Chinese learners' strategy use in historical perspective: A cross-generational interview-based study

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Abstract

Understanding language learners' strategy use from their own perspectives rather than according to researchers' preconceptions is essential for appropriate research and pedagogy. However, the literature on Chinese learners has tended to rely on anecdotal descriptions or Western constructs to portray Chinese learners' strategy use, and this results in an apparently self-contradictory picture. In this paper we argue that a better understanding of Chinese learners' strategy use can be gained by accessing their own voices, and by analysing findings in relation to context, in this case historical context. We report on an interview-based study which investigated the strategy use of 13 English language learners from three 'generations' of learning experience between 1979 and the present day. Data analysis confirms that memorization is a popular learning strategy for these learners. However, its application is complex and diverse, while change as well as continuity emerges from an overall comparison of different generations' learning strategy use. We argue on this basis that language policy and related pedagogy may be important influences.
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1. Introduction

Western interest in the specific nature of the Chinese English learning scene has grown immensely over the last five or so years as increasing numbers of students have come to the West for higher education, as opportunities for Western business have developed within China, and as academic as well as commercial partnerships have developed. With this growth in interest there have been attempts to describe the specificity of Chinese learners, the Chinese culture of learning, and so on. As highlighted by Pennycook (1998), many of these attempts – especially the earlier ones – seem to partake too readily of orientalist stereotypes, even when the writers have considerable experience of China (e.g. Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Ho and Crookall, 1995).

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Rote learning figures strongly in such accounts as something to be denigrated. As Shi (2006) has pointed out, Confucian explanations have often been given for this kind of learning, in a rather superficial way.

Redressing the balance, others have attempted to describe the specificities of Chinese learning from a more sympathetic perspective. Interpretations have still cited Confucius, but with more emphasis on those of his sayings which support an alternative, more active reading of Chinese learning styles and culture of learning. Watkins and Biggs' (1996) work is important and has been frequently cited in this respect. There has also been some empirical work which compares Chinese students with those in other East Asian countries. However, as has been pointed out by Clark and Gieve (2006), all these approaches tend to share a common failure of over-generalization and stereotyping with regard to an entire, very large nation.

With specific regard to learner strategies, the literature on Chinese learners reveals a similarly contradictory and, in most cases, over-simplified picture. This literature will be reviewed in Section 2 below in order to justify the innovative approach we adopt in this study, namely to attempt to move beyond stereotyping and over-simplified interpretation by (1) accessing individual voices and (2) interpreting findings from a historical perspective, with a focus on the possible influence of language education policy and associated pedagogy rather than explanations which invoke 'traditional culture'. In Section 3, as a further foundation, we provide an overview of changes in policy and pedagogy over the last thirty years before describing our interview-based study (Section 4) and discussing the complex nature of strategy use which is revealed (Section 5).

2. Chinese language learners' strategy use

According to Cohen (1998, p. 5), 'Second language learner strategies encompass both second language learning and second language use strategies. Taken together they constitute the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either for the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both'. A substantial body of research has endeavoured to identify strategy categories (e.g. Wenden, 1987; Oxford, 1990) and examine possible influences on learners' choices of strategies (e.g. Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Green and Oxford, 1995). The literature more specifically on Chinese learners' strategies is, however, composed of contradictory anecdotes and research findings, and questionable cultural interpretations.

Anecdotally, Chinese learners are described either as 'passive' rote learners and low level strategy users or as mentally active and deep strategy users. On the negative side, Chinese learners' strategy use is often criticised, with Chinese learners being described, for example, as 'proverbial rote memorizers or recyclers' (Deckert, 1993, p. 133), 'relentless rote learners' (Biggs, 1991, p. 27), or syllabus-dependent and passive (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). In a summary of such views, Hu (2002) describes Chinese learners' learning strategies in terms of reception, repetition, review, and reproduction. In other words, Chinese learners are viewed as passive *receivers* of knowledge that they expect to be passed on by teachers; they hold *repetition* to be the necessary means to acquire knowledge and understanding; they consider *review* as a key step for consolidating old knowledge; and they *reproduce* textual knowledge as required by teachers or tests.

An alternative anecdotal viewpoint is that Chinese perspectives should be valued and rote learning should be carefully re-examined (Sampson, 1984; Biggs, 1996). Thus, from Chinese learners' points of view, 'memorization is far from being an easy cop-out or a release from thinking. It is considered as the initial step in assimilating a lesson' (Sampson, 1984, p. 29). From a similar perspective, Cheng (2000, p. 438) observes: 'among the students I have taught or observed [...] many are extremely active and even aggressive'.

The above contradictory anecdotes correspond to similarly contradictory research findings (e.g. Huang and Naerssen, 1987; Biggs, 1996; Marton et al., 1996; Yang, 1999; Gu, 2003; Ding, 2007). Research into Chinese learners' vocabulary-learning strategies (Masemann, 1986; Huang and Naerssen, 1987; Biggs, 1996; Yang, 1999; Gu, 2003; Ding, 2007) has been particularly prevalent, but different findings have been reported. For example, Huang and Naerssen (1987) found memorizing vocabulary lists was the most popular strategy among Chinese learners. Similarly, Yang (1999) reported a significant majority of Taiwanese university students using rote or learning by heart strategies. On the other hand, Masemann (1986) argues that rote learning is just the initial step leading to a deeper form of learning. This is confirmed by Biggs' (1996) analysis of Chinese learners' rote learning. He proposes that Chinese learners may be repetitive learners rather than rote learners, suggesting that their strategy use is purposeful rather than mechanical. The value of memorization through repetition has also been stressed more recently by Gu (2003) and Ding (2007), in relation to vocab-

ulary items and whole texts, respectively. However, the nature of the relationship between memorization, repetition and *comprehension* has not been clarified further since a study by Marton et al. (1996) revealed the possibility that Chinese students, when they appear to be rote learning, may be 'memorizing what is understood' and/or 'understanding through memorizing'.

Finally, two opposing perspectives on Chinese traditional culture tend to be resorted to in interpretation of learners' language learning behaviours. For example, following Cortazzi and Jin (1996), who first proposed the notion of a 'Chinese culture of learning' that encourages rote learning and constrains learners from being active, Hu (2002, 2005) supports the opinion that Chinese learners' strategy use is constrained by a traditional learning culture involving knowledge transmission. On the other hand, Biggs (1991), Lee (1996), Marton et al. (1996) and Gu (2003) argue that the Confucian tradition values deep learning, requiring deep strategy use. Thus, quoting Analects II 15 ('seeking knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous'), Biggs (1991, p. 30) holds that Confucius' methods were 'individual and Socratic, not expository', although he also acknowledges that 'Confucius did inspire several themes and variations' (cf. Shi, 2006). This positive view of the Confucian tradition is also upheld in a recent study by Gu (2003, p. 97), who argues that learners' strategy use demonstrates positive traditional characteristics of 'self-cultivation', 'self-realization', 'effort' and 'perseverance'.

While the anecdotes, research findings and interpretations detailed above are contradictory, they share in common a tendency to treat Chinese learners as a homogenous group. Broad discussions of 'The Chinese Learner' are usually insufficiently sensitive to the age, gender, or geographical location of the learners in question, and beliefs about the influence of 'Chinese culture' on learning styles or strategies may accordingly be overstated. As contended by Cheng (2000), Confucian values have become a convenient explanation for any observed behavioural trait, but 'Chinese learning strategies' are likely to be more complex than they are usually made out to be. Common assumptions, such as the notion that memorization and understanding are mutually exclusive categories, may be in need of reappraisal (Kennedy, 2002, p. 442). Moreover, culture is a discursive construct (Kubota, 2006), cultures are variable and in a state of flux, and simplistic 'large culture' explanations can now be seen to be inadequate (Holliday, 1999; Clark and Gieve, 2006). As pointed out by Holliday (1994, p. 21), learners' immediate learning context is likely to be a better reference point than national culture for understanding learners.

A qualitative, in-depth investigation that 'goes beyond the self-fulfilling prophecies and Confucian confusion that circumscribe notions of The Chinese Learner and Chinese Learning Styles' (Kennedy, 2002, pp. 442–443), yet with a focus on context and not just individual differences, therefore appears to be called for. It seems possible that variations in the specific nature of the language learning experience undergone by individual Chinese learners may contribute to differences among them (as, indeed, Gao (2003, 2006) has found for Chinese learners who go abroad to study). Along with possible regional differences, historical change in educational practices and their potential influence on learners' strategies should not be neglected.

As yet, there has been no research that examines Chinese learners' (or, as far as we are aware, any other group of learners') strategy use from a historical perspective, and this study aims to fill the gap. Via interviews with a group of Chinese learners from three generations, the study attempts to interpret their strategy use in relation to the recent history of educational policy and practice within China.

3. Contextual factors and historical perspectives

As argued by Horwitz (1999), broad 'cultural' differences may be no more salient than other contextual or individual differences in influencing learners' beliefs and strategy choices. Moreover, 'situation specific factors such as teaching methodologies and language proficiency level rather than cultural attributes' may be 'to blame' (Cheng, 2000, p. 436). Apart from individual characteristics which might influence learners' strategy use, language education policy and associated pedagogical factors may be salient, yet are seldom discussed in the literature. In a rare research study considering this aspect, Hu (2003) suggests that variations in language policy and pedagogy may have contributed to geographical differences within China in learners' strategy use. Indeed, according to Hu (2001), changes in language education policy have brought about qualitatively different contexts for language teaching and learning in China, and – we would suggest – different generations of language learners, in principle, might therefore demonstrate features of strategy use that are typical of dif-

ferent historical periods. In this connection it is important to mention some recent research which has contributed an enhanced understanding of historical aspects of English language teaching and learning in the Chinese context (Adamson, 2004; Chen et al., 2002; Lam, 2002, 2005; Luo, 2004). For example, Lam (2002, 2005) divides the post-1949 history of foreign language education policy in China into three broad phases (each further sub-divided into two), corresponding to before, during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Covering the same post-1949 period, but with a focus more on pedagogy than on policy, Adamson (2004) offers a useful overview of change in pedagogical approaches and influences on them by means of an analysis of published textbooks. There are also a few researchers, for example, Chen et al. (2002) and Luo (2004), who have reviewed recent change in the national curriculum historically. On the basis of a critical review of all these authors' work, in Table 1 we provide an overview of developments since the Cultural Revolution in the Chinese national curriculum and associated pedagogy (this is based in particular on Chen et al., 2002 for the division into phases and the overview of syllabus and syllabus contents, and a combination of Chen et al. (2002) and Adamson (2004) for indications of associated pedagogy).

As can be seen from the table, there have been significant changes in the syllabus over the last 30 years with regard to objectives, teaching and learning contents, and recommended pedagogy. It is to be expected that there have also been concomitant changes in emphasis in actual English language teaching practice (Shi and Wen, 2005). Although we should of course be aware that desired changes in practice do not necessarily follow in a predictable fashion from changes in curriculum specification, Lam (2005) survey of 415 learners of different ages showed that 'the results as a whole do indicate that the experience of learners kept pace with

Table 1
Historical overview of recent changes in English syllabus and associated pedagogical features.

Phase	Syllabus	Syllabus contents	Associated pedagogy
1. 1977–1990	1978–1980 (secondary)	Vocabulary; Pronunciation and grammar; basic listening, speaking, writing and translation skills	Grammar-translation with structural approach; emphasis on accuracy and memorization
	1986 (secondary)	As above; additionally, ability to read materials less difficult than textbooks	Adds in the importance of language use in daily dialogues
	1990 (secondary)	Increase in vocabulary-learning load; otherwise, unchanged	
2. 1988–2000	1988 (middle school)	Vocabulary; four basic skills; basic English knowledge and initial skill in language use; pronunciation (ability to read aloud), vocabulary (ability to spell words), and grammar	
	1992 (middle school)	Vocabulary (can read; spell and understand in listening)	Emphasis on listening and reading; changing teachers' role from 'instructor' to 'guide'
	1993 (high school)	vocabulary; 4 basic skills; basic communication skills based on oral and written English	
	1996 (high school)	Vocabulary; extensive reading; understanding of English culture.	
	2000 (middle school)	Vocabulary (reading vocabulary added); communication skills based on familiar topics; can describe simple things and make judgement; awareness of inter-cultural communication;	
3. 2001 onwards	2001 (primary, secondary)	Basic language skills; language knowledge (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, function, topic); learning strategies; cultural awareness; develop students' comprehensive abilities in using the language.	Moving away from perceived previous overemphasis on grammar explanation, vocabulary instruction, imitation, and rote and mechanical drilling. Combined focus on language knowledge and skills via integrative, open-ended, interactive activities

Note: 'Middle school' and 'high school' are both at secondary level (middle school comes first, followed by high school). Our use of 'secondary' or 'middle'/'high' follows the wording in the corresponding official documents.

language education policy trends' (p. 101). Lam's focus is on physical and curricular conditions for learning rather than on methodology *per se*, but it seems fair to say that, in theory at least, the overall pedagogical emphasis has shifted since the Cultural Revolution from accuracy, memorization and limited communicative language use towards aiming for a more comprehensive understanding and mastery of language and the language learning process, including the development of the four skills via a learner-centred methodology and overt strategy training.

4. The study

To date, there has been no empirical research into Chinese learners' strategy use in language learning which adopts a historical perspective. The present study aims to fill the gap by investigating three 'generations' of learners, aiming to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most common language learning strategies these Chinese learners have engaged in?
2. How can the popularity of these learning strategies be explained? To what extent are historical explanations useful?

Through adoption of a holistic approach founded on learners' perspectives, it is expected that learners' own accounts of their strategy use will reveal insights relating to specific learning contexts and instructional practices, but that explanations relating to changes in language education policy may also emerge.

4.1. Participants

Thirteen participants were carefully chosen to represent three 'generations' who started learning English during three different phases of language education policy development in China (roughly corresponding to the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, as shown in Table 1). They were: four research visitors, five MA/MSc/MBA students and one PhD student, all studying at the University of Warwick, UK, together with three young learners who were children of three of the research visitors. Although gender differences were not a focus of this study, an attempt was made to keep a rough balance between genders within the different generations. Details of participants are presented in Table 2.

Regarding educational background, three of the four research visitors obtained their MA degree in China, while the five MA/MSc/MBA students and the one PhD student finished their undergraduate education in China. The three young learners began learning English in China and had enrolled in two different primary schools in the UK about a month before the study began.

Table 2
Participants' profiles.

Participant no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Age	39	37	40	34	28	27	24	26	23	25	9	8	8
Age group	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	M	F
Course	RV	RV	RV	RV	MSc	MA	MBA	MA	MSc	PhD	PS	PS	PS
Year began learning English	1979	1979	1979	1982	1986	1988	1988	1989	1989	1993	2002	2003	2003
Level of education when English study began	Tertiary level				Secondary level						Primary level		
'Generation'	1.				2.						3.		

Key. RV: Research Visitor; PS: primary school pupil.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The most commonly used research instrument in learner strategy research is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) survey instrument (Oxford, 1990). However, several researchers have proposed developing qualitative studies to supplement survey-based research and explore learners' learning behaviour from a broader perspective (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Parry, 1996; Gao, 2003, 2008). Moreover, using interviews with Chinese learners, Marton et al. (1996) obtained first-hand data from participants' points of view and were thus able to reveal the inadequacies of stereotyped opinions regarding the supposed opposition between memorization and understanding. In view of our research questions, an interview with participants about their past learning experiences seemed to be a logical approach to research in this study.

The interview was structured around an interview guide (see Appendix I) prepared beforehand and consisting of two major categories: strategy use in English language learning and possible influences on this. The interview guide focused attention on how participants had learned English before moving to the UK, and any strategies deriving from that experience, since changes due to their move from an EFL environment to an English-speaking country were not the focus of the study (see Gao, 2003, 2006). In order to encourage diverse answers, relatively open questions were deployed, as suggested by Cohen (1994) and Wengraf (2001). Indeed, the actual interviews were more flexible than the interview guide suggests, and planned questions were often adjusted to the conversation flow. It is important to recognize that age differences had an impact on the nature of interviews. For the three children involved, the interviewer confined the interview questions to central questions concerning how they had learned English at school and at home in China, and whether their parents or teachers had taught them how to learn English. In acknowledgment of the fact that children could not provide answers of great complexity, the questions were phrased in such a way as to elicit facts that could be retrieved by them easily. Even though children's responses were sometimes fragmentary and their descriptions were less coherent when compared with adults', they still provided useful insights into how they went about learning English and who/what had influenced them in this. Relevant codes (see below) could be associated with these insights, thus making cross-generational interpretation possible.

Each interview, averaging 30 minutes in length, was conducted in the participants' native language (Chinese), enabling interviewees to express themselves openly (Yang, 1999; Rao, 2002). When it came to analysis of the transcripts, the first-named author repeatedly read these and endeavoured to 'find codes from data' (Punch, 2005, p. 200). Based on descriptive codes in the first instance, she discovered patterns and regularities that emerged as themes, which were then transformed into categories by means of techniques informed by Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2000). Through comparison and discussion between the researchers, the final categories were formed. These will be further discussed in Section 5.

5. Findings and discussion

Data analysis revealed rich information relating to interviewees' English learning experience. Their accounts tended to centre on memorization as a major strategy, which, however, involved various skills. Notably, 'rote learning' (死记硬背: siji yingbei, literally 'mechanical repetition') was mentioned frequently as an important part of memorization. Overall, all ten adult interviewees hold a positive attitude towards the status of 'rote learning' although interviewees 1, 4, 7, and 8 expressed their doubts as to its being the best choice of learning strategy. Besides rote learning, a few other memorization approaches were reported by the interviewees (as discussed in Section 5.1). At the same time, data showed that language education policy and pedagogical developments may have had a greater impact on overall strategy use than individual factors (as will be discussed in Section 5.2).

5.1. Insights into memorization and rote learning

Not surprisingly, perhaps, memorization was the most frequently used term when participants recalled how they had learned English. On further inquiry, all except for the three children mentioned 'rote learning' ('siji

yingbei') as a strategy they had tended to use for memorization. However, as we shall see, their accounts suggested a more complex picture than that presented by Marton et al. (1996) when it came to use of this strategy, involving different combinations of repetition with understanding, awareness of memory curve, word association and use of Chinese pronunciation.

5.1.1. Repetition and memorization

We should recall that Marton et al. (1996) revealed the possibility that Chinese students, when they appear to be rote learning, may be 'memorizing what is understood' and/or 'understanding through memorizing'. According to most of the interviewees in the present study, however (e.g. 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6), the use of rote learning as a learning method is mainly related to its leading to memorization, not to understanding. This differs from Marton et al.'s (1996) emphasis on repetition as a prelude to understanding, or as a form of understanding.

Interviewees' accounts of the value of repetition mainly centred on two aspects. Firstly, some interviewees (e.g. 1 and 4) emphasized how repetition could be complex and thus effective. For example, repeating words does not necessarily mean that this shuts down other possible assisting channels:

> 'sometimes, you might go blank while reciting, but the hanging on sound is internalized and can be a reminder of the word...' (interviewee 4).

For interviewee 4, repetition of reading a word or text aloud helped activate the sense of hearing, so enhancing 'language sense' and thereby facilitating memorization. Likewise, interviewee 1 reported combining repetition with another form of practice. After repeating a word or words continuously, he would begin to repeatedly practice in context instead. For him, to rote-learn individual words was not of benefit in itself, and should be followed by repetition of exercises.

> 'through exercise, doing a large amount of exercises, [I can] know the usage of words and have deep understanding of them'. (Interviewee 1).

Although repetition was used differently by these two interviewees, in both cases it was considered to lead to memorization.

Interviewee 5 also strongly suggested that repetition, in this case repeated spelling aloud, functions on its own as a means to memorization. Take the following extract, for example:

> E: I spell aloud and write at the same time.
> R: How long did it take you to remember a word?
> E: Around twenty times repetition. It also depends. I often review. You know, sometimes I may forget. Then I would rote-learn again. (Interviewee 5).

For interviewee 5, repetition consisted of reading, writing and reviewing many times, which led to long-term memory.

In sum, for these interviewees, repetition, although in different forms and in different combinations with other strategies, constituted an important part of an overall approach to memorization.

5.1.2. Understanding and memorization

For Marton et al. (1996), understanding is a deeper level of memorization and to aim at understanding facilitates memorization. This view was shared by some interviewees (e.g. 2, 7, and 8). Thus, Interviewee 8 preferred to memorize vocabulary in its textual context:

> 'I will always read the text silently. If I really come across a word that hinders understanding, I would refer to the word list following the text. In fact, remembering words in the text makes them difficult to forget'.

Agreeing with him, interviewee 2 added: 'Reciting text can be done by firstly looking through the overall structure and internal links of meaning. This initial understanding makes memorization much easier'. Adhering to the idea that understanding not only helps memorization but also prepares for real language use, interviewee 8 reported her practice of making use of context whenever possible. For instance, she was used to reading original English magazines and instructions in addition to her compulsory reading.

However, placing emphasis on understanding prior to memorization did not mean that these interviewees (2, 7, and 8) ignored repetition. On the contrary, they seemed to seek opportunities for repeated exposure to the words, and this helped them to explore further meanings of them in various contexts. All of them thought a wide range of reading was of great help in this matter. Of significance here is the idea that deeper understanding can come after memorization, whereas Marton et al. (1996) tend to emphasize the necessary role of understanding in the very process of memorization.

5.1.3. Memorization and the need for review

The retrospective data regarding 'rote learning' particularly revealed that, except for the three children, all interviewees were wary of the memory curve, which urged them to seek strategies to overcome the difficulty of natural forgetfulness. They typically mentioned regular reviewing as essential. In particular, interviewees 2, 5, 6 and 10 gave a detailed description of the review procedures they engaged in. Both interviewees 5 and 6 based their reviewing on lesson units. Like interviewee 5 (see Section 5.1.1 above), interviewee 6 would review previously learned lessons regularly. In general, she took four lessons as one unit, which meant three previously studied lessons were often reviewed while studying a new lesson. Interviewee 2, referring to a book discussing human memory, showed that her way of reviewing was based on time intervals. For instance, she would review words or texts she had studied three days afterwards, then review them again a week later and gradually extend the time span to a month. Interviewee 10 held a strong belief in the number of words in his vocabulary as a measurement for reviewing. He recalled: 'Each day I would memorize 40 words. The second day I would learn 40 new words and review the previous 40 words. The third day [I would do the same, and so on]'. Although not all of the interviewees insisted on strict regular reviewing like interviewees 2, 5, 6 and 10, this was generally recognized as an effective way to maintain memory.

5.1.4. Word association and memorization

In addition, some interviewees (2, 5, 6, and 9) mentioned strategies such as word association or use of word prefixes and suffixes, or of synonyms and antonyms – strategies which they said they either learned from reference books or their teachers. A case in point might be interviewee 6, who was inspired by a book she recalled as being titled *Sparkling English*. She said: 'Synonyms, word alteration or derivation. I will memorize one word then extend to its different variations. For instance, from *nation*, I will cover *national, nationalize, international*'.

However, these extra strategies were not always mentioned appreciatively. Interviewee 1 directly complained: 'I got some advice on how to memorize vocabulary such as using prefixes, suffixes and so on. I seldom used this...It takes time. Also they are irregular...In addition, I got used to my own method of rote learning. To learn a new method needs both time and energy. What's more, it's taking a risk to test a newly learned method'. For interviewee 1, rote learning was still the most reliable and valid way of memorization. It seemed that to know alternative learning strategies was one thing while to use them was a different matter.

5.1.5. Use of Chinese pronunciation and memorization

Simulating Chinese pronunciation (that is, associating the English pronunciation with Chinese sounds by transliterating into 'pin-yin') emerged as a means used by three interviewees (1, 3, and 4). Although interviewee 4 claimed he only used such a technique for a short period of time at beginner's level, it seemed to be especially commonly used by interviewees 1 and 3. Interviewee 1 complained:

'...at that time English teachers were not qualified [...]. They came from other professions or were previously Russian teachers. They began teaching us after only being trained for a short time. They would routinely ask us to follow them reading the vocabulary once (who knows accurately or not?) and then

spent most of the time explaining grammar in Chinese, so we had to think of some way to help ourselves learn vocabulary...actually sound simulation is funny and impressive'.

Apparently, these interviewees had to resort to the only resources available to them for memorizing vocabulary (association with mother tongue), due to a lack of professional teachers and knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet at that particular time.

Interviewee 3 thought this 'silly' way was helpful for him although until now he had been shy to open his mouth to speak English in public as he knew his pronunciation must be strange. Nevertheless, 'to simulate pronunciation is somehow to relate English to Chinese and it is beneficial to certain extent'. This method apparently did not represent the majority in this study but was an additional means revealed by the data which should not be overlooked with regard to memorization.

As can be seen from the above discussion, memorization was the most salient strategy used by participants in the study. However, whereas Marton et al. (1996) present a rigid distinction between memorization and understanding, the data in this study reveal complexities in this area, and provide additional insights into its dynamic nature.

5.2. Strategy use across three generations: commonalities and diversity

5.2.1. Overall comparison across the 'generations'

A further distinctive feature of the present study concerns its examination of Chinese learners' overall strategy use from a historical perspective. Linking reported strategy use with 'generation' provides an interesting picture, with some commonalities and some diversity emerging, as can be seen in Table 3.

Overall, as displayed in the table and as already reported in Section 5.1, all three generations reported much use of memorization strategies. Comparatively, the first generation and the second generation had more common ground with each other than with the third generation in that they both used rote learning and Chinese translation strategies and applied such strategies to grammar and approaching texts as well as vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, aside from this commonality, differences were found between them. Indeed, great diversity was revealed when the three generations were compared.

Particularly indicative of a strong relationship between generation and the type of strategy use, were three major differences between generations. The first was in the area of approach to pronunciation. Thus, the second generation reported the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) being a major assistance in memorization, but this was absent from the experience of both the first and the third generations (in the first generation students did not know how to pronounce at all; indeed, there is an overall shift from emphasis on written language to sound between the first and second generations). For example,

'English has spelling, pronunciation and meaning. At that time I memorized them separately...No connection... I began learning IPA. Therefore I could connect pronunciation with spelling. Suddenly it felt much easier' (interviewee 8).

Second, grammar learning was also different among the three generations. Both the first and the second generation reported relying on Chinese explanation of grammar rules. However, the second generation reported using many grammar exercises to consolidate memorization of rules whereas the first only focused on Chinese explanation. For the third generation, there was no specific mention of grammar learning.

Third, use of mother tongue as a support seemed to follow a descending trend from the first to the third generation. For example, the first generation relied heavily on Chinese translation of texts; the second generation, instead, used selective translation; and for the third generation, translation was absent.

It is true that the first two generations in this study were adult learners who had more metacognitive knowledge and thus ability to reflect on their strategy use than the third generation (young learners). However, there did seem to be qualitative differences in self-reported strategy use between the generations, even with respect to the young learners. As we shall consider in the next section, differences between the generations seem to have been associated with various factors such as changing language education policy and associated pedagogy as well as individual preferences and family upbringing.

Table 3
Interviewees' reported strategy use.

Generation	Interviewee	Start English in Primary education	Start English in Secondary education	Start English in Tertiary education	Self-reported strategy use		
					Vocabulary	Grammar	Text
1st	1			1979	Repeated ('rote') spelling aloud, Chinese translation, relating pronunciation to Chinese sounds	Chinese explanation	Translation
	2						
	3						
2nd	4		1982		Repeated spelling aloud and repeated reading aloud, understanding, Chinese translation, awareness of memory curve, word association, International Phonetic Alphabet, imitate tapes	Chinese explanation, English grammar exercises	Selective translation, understanding Rehearsal of speech
	5		1986				
	6		1988				
	7		1988				
	8		1989				
	9		1989				
	10		1993				
3rd	11	2002			Understanding word image and English meaning; meaning in context; imitate tapes/watch videos		Retell with understanding
	12	2003					
	13	2003					

5.2.2. Influences on strategy use

Influences on learners' strategy use appear to be complex, involving individual preferences, family education, teachers' instruction, underlying language education policy, and so on. Interviewees frequently expressed the idea that their teachers' ways of instruction were important influences on their strategic behaviour, and their descriptions seemed to indicate that changes in teaching approach did follow on from changes in language education policy at different historical times.

5.2.2.1. Language education policy and associated pedagogy and strategy use. Language policy and associated typical pedagogy at different historical times were revealed as important factors that affected interviewees' strategy use. Although language education policy and the term 'pedagogy' were not specifically mentioned by all participants, their reports on the general English language learning context and how their teachers taught English strongly suggested that there had been an influence of 'officially approved' pedagogy on the different generations.

If we refer to Table 3, it can be seen that the first generation have typically used a limited range of learning strategies such as memorizing vocabulary, or translation into Chinese. Comparing this finding with Table 1, we can see that it is consonant with the grammar-translation type of pedagogy associated by Adamson (2004) and Chen et al. (2002) with the late 1970s and 1980s. This in turn was closely linked with the broader English language education background of the time, when English had just started to be restored on a nation-wide basis and there was a lack of teachers themselves qualified in English (Hu, 2001). Reported strategy use of the second generation reflected an emphasis on oral skills through drilling, which was consistent both with the audiolingual type of approach being recommended by that time and the broader national priority being placed on communication with other countries. During this period, English became a compulsory subject in both junior and senior schools. Just as importantly, it was raised to the status of a National Entrance Examination subject, but with a focus on grammar rather than, for example, oral communication. Accordingly, grammar exercises appear to be a salient feature in this generation's strategy use. For example, interviewee 8 stated, 'If you memorize vocabulary and do grammar exercises, you can get a higher score [in exams]'. Moving to the third generation's ways of English learning, these appear to be more 'activity-oriented' and meaning-focused, both aspects being characteristic of the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching at the present time, and of course the extension of English teaching to primary level which has been occurring since the beginning of the 2000s.

5.2.2.2. Other factors and strategy use. Although interviewees' reported strategy use was stamped with historical characteristics in terms of language policy and associated pedagogy, our data suggest that these are not the only sources of influence. There were other factors playing a role such as individual preferences, perceived examination pressure, and family education.

For example, interviewee 1 was not satisfied with the way he was learning English and complained: 'it is useless to memorize words. Only when you use them do you know them. I didn't memorize words, but I like to read Nature Exploration in English'. Evidently, interviewee 1's choice of authentic material was more of a personal preference than the result of any pedagogical intervention. Interviewee 7, on the other hand, revealed that her way of learning was subject to the exam system: 'If you memorize vocabulary and do grammar exercise, you can get a higher score'. Indeed, as Rao (2006) has argued, the emphasis placed on memorization by Chinese learners may be to a large extent influenced by the perceived need to gain good scores in examinations. Interestingly, in this connection, the adoption of memorization as a strategy by the young learner interviewees appeared to be strongly influenced by their families. All three families seemed to require their children to memorize vocabulary even though teachers did not. As argued by interviewee 2 (the mother of interviewee 12) in relation to children of the present generation: 'vocabulary is the most basic thing. They will have to spell the words one day. The earlier the better'. Thus, even though children did not need to memorize words, they had extra homework assigned by parents. In this way, memorization strategies seemed to be passed on from the older generation to the younger. This may be an additional explanation of the fact that a 'traditional' emphasis on memorization (particularly memorization of vocabulary) maintained its salience across the three generations, despite the other changes we have highlighted.

6. Conclusion

This study has reconsidered Chinese learners' language learning strategy use from their own perspectives, as revealed by interviews with learners from different recent 'generations'. One major finding is that Chinese learners' use of memorization strategies appears to be more complex and can be more dynamic than has been previously been described (particularly in relation to repetition, understanding and review). Another important finding is that language education policy and associated pedagogical factors do seem to have been influential in bringing about overall change in strategy use, but that other factors such as individual preferences, examination pressure and parental influence should not be ignored.

Although we have discerned both complexity within the phenomenon of memorization strategies and change over time in overall strategy use, our study has also revealed notable continuity, in that memorization (of vocabulary, in particular) is viewed as the most important aspect of language learning across all three of these different generations. However, the reason for this continuity may itself have less to do with a purported 'Chinese culture of learning' as claimed by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) – a somewhat static notion that tends to essentialize Chinese culture – and more to do with continuity in language education policy and accompanying intended pedagogies. Thus, although we follow Chen et al. (2002) in distinguishing three recent phases of language teaching reform, they have themselves emphasized that 'Reviewing the history of the national curriculum over the past twenty years, one striking feature is that it is a process of change, progress and development rather than destroying the 'old' and establishing the 'new'' (p. 24; our translation).

On the one hand, teachers or parents can be significant mediators who pass on learning strategies to the younger generation through education or child-rearing; on the other hand, language education policy can make a difference, while children, parents and teachers are individuals whose personal differences can make their strategy use flexible and unpredictable. It also needs to be borne in mind that children interview differently from adults, and it will be interesting to see whether the views of the young learner participants in this study have changed when we interview them again five or ten years into the future.

As an exploratory investigation, this study has offered preliminary, suggestive findings that need to be further examined. For instance, there needs to be further research into how teachers interpret language education policy and recommended pedagogy when they teach, how language learning strategies may be mediated via instruction and parental influence (the latter factor having emerged as important but without being considered in depth here), and whether our findings are more widely generalizable within China (regional variations in policy implementation might be salient, but were not focused on in this study). It would also be interesting to see whether links between historical change in language education policy, teachers' instructional practices and learning strategy use can be discerned, in the same or different ways, in other contexts.

From one point of view, then, this has been something of an experiment in linking the broad history of language teaching with learners' and teachers' individual life stories. We would suggest, however, that the interview findings reported here and the historical perspective we have used to interpret them have also, in their own right, provided useful new insights into the changing and complex, yet to a certain extent consistent nature of the memorization strategies adopted by Chinese learners, now and in the past.

Appendix I. Interview Guide

1. **Could you please recall how you learned English in China?**
   When did you begin to learn English?
   How did you learn English (Primary, Middle School, and College)?
2. **What is the most common strategy (方法: fang fa, literally 'method') you have used to learn English?**
   How did you come to know this strategy?
   When do you use it most?
   How do you find it helpful/useless in your learning process?
   Do you have other ways to learn English?
3. **What are the factors that may have influenced your strategy use?**
   Did your English teacher teach you any strategies?

What are those strategies?
Are there any other factors which have influenced your strategy choice?

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