semi-structured interviews about their experiences of learning English vocabulary. We asked the teachers to recommend the interview participants according to their English examination results in the previous year (see Table 1). According to the teachers, the interview participants also roughly represent the proportions of pupils of the whole year group in terms of their English examination results.

Before the inquiry, we fully appreciated the ethical challenges presented as the inquiry involved young language learners. Permission was sought through the collaborating teachers, as their guardians in school, to conduct the survey and interviews for us. All the participants were also informed of the purposes of the inquiry, which was to generate some foundational understandings for teachers to implement pedagogical innovations and enhance their strategic learning.

4.2 Data collection

We adapted the Chinese version of Gu's (2005) vocabulary learning questionnaire for this inquiry into the participants' vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies to see how their strategy use could be regarded as acts associated with their learning beliefs. The original questionnaire had 90 Likert-scale questions (from "1" extremely untrue of me to "7" extremely true of me). In the inquiry we first piloted the questionnaire with selected pupils from the secondary school to see whether the questionnaire content was suitable for first year junior secondary school pupils. In the pilot testing, it emerged that the selected pupils had problems in differentiating some of the items in the questionnaire, leading to the deletion of two items. The actual questionnaire used in the inquiry thus had 88 items.[1]

Table 1. Interview Participants

No	Name	Gender	English Levels	Family Background Notes
1	Ai	Female	Excellent	Both parents run businesses.
2	Chenyang	Female	Excellent	Her father is a businessman and her mother a schoolteacher.
3	Dian	Female	Excellent	Her father is a senior administrator in a corporation and her mother works in a state-owned enterprise
4	Xiaoran	Female	Excellent	Her father is an engineer and her mother a senior accountant.
5	Yue	Female	Excellent	Her father is a businessman and her mother a civil servant.
6	Wenxuan	Female	Good	Both parents are schoolteachers.

No	Name	Gender	English Levels	Family Background Notes
7	Cathy	Female	Satisfactory	Her father is a school teacher and her mother an engineer.
8	Luoyi	Female	Satisfactory	Both parents are senior managers in business corporations
9	Bian	Male	Excellent	Both parents run businesses.
10	Peizhe	Male	Excellent	His father is a manager while his mother is a senior engineer.
11	Zhiqi	Male	Excellent	His father is a civil servant and his mother a university lecturer.
12	Boyi	Male	Good	His father is a designer and his mother a civil servant.
13	Wenchang	Male	Good	His father owns a small business and his mother is a housewife.
14	Zhongyuan	Male	Good	His father is a senior researcher and his mother a medical doctor.
15	Tian	Male	Satisfactory	His father is a businessman while his mother is a housewife.
16	Zhentao	Male	Satisfactory	His father is a businessman and his mother a housewife

All the names here are pseudonyms. The English levels were based on their English exam results. For instance, 60-70 out of 100 is considered "satisfactory" and 90 or above "excellent."

Immediately following the administration of the questionnaire survey, 16 pupils were interviewed in pairs about their learning experiences. We asked them questions like "What do you normally do in learning English vocabulary?" and "Why do you learn English and its vocabulary in your ways?" The interviews allowed us to explore how they had developed their strategy use retrospectively. They also helped capture the participants' voices and enhance our understanding of their learning realities. Given their young age, it was considered desirable for us to interview them in pairs. In the interviews, the participants were asked to share their experiences as far as possible without prompts from the interviewers. Wherever appropriate and necessary, we asked these pupil participants specific questions from the semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were conducted in Putonghua, the first language of the participants. All the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and the transcripts were double checked by all the researchers involved in the inquiry.

4.3 Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed to generate descriptive statistics using SPSS (Statistics Package for Social Sciences) 16.0. Pearson correlation was run to examine the correlations between the participants' stated beliefs about vocabulary learning and their self-reported strategy use in the questionnaire data. The questionnaire was also found to have reliability results (cronbach ά) ranging from 0.52 to 0.96, which were compatible with those in Gu and Johnson (1996).

In order to acquire a deep understanding of the interview data, we adopted a paradigmatic approach (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5), in which the participants' accounts were analyzed thematically to "produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database" as follows: we first synthesized the participants' statements into biographical narratives in an effort to obtain a global understanding of each individual participant, as advised by Colley and Diment (2001). Then we derived initial

coding categories as informed by the research questions and sociocultural perspectives on language learning. To facilitate the analysis, we operationalized language learners' exercise of agency in terms of self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition and emotionality (Giddens, 1984; Sealey & Carter, 2004). In the analysis, we looked for the participants' references to motivational and belief discourses underlying their strategy use. We also conceptualized "context" in terms of various resources that mediate learners' strategic learning (Palfreyman, 2006). Resources that help define "context" include "discursive resources" (e.g., beliefs about learning), "material resources" (e.g., artefacts and material conditions with their associated cultural practices), and social resources (e.g., supportive social agents) (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Palfreyman, 2006). Contextual learning discourses reflects the dominant values, attitudes and beliefs attached to learning a foreign language and mediate language learners' asserted values, attitudes and beliefs in the learning process and, in turn, their reported strategy use. These changes are often made possible through social agents' mediation as well as their use of various material resources. In the analysis, we identified the participants' references to their vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies and grouped their statements concerning various contextual processes according to our conceptualizations of "context." Through a constant process of questioning and comparison, we revised the initial coding categories and searched for explanatory relationships among the categories and the statements within the same categories (Patton, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). A comparison was also made to see to what extent the interview and survey findings corroborated each other. The involvement of three researchers, using their respective backgrounds and knowledge to examine the data in turn, further enhanced the quality of the analysis.

5. Findings

Skimming through the survey and interview data, one might have an impression that the participants treated the task of learning vocabulary as a task of memorizing vocabulary. The analysis of survey and interview data showed that the participants' strategy use in learning vocabulary was closely related to their stated beliefs. The interview data further revealed the profound mediation of various contextual resources on their development as strategic learners, especially social agents including parents and teachers.

5.1 Strategy use and agency

The survey data established the connections between the participants' self-reported strategy use and vocabulary learning beliefs, part of learner agency. The interviews revealed that many participants purposefully and intentionally selected particular strategies to suit their needs and pursue their own goals when learning and memorizing vocabulary. These findings are suggestive of the roles that "agency" played in the participants' learning process (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Gao, 2010).

(1) Strategy use and beliefs

The results of statistical analysis (Table 2) indicate that overall, the participants' stated beliefs about memorization and context positively correlate with their metacognitive regulation (MrSs) (r = .189***) and use of cognitive strategies (CoS) (r = .409***) at the significance level (p < .001). The data also suggest that the participants' vocabulary learning beliefs correlate with different categories of metacognitive regulation and cognitive strategies at the significant level of .000, except for the pair of self-initiation and learning beliefs. Among the pairs of positive correlation, dictionary strategies showed the highest coefficient with learning beliefs (r = 3.62) at the significance level .000. Further analysis identified that the participants' beliefs in the need to memorize English words positively correlate with their use of cognitive strategies (CoS) (r = .209***) at the significance level (p < .01) but it has a negative correlation (r = -.096) with their MrSs at the significance level (p < .05). Moreover, the analysis revealed that the participants' beliefs in the need to acquire words in context correlate positively with MrSs (r = .403***) and their use of cognitive strategies (CoS) (r = .404**).

Drawing on these statistical results, one may argue that the participants' stated beliefs about vocabulary learning are correlated with their reported vocabulary learning strategy use. If participants had a strong belief in the need to memorize words as recorded in the questionnaire, they also reported less use of metacognitive regulation strategies, which help them to autonomously take control of their own vocabulary learning. In other words, the belief that words should be memorized discouraged the participants from actively deepening their engagement with vocabulary learning and encouraged them to memorize the words mechanically, such as "Remembering the meanings of a word is an end of itself." In summary, these statistical results reveal the close connections between the participants' strategy use and their beliefs. Given language learners' use of metacognitive beliefs in strategic language learning is "closely tied to [their] exercise of agency" (Gao & Zhang, 2011, p. 28), these identified connections speak for the role that agency had in the participants' strategic vocabulary learning. The participants' narratives of vocabulary learning as captured in the interviews shed further light on the participants' exercise of agency in their strategic vocabulary learning.

Table 2. Correlations between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary learning beliefs

Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning Beliefs	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning Beliefs (Words should be memorized)	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning (Words should be acquired in context)
Metacognitive Regulation (MrSs)	.189***	-.096*	.403***
Selective attention	.345***	.121*	.403***
Self-initiation	-0.014	-.265***	.277***
Cognitive Strategies (CoSs)	.409***	.209***	.404***
Guessing strategies	.353***	0.059	.485***

Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning Beliefs	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning Beliefs (Words should be memorized)	Correlations with Vocabulary Learning (Words should be acquired in context)
Dictionary strategies	.362***	.164***	.381***
Note-taking strategies	.343***	.170***	.344***
Rehearsal strategies	.401***	.188***	.346***

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *$p < . 05$

(2) Strategy use related to exercise of agency

The analysis of interview data revealed further evidence supporting the argument that the participants' strategy use can be seen as related to their exercise of agency, which is associated with their "intent or […] will" in learning English (Giddens, 1984, p. 14-15). They confirm that the participants were highly motivated to expand their English vocabulary and made various efforts in encountering new words, committing these words to memory and using them in various contexts. As found in the survey, the interview participants were keen on identifying and selecting important words for learning and memorization. These words were not limited to what was covered in regular teaching but also included those words considered 'highly important' because of their frequent appearance in English TV programs or reading materials:

> Extract 1
> If a teacher says that this is an important word, it must be an important word and will be examined. When I watch English TV programs, I sometimes notice a word being frequently used. It must be an important word for memorization. (Bian)

The self-initiated efforts of Bian and other participants reflect their strong motivation in learning English and are indicative of their metacognitive regulation efforts (Gu, 2003). In order to further pursue the learning of English, the participants also regulated their learning process by setting goals and regularly monitoring their learning progress. For instance, Boyi gave himself a certain number of words to memorize each day:

> Extract 2
> I set a goal for myself. I will say that I have to memorize a certain number of words. I will not eat before finishing the memorization goal. […] I will try my best to finish the goal. (Boyi)

It is probably striking to discover that language learners at such a young age had already started organizing their learning efforts in such a disciplined manner. As revealed in the interview data, even without such dedicated self-regulation, the participants would still be able to regularly check their learning progress as their teachers often assessed their progress in learning English vocabulary by doing dictation exercises. In addition, at least six participants managed to have extra monitoring dictation activities at home:

Extract 3

I always do dictation with my mum. (Zhentao)

Due to such monitoring of their learning progress, the participants reported undertaking various efforts to learn and memorize English words. Among all these efforts, memorization by rote turned out to be a frequently evoked but popularly discredited method of learning. Most of the participants (except for three of them) in the interviews disapproved of the use of rote-learning methods, which was supported by the quantitative findings (see Table 2). At the same time, they also worked out different ways to deepen their memorization of new words in the learning process. Close examination of the participants' references to rote memorization helped expose the real issue in these apparently contradictory findings; it was related to the participants' dissatisfaction with the results of rote memorization as indicated in the following interview extract:

Extract 4

Rote memorization was just like that: here is a list of words. Each word has its Chinese meanings […] I just memorized them one by one. For instance, I spent an hour memorizing this list of words and it just did not work for me. (Dian)

What did not "work" for these learners was the "poor" result of such memorization efforts. The participants who always tried to memorize by rote find it difficult to commit English words to long-term memory. Even those who claimed to favor "rote" methods to memorize words admitted that they "easily forgot what [they] had memorized" (Peizhe). Zhongyuan commented on memorization by rote as follows:

Extract 5

I can think of these words quickly during the examinations. I do not need to think which methods I used to memorize them and I also do not need to think which categories these words can be classified into. […] However, I can get easily confused with the words I memorized by rote. […] especially when two words have similar pronunciations, like "of" and "off." (Zhongyuan)

Though previous research has established that rote learning together with higher levels of metacognitive control can lead to deep processing of meaning and forms (Ding, 2007; Gu, 2003; Jiang & Smith, 2009; Shi, 2006), these data extracts indicate that the participants were not able to maximize the potential benefits of rote memorization for their vocabulary learning. In particular, Extract 5 points to both the necessity of memorization and the advantage of having a simple memorization method, but it also testifies to the inefficiency of memorization by rote. As a result, most interview participants resorted to other means of memorization so that they could remember "important" words longer and more effectively. Though not widely used by the participants as recorded by the survey findings (see Table 2), eight interview participants reported using linguistic cues such as syllables and pronunciation in memorizing English words:

Extract 6
When I am memorizing a word, I will often divide the word into sound segments (syllables) […] then I associate the syllables with the word's spelling. (Peizhe)

Apart from such phonological awareness, three participants had also developed morphological awareness and apply this understanding in their memorization efforts:

Extract 7
As for "slowly," "quickly," I need to remember their suffix, "ly." If I remember the main body of the words, I can add something before it and after it and change them into different words. […] I discovered this rule as I learned more and more words. I also learnt about suffixes from my teacher. […] Gradually I have a better understanding of how they work. (Cathy)

The above extract indicates that these language learners gradually developed their strategic awareness of various phonological and morphological cues that could be utilized to facilitate their memorization and retention of English words. Other participants reported similar experiences of discovering their own ways of learning and memorizing English vocabulary. As another example, Chenyang described how he tested and selected suitable strategies as follows:

Extract 8
Some methods are more suitable for others and they are not necessarily suitable for my learning. They may not suit me at all. […] I always first try these methods. If I feel it is particularly burdensome when using them, I know such methods are no good for me. (Chenyang)

This extract suggests that strategies used by participants like Chenyang resulted from a process of careful consideration and elaboration and thus lend further support to the argument that their strategy use is related to their exercise of agency. At least half of the participants in the interview claimed that "[they] discovered [their] way of memorization [themselves]" (Luoyi). Extract 8, nevertheless, also indicates that "others" were likely to recommend new methods of learning to these participants. Extract 7 also has an explicit reference to "my teacher," who played an important role in introducing new ways of learning to the participants, as experienced by Cathy. Furthermore, Bian's mention of material resources such as English TV programs in Extract 1 means that the participants' strategy use had been supported by their access to such learning resources. Zhongyuan's reference to "examination" in Extract 5 also implies that the participants' selected "useful" strategies in response to contextual learning conditions. These findings reveal that the participants' agency was not alone in initiating and sustaining their vocabulary learning strategy use. They invite further attention to the mediation of contextual resources and social agents in the participants' strategic learning process.

5.2 Strategy use and contextual mediation

As discussed in the previous section, the participants exercised metacognitive control of their vocabulary learning efforts and strategy use. The interview data also pointed to the fact that various contextual processes and resources had been mediating the participants' strategic vocabulary learning process. In particular, teachers' pedagogical practices and learning materials facilitate the development of the participants as strategic vocabulary learners. Furthermore, close examination of the participants' narratives revealed that their family, especially their parents, had been most enthusiastic in supporting, regulating and enhancing their vocabulary learning efforts. In addition to the provision of material learning resources such as English magazines or books, these parents were found to have mediated various learning beliefs and strategic language awareness into the participants' repertoire of metacognitive knowledge as well as having developed their capacity for strategic vocabulary learning (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Palfreyman, 2006). Other members of the participants' social networks, such as siblings in their extended families and their classmates, have also mediated their development as strategic vocabulary learners (Parks & Raymond, 2004). However, the effect of none of these social agents' mediation on the participants was of comparable proportion to that of the participants' teachers and parents as shown in their narratives. Therefore, this paper focuses on the roles of teachers and parents.

5.3 Teachers and learning materials

As revealed in the analysis, the participants' teachers were found to have stimulated them to organize and regulate their learning efforts as well as fostered the use of particular mnemonic strategies among them. They were often encouraged by their teachers to set high learning goals and undertake strenuous efforts to achieve these goals. For instance, all of them attended private tutorials where they received extra exposure to the language, many preparing for standard English tests such as the Public English Test (PET) or IELTS. Xiaoran mentioned that in her tutorials, the teacher asked her to memorize a certain number of words and, as a result, she decided to adopt a plan for memorizing English words regularly:

> Extract 9
> I planned to memorize a few words each day. During the weekend tutorials, teachers there always assign me some words to memorize. I need to memorize these words within the week. Every day I spend some time reviewing the words I have memorized. [...] I also have to memorize words for the standard English test. (Xiaoran)

While the quote indicates that Xiaoran was somehow compelled by the teacher in private tutorials to memorize English, it must be noted that she learnt and memorized these words in addition to what she had been learning in regular school. Teachers in these private tutorials also taught the participants various mnemonic strategies such as the use of "phonological segments" of a word and associating one word with others for memorization (Wenchang). In their regular school education, eight interview participants

mentioned that teachers in school raised their phonological and morphological awareness and advised them to use such knowledge in memorizing English words. As mentioned by Cathy in Extract 7, her teacher encouraged her to pay attention to "suffixes" in reading. Many more participants like Ai were taught phonological "rules" to assist them in memorizing English words.

> Extract 10
> I memorize words according to their pronunciation. […] my teachers mentioned this rule and they have summarized some rules in class. (Ai)

During the interview, Ai even related her teachers to "salespersons at ABC English (an English learning software company)" because of their enthusiasm for suggesting new ways to learn English. Such comparison suggests that teachers can meaningfully mediate the participants' ways of learning English vocabulary.

As mentioned in Extract 4, participants like Dian often relied on published wordlists as guides for committing English vocabulary to memory. These wordlists, especially those in textbooks, often indicate the relative importance of individual words, as described by Chenyang:

> Extract 11
> Those words in boldface in the vocabulary list are important words. But I cannot just memorize those. They are quite limited in number. […] what if words of different fonts are also covered in examinations? I normally ask my parents to do dictation with me on the words of different font types. (Chenyang)

Even though the practice of marking each word's importance in the wordlists did not make Chenyang focus his efforts on memorizing these highlighted words, it did help the participants become aware that not all words deserve concerted memorization efforts. Consequently, they tended to memorize words outside published wordlists selectively, even when they appear in contexts such as TV programs. As mentioned by Bian in Extract 1, frequency of noticing became one of the most important criteria for the participants to decide whether a word needs to be memorized. The teacher's recommendation is another important criterion as Bian believed the words emphasized by teachers in teaching would be those "examined" in tests. Both Chenyang and Bian exercised their agency in vocabulary strategy use when deciding which words to memorize, but their narratives also made it explicit that examinations profoundly mediated their perceptions as to whether individual words should be memorized or not.

5.4 Parents as influential mediators

One of the most significant findings emerging from the inquiry was probably related to parental involvement in the participants' learning of English. Parents were found in the interview narratives to have made enormous efforts to support the participants' language learning endeavors. The depth of parental involvement and the variety of parental support

strategies deserve close examination in this paper. As an example, Xiaoran described how her mother mediated her vocabulary learning efforts as follows:

> Extract 12
> My mum usually asks me to remember a certain number of English words before she leaves for work. After she returns from work, she will give me some rewards if I remember these words. […] she usually gives me a dictation. […] If I have problems with these words in the dictation, she will ask me to write out these words three or five times. (Xiaoran)

As is evident from this extract, Xiaoran's mother tried to provide material support and transmit particular ways of learning to her daughter. She rewarded Xiaoran materially for success in the learning and, by doing so, sustained her vocabulary memorization efforts. The mother also advised Xiaoran on how to overcome the learning problems she had in memorizing her vocabulary. The extract creates a striking impression that the mother functioned socially, like a teacher, to guide and her daughter's progress in learning English vocabulary.

Overall, the interview data suggest that parents provided essential social support for the participants' learning of English vocabulary. In the interviews, at least ten participants mentioned that their parents had functioned as teachers, regularly instructing them and monitoring their progress in learning vocabulary. Parents in these participants' discourses were also considered a source of ready help:

> Extract 13
> My mum told me to do more exercises. I found that it was rather fun to do these exercises. […] I found many mistakes in my answers. Then my mum would try to explain my mistakes to me. I did not understand her explanation at first. Then my mum simplified her explanation and gave me a lot of interesting examples. (Yue)

Due to the lack of actual opportunities to use English on the Chinese mainland, the parents created a variety of social spaces for their children to deepen and widen their engagement with English. The most popular method among the parents was to send their children to reputable tutorial centers or employ private tutors so that the children could have extra English tuition. There were also parents who had ingenious solutions to the problem. In the interviews, two participants mentioned that their parents often took them to places in the city where English was likely to be used so that they could practice their English:

> Extract 14
> Wenchang: When I go to the Great Wall, I always meet foreign tourists there […] I have made many trips to the Great Wall.
> Interviewer: Who takes you to the Great Wall?
> Wenchang: My parents do.

Another two participants claimed that their parents regularly devoted time to using English at home so that they could experience using English socially:

Extract 15

When my parents are at home, sometimes they will say that we will not use Chinese. All the conversations then switch to English. Just like when I went to Great Britain, I had to use English all the time. (Zhiqi)

These efforts reveal the strong commitment that parents had to supporting their children' learning of English. They also speak for the enormous material investment that these families had made in supporting the children' educational efforts. For this reason, the participants could access rich learning resources beyond their school settings that many other Chinese learners of English could not dream of. For instance, Luoyi described the availability of rich learning materials at home as follows:

Extract 16

I read English materials at home. […] newspapers or short stories. Nothing special. For instance, I like to read 21st Century. I also read China Daily or simple short stories, and Bookworm series or those Cambridge reading series. (Luoyi)

The participants' easy access to material learning resources put them in advantageous learning positions, but their parents were far more pro-active in using these resources strategically and empowering them with stronger commitment and better capacity in learning English.

Parents were found in the interviews to have actively fostered positive attitudes towards the learning of English. Overseas trips, particularly those to English-speaking countries, powerfully reinforced the participants' impression that English is important, and this helped generate willpower to sustain their memorization efforts. Some of the parents also imbued the children with practical reasons for learning English, echoing the traditional emphasis on education as a means to achieve social mobility (Thøgersen, 2002):

Extract 17

My mum has always been warning me, reminding me of things such as how difficult it is for me to find a job or I need to go to a good university and so on. As a result, I feel that I have to memorize English words. (Wenxuan)

Wenxuan's mother did not stop at emphasizing the importance of learning English. She also fostered learning beliefs in her daughter and developed her capacity for learning English, especially memorizing English words. For instance, she tried to make her believe that she could learn English anywhere, regardless of the distractions around her. To do so, she intentionally made her memorize English words in noisy restaurants, an unusual practice among all the parents. Other parents were found in the interviews to have advised

their children on how to learn best and raise their strategic language awareness. For example, Tian described how his mother helped him overcome the vocabulary hurdle before the start of his secondary education:

> Extract 18
> In my primary school, especially before I started my secondary school, I did not have enough vocabulary. My mum tried all sorts of ways to help me learn English vocabulary, including the most renowned, effective "Super Right Brain" method. (Tian)

"Super Right Brain" is a mnemonic strategy that requires language learners to create an interesting story for each word that they want to memorize, assuming that young children find it easier to remember stories. In order to sustain Tian's use of "Super Right Brain" method, his mother kept praising his "super imaginative capacity" and his ability to "think of all sorts of ways to memorize English words." As another example, Yue was also taught by her parents to become morphologically aware of English vocabulary's word structure. Yue did not believe her mother at first until the teacher said similar things. Following this, she found that such knowledge was really "useful" in learning and memorizing English words.

6. Discussion

The combined use of survey and interviews has generated a rather complete picture of agency and contextual mediation in the participants' development as strategic vocabulary learners. The survey data has established close correlations between the participants' reported strategy use and metacognitive beliefs about vocabulary learning, which were supported by the findings from the analysis of selected participants' interview narratives. Further analysis of the participants' interview narratives also identified the participants' strategy use in vocabulary learning as emerging from an ongoing interaction between contextual conditions and agency.

In the inquiry, the participants were found to have taken on vocabulary learning tasks beyond their regular school workload, revealing a strong desire among them to prove that they are better learners than others. They were also found to have reflected on and monitored their strategy use before they decided which strategies were most suitable for their own learning needs. Even at this young age, they already claimed that their strategy use was their decision as they had "discovered" their ways of learning. While the participants' strategy use was inseparable from their exercise of agency and their will and capacity to act otherwise (Giddens, 1984), the findings in the inquiry also support the view that contextual resources mediated the participants' use of vocabulary learning strategies, especially strategies to memorize English vocabulary (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Palfreyman, 2006; Parks & Raymond, 2004). For instance, the participants' parents worked together with teachers to imbue them with the societal learning discourses, seeing English as instrumental in individuals' academic and career advances, which

helped sustain their memorization efforts. They also fostered beliefs in the importance of remembering English words by developing the participants' memorization capacity and mnemonic strategies as well as impressing the importance of learning and retaining English vocabulary on their young minds. They further supported the participants' use of vocabulary learning strategies by investing heavily in learning materials and creating various social opportunities to use English. The participants also referred to contextual necessities such as examinations and pedagogical practices including the use of published wordlists as influential in mediating them to undertake particular strategies in learning and memorizing English vocabulary. Limited opportunities to use English in context further encouraged the participants to memorize English vocabulary by rote even though many of them were not satisfied with the poor retention result. Confirming the previous research on the popular use of mnemonic strategies among Chinese learners (Barcroft, 2009; Gu, 2003), these findings thus underscore the important role that learning contexts have in mediating learners' strategy use (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Norton & Toohey, 2001). They also support the argument against the theorization of learners' strategy use as "largely pertaining to individual will and knowledge" (Parks & Raymond, 2004, p. 375). In other words, these learners' strategy use in learning vocabulary is also made possible by learning contexts.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we reported on a study that has explored a group of first year junior secondary school pupils' development as strategic vocabulary learners on the Chinese mainland. One might argue that the Chinese learners in the inquiry belong to a privileged social group, who clearly belong to those "who have" (Nunan, 2003). The survey data on the participants' strategy use are also self-reported data, which may be more related to their knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies, rather than their actual strategy use in learning English vocabulary. Given that sociocultural perspectives on language learning are underlined by an epistemology different from the cognitive explanation of vocabulary learning strategies, it is certainly more desirable to have a longitudinal approach so that the developmental process of the participants' strategic vocabulary learning can be well captured. Due to these methodological reservations, it is problematic for us to generalize the emerging findings from the inquiry uncritically. Nevertheless, the findings generate an emerging picture of the participants as strategic vocabulary learners, which has a few important implications for the teaching and learning of English vocabulary.

Given the critical impact of early experiences on language learners' later learning efforts, it is particularly encouraging to see that the participants had started exploring alternative possibilities in their strategy use when they just started learning the language. Because of these pupils' age, many language teachers probably find it tempting to induce them to adopt particular "good" strategies without necessarily giving them a chance to rationalize their use of these strategies and fostering some sense of ownership among them concerning their strategy use. Therefore, it becomes a critical challenge for language

teachers to fully appreciate pupils' agency and support their exercise of agency in strategic vocabulary learning.

The findings in respect of contextual mediation on the participants' strategy use suggest that it is possible for social agents such as language teachers to mediate young learners' strategic development. For instance, these learners, as claimed in their interviews, benefited from their teachers, both in regular schools and private tutorials, who developed their strategic language awareness including phonological and morphological awareness to make them better language learners. Such strategic language awareness can be systematically promoted among language learners like the participants through regular classroom teaching if teachers teach both English vocabulary and ways to learn English vocabulary by themselves in English lessons. In particular, language learners need to be provided with alternative strategies to memorize and commit vocabulary to their memory and also develop higher levels of metacognitive control of their learning. The narratives also record close parental involvement in the participants' learning efforts, suggesting that more could be achieved through collaboration between teachers and parents. One may argue that teachers could learn from parents experienced in supporting their children's language learning efforts about the ways they nurtured learning capacities and fostered stronger commitment to learning English among their children. They may use such knowledge to support parents who need such insights in developing their children's strategic learning capacities and commitment. In this way, teachers and schools can then play a critical role in identifying parental support strategies that are helpful for families of various socioeconomic backgrounds and in isolating those strategies that are only useful for families in privileged positions.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. Detailed information about major dimensions in the questionnaire is available upon request. Please contact Xuesong (Andy) Gao at xsgao@hku.hk.

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来教学的长期影响。

关键词：互教互学；教学策略；自主学习；教师教育

在语言教室里创建学习者社群

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本文报告的一项研究是关于一组英语学习者在共同完成一个项目的过程中如何形成一个学习社群（learning community）。学生的任务是作为宣读人参加一个国际会议。墨西哥西部的一所小型私立大学的商务英语课程本科学生组成一个团队，共同研究、撰写一篇拟在国际会议上宣读的课题论文。本研究采用重质性的互动分析方法（Interaction Analysis）、通过观察参加者之间的互动进行，资料采集依赖视频和音频记录、辅以访谈和问卷调查。分析表明，在该项目实施过程中，学生不仅学会商务英语专业术语，也学会如何进行研究合作。

关键词：学习社群；知识建构；互动分析。

中国重点中学学生英语词汇学习策略使用研究

高雪松　香港大学

刘宏刚　东北师范大学

朱奋梅　北方交通大学附属中学 ···86

本文汇报了一项中国大陆中学生英语词汇学习策略使用及其发展情况的混合研究成果。研究的定量部分采用问卷方式对某重点中学初中部 475 名一年级学生（247 名男生和 228 名女生）的英语词汇学习策略使用情况进行了调查。量化研究中的 16 名学生（男女生各半）参与了本研究中的定性部分。定性研究主要以半结构访谈为主，重点关注学生们的英语词汇学习经历。本文从社会文化视角对研究数据进行了分析，结果发现：学生的英语词汇学习策略使用、词汇学习观念以及在词汇学习过程中个人的能动性 (agency) 是密切相关的。访谈结果进一步揭示了这种内在联系：学生的词汇学习策略是在其学习能动性、词汇学习情境、社会个体的支持（父母和老师）三者互动过程中形成的。研究建议教师要和学生周围的社会个体（如家长）密切合作，对学生词汇策略的学习予以足够的支持。

关键词：能动性；情境；社会文化视角；词汇学习策略；混合研究

失而复得：语言学习辅导的叙事

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本文探讨了外语教育的自传写作和互动讲故事这两种叙事教育过程的潜力。在赫尔辛基大学语言中心的自主学习模块 (Autonomous Learning Modules—ALMS) 中，学生撰写各种自传体文本，作为他们的语言档案的一部分。这些文本在面对面辅导会上加以讨论。芬兰学生的学习者身份受影响于英语在芬兰的竞争力：掌握英语是必须的，而不掌握英语则意味着失败。这一点对那些自我认定为"不同"的学习者尤为真实，他们以前的语言学习经验和课堂环境引起他们的焦虑。在 ALMS，辅导员鼓励他们以讲故事的形式分享过去的学习经验，并以此为基础制定自己的个人学习计划。讲故事还能为学生创建安全的自我反思空