Chapter 7
Familiarity and Use of Language Teaching Strategies among Chinese Language Teachers

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There is no denial that Chinese language is one of the most difficult languages to learn. The Foreign Service Institute of the United States classifies Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), together with Arabic, Japanese, and Korean, as Category V: language which are exceptionally difficult for *native English speakers* which requires 88 weeks (2200 h) of learning to attain the competence of Speaking 3: General Professional Proficiency in Speaking and Reading 3: General Professional Proficiency in Reading. This is in stark contrast with Category I which requires only 23–24 weeks (575–600 h) to attain the same level as that in European languages such as Danish, Dutch, French, and Italian (Effective Language Learning 2013). Thus, in terms of time required to reach the same level, Chinese demands about four times as much as most European languages. Note that this is for motivated adult learners. What more for schoolchildren who are required to but may and may not be motivated to learn Chinese?

Nonetheless, there seems to be no systematic empirical studies documenting specifically what makes Chinese language difficult, although there are many web-based commentaries of personal views and experiences on the problem. For example, Moser (2010), of the University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, lists nine reasons, including the different writing system as compared with alphabetic systems, difficulty in using the dictionary because of its complicated referencing system, and the language being tonal, *inter alia.* In response, Lewis (2014) commented that Moser based his speculation on only English and no other languages. Lewis also suggested that the difficulty in writing Chinese can be overcome by using the modern technology with the use of Hanyu Pinyin. And, for the need to remember a very large number of Chinese characters, Lewis suggested the use of memory mnemonics (actually, a language learning strategy) to create associations and thereby reduce memory load.

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A more balanced view is presented by Wagner (2014), Programme Editor for Dictionaries at the Oxford University Press. Wagner is of the view that learning Chinese is just like learning other languages where difficulty is concerned, at least for adult learners. Although there are more than 80,000 Chinese characters, only 3500 of these are in Standard Chinese, and 1000 of the most frequently used will enable reading of almost 90 % of publications in modern Chinese. As for the difficulty caused by the tone variations in Chinese, the problem arises from transferring uses in English to Chinese (e.g., raising English intonation at the end of a question) and paying attention to context should help (e.g., 我要水饺 *I want dumplings* compared with 我要睡觉 *I want to sleep*). And, it is said that the best part of learning Chinese lies with its grammar which is straightforward and similar to English in most cases but with no irregular verbs, no noun plurals, no gendered parts of speech, and no noun–verb agreement to remember. Similar views and recommendations are made by Bullock (2014).

In an undated commentary, Flynn (No date) pointed out that how hard a language is to learn only arises in the area of second languages and the difficulty is a function of the degree of difference between the first and second languages. For example, a native speaker of Spanish will find Portuguese, a closely related language, much easier to learn than a native speaker of, say, Chinese. The author further stresses the importance of motivation in that if people learn a language they need to use, they often learn it faster than people studying a language that has no direct use in their lives. Moreover, the writing system is not the only factor contributing to learning difficulty. Flynn cites a study by the British Foreign Office which found Hungarian (not Chinese !) most difficult to British diplomats because of its complex grammar, for instance, the 35 forms of a noun according to the contexts it is used.

In short, while Chinese language may need more time than many other languages to learn to a specific level of attainment, it is not necessarily the most difficult one, considering that there are many aspects of the linguistic and environmental factors that make it easy or difficult. However, it is of note that the cited commentaries have adult learners as the focus and the ideas thereof may and may not apply to young students in school, as research has shown that children and adults do not learn language in the same way (e.g., Cook 1995).

Linguists make a difference between language *acquisition* in natural home environment and language *learning* in contrived classroom situations (Krashen 1981). Where Chinese language students are concerned, those who grow up in an environment in which they are constantly exposed to the language *acquire* (in Krashen's sense) it as a *first language* (in the linguistic and *not* administrative sense as the terms are used in the Singapore context) are exposed to it practically all the time, so much so that they cannot help acquiring it. These students acquire the language as part of their daily living without the need for special teaching. In contrast, students who do not grow up in *that kind of* environment *learn* Chinese as a *second language* (although it may be their heritage language) need special help to compensate for the lack of constant and inescapable exposure to the language. In this regard, language learning strategies (LLS) may provide part of the answer to the question of how to learn a second or heritage language

effectively and efficiently. In view of the trend of increasing proportion of Singapore's schoolchildren who do not speak Chinese (Mandarin) at home, the use of LLS to help them learn Chinese more effectively is of no small significance.

Language Learning Strategies and Proficiency

LLS are defined as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques student use, often consciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language (Oxford 1990). LLS are also later more concisely defined as "specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning" (Oxford 2003: 8). Thus, LLS are tools for active self-directed and goal-oriented involvement for developing second-language ability, for instance, forming conversation patterns, labeling word groups, using gesture to communicate, breaking words down to their components, guessing word meanings when reading, etc. Effective second-language learners are found to consciously use LLS by which they motivate, manage, and monitor their own learning. They are able to describe the LLS they use and even explain the reasons for using them.

Strategy training or learner training is the effort to teach students in using LLS and such efforts have largely been found rewarding (Thompson and Rubin 1993), although not always so. Based on the success of LLS training, Oxford (No date) derived the following 10 principles of enhancing student learning:

1. Strategy training should be based clearly on students' attitudes, beliefs, and stated needs.
2. Strategies should be chosen so that they mesh with and support each other and so that they fit the requirements of the language task, the learners' goals, and the learners' style of learning.
3. Training should, if possible, be integrated into regular L2 activities over a long period of time rather than taught as a separate, short intervention.
4. Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes.
5. Strategy training should include explanations, handouts, activities, brainstorming, and materials for reference and home study.
6. Affective issues such as anxiety, motivation, beliefs, and interests – all of which influence strategy choice – should be directly addressed by strategy training.
7. Strategy training should be explicit, overt, and relevant and should provide plenty of practice with varied tasks involving authentic materials.
8. Strategy training should not be solely tied to the class at hand; it should provide strategies that are transferable to future language tasks beyond a given class.
9. Strategy training should be somewhat individualized, as different students prefer or need certain strategies for particular tasks.
10. Strategy training should provide students with a mechanism to evaluate their own progress and to evaluate the success of the training and the value of the strategies in multiple tasks.

These principles are of relevance to the teaching of Chinese learned as a "second language," considering the language background of the majority of students learning the language in the Singapore context. These principles stress the need to be explicit, integrative, and sustaining in training students in LLS and to ensure they are functionally engaged as part of the learning process. In short, teachers should not only teach students to learn the language but also teach them *how to learn it.* This implies that over and above the conventional notion of teaching four language skills ("skills/knowledge") in Chinese lessons, teachers need to teach students a *fifth language skill*, that is, LLS.

Summarizing earlier studies by various researchers, Oxford (2003: 10) concluded that more successful second-language learners have been found to use LLS more systematically with goal-directedness while, in contrast, less successful ones used them in a random, unconnected, and uncontrolled manner. Successful second-language learners were also found to be more able to reflect on and articulate their own language learning process. Moreover, explicit LLS instruction has been found to result in better learning outcomes for speaking and reading among ESL/EFL students.

LLS vary in nature: cognitive (e.g., translating, analyzing), metacognitive (e.g., planning, organizing), or social–affective (e.g., paying attention to social relationships and own feelings). Oxford (1990) summarized a host of factors associated with the use of LLS. Such factors include motivation, gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, types of task, age, learning styles, and tolerance for ambiguity. There have been several schemes classifying LLS before Oxford's (1990) synthesis. She first organized LLS into two broad groups and then six subgroups. In her classification, *direct strategies* include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies and *indirect strategies* include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Table 7.1 shows details of the strategies classified by Oxford.

Obviously, these strategies do not come by naturally to the second-language students, and they have to be explicitly trained, reminded to use, and guided in using them, with the aim of automaticity in language learning situations in and out of the language classroom. In other words, the students need be shown the LLS and encouraged to use them for effective language learning.

Understandably, most studies on LSS deal with the learning of English as a second language. Studies conducted in China, Taiwan, and the United States involved Chinese learners of English or non-Chinese learning Chinese language. There are rather few studies on the learning of Chinese as a second language by Chinese students, perhaps because there is no such need and doing it sound self-contradictory since Chinese students are supposed to learn it as a first language.

It appears that the study by Chien (2010) is a rare exception to this situation. The study conducted in Hong Kong where normally Chinese texts are taught in Cantonese (a Chinese *dialect*) focused on students learning to speak and read in Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese). The study involved 12-year-old Form 1 students from three secondary schools. *Strategies Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL; Oxford 1990) was translated into Chinese for collecting data. Of the 14 most

Table 7.1 Language learning strategies

Strategies	Sub-strategies	Specific strategies
Direct strategies	Memory strategies	Creating mental linkages
	Used by students to help them remember new language items	Applying images and sounds
		Reviewing well
		Employing action
	Cognitive strategies	Practicing
	Used to help students think about and understand new language	Receiving and sending messages
		Analyzing and reasoning
		Creating structure for input and output
	Compensation strategies	Guessing intelligently
	Used by students to help them compensate for lack of knowledge	Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing
Indirect strategies	Metacognitive strategies	Centering learning
	Use by students to think about their thinking process when learning new language	Arranging and planning learning
		Evaluating learning
	Affective strategies	Lowering anxiety
	Used to relate how students feel about the new language	Encouraging self
		Taking emotional temperature
	Social strategies	Asking questions
	Use by students which involve interaction with other people	Cooperating with others
		Empathizing with others

Source: Oxford (1990), cited in Chien (2010)

frequently used LLS, there are four metacognitive strategies, three affective strategies, three compensation strategies, two social strategies, one memory strategy, and one cognitive strategy.

In Singapore, Loh (2007) studied the use of LLS to learn Chinese by Primary 6 students in one school. Using an adapted version of Oxford's *Strategies Inventory for Language Learning*, the author compared the use of LLS to learn English and Chinese among the young students and observed that there were differences in LLS use between the languages. In a very real sense, these students were learning concurrently the two languages as second languages! It was found that LLS use depended heavily on teachers' instruction and not on individual student's ability and motivation. This underlines the important role of language teachers in training their students in LLS. Moreover, differences in the two language syllabuses had an influence on LLS use. This suggests that LLS need be specifically built into second-language syllabuses to ensure their use in language lessons as the *fifth* language skill.

Later, also in Singapore, Yeo (2011) reported a study on the use of LLS to learn Chinese and English of Secondary 1 students in two Special Assistance Plan Schools in Singapore; by the way, these schools admitted students who have done extremely well in the high-stake Primary School Leaving Examination and fell within the top 10 % of the cohort. The author interviewed 12 students, six who had Chinese as their home language and, in contrast, six had English as their home language. The author argued that the home language background of students (English language) could make learning of Chinese difficult and that LLS could be a contributing factor for overcoming the problems and thereby leading to better achievement. Specifically, it was found that most students used memory strategies of *placing new words into a context* and *using Hanyu Pinyin in memory*. This was attributed to the availability of dictionaries and vocabulary handbooks. It was also observed that the teachers might have a role to play in teaching the LLS.

In a later conference paper, Yeo et al. (2012) argued for a case to integrate LLS into the teaching of Chinese to students who have difficulty in their learning (the so-called Chinese Language B students) for whom the program emphasized the development of oral skills explicitly much more than reading and writing. It was argued that by using LLS, such students should be able to learn Chinese with greater ease and effectiveness and thereby develop their communication skills.

More recently, in the United Kingdom, Hu (2013) surveyed Chinese Language teachers and non-degree students in Sheffield on LLS use in the teaching and learning of the language. It was found that, in general, neither the teachers nor the students were consciously aware of LLS, although its use had been stressed in curriculum, language teaching and learning research literature. The author therefore suggests training in LLS for both teachers and students.

Teaching of LLS

The need for students to learn LLS implies that, in the first place, the language teachers need be familiar with the LLS, consciously and routinely use them in language lessons where specific LLS are relevant, and then go further to train and guide the students to do the same such that the LLS become second nature to them.

That this is so can be understood from a social psychological perspective, as the language classroom is an arena for intensive and purposeful social interaction between the teacher and her students. In the social context, the teacher and her students play complementary roles: when the teacher talks, the students need to listen, and when the teacher asks questions, the students need to answer them, etc. The teacher and her students can switch roles and the students can learn to talk and ask questions. In the same manner, the teachers can first demonstrate specific LLS for her students to emulate later, and by doing this, students are guided to build up their own LLS repertoire. For example, in the teaching of Chinese characters which are made up of two or more parts, the teacher may use the components approach (部件教学) and analyze the components and structure of Chinese characters

students are to learn. In fact, the estimate is that more than 85 % of Chinese characters are of this type. This approach is a strategy which the students can adopt so that they can use it subsequently when trying to learn some Chinese characters new to them. Asking for word meanings in English when learning Chinese (i.e., the bilingual approach) is another strategy.

In short, LLS need be demonstrated in the reality of Chinese Language classroom as a routinized part of teaching since students can benefit from learning the *fifth* language skill. To be able to do this, the Chinese Language teachers themselves need be familiar with the LLS and use them often enough in the lessons they teach. In doing so, LLS are transformed into language teaching strategies.

Objectives

It is not known to what extent the Chinese Language teachers in Singapore schools are familiar with the host of LLS such as those listed by Oxford (1990). It is also not known how often the Chinese Language teachers have used those which they are familiar with. The present survey, therefore, intends mainly to find answers to these two questions, the answers to which can be useful for planning training programmes to equip Chinese Language teachers with the capability of using as well as teaching them. Therefore, in the context of teaching Chinese Language, the present study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. How familiar are teachers about LLS?
2. How often have the teachers used the LLS?
3. Which of the LLS have the teachers found effective?
4. Are there other strategies the teachers used and found effective?
5. What tasks do the teachers see as most difficult for their students?

Method

Respondents

The respondents were Chinese Language teachers who attended professional training courses during the November end-year vacation 2014 at the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language.

As shown in Table 7.2, a total of 202 teachers (57 % Primary and 43 % Secondary) took part in the survey. Of both the Primary and Secondary groups, there is a female preponderance; this is a reflection of the population of Chinese language teachers in Singapore schools, although the proportions may not be exactly those of the

Table 7.2 The respondents' personal information

		Primary (N = 115) %	Secondary (N = 87) %
Gender	Male	13	15
	Female	87	85
Teaching experience	Mean years (SD)	10.4 (9.0)	6.9 (6.2)
Level of teaching	Primary 1–3	25	–
	Primary 4–6	75	–
	Secondary 1–2	–	39
	Secondary 3–4 or preuniversity	–	61
Nationality	Singapore citizens	72	70
	Permanent residents	24	13
	Chinese national	2	14
	Others	2	3
Professional training	Completed in Singapore	88	80
	Completed outside Singapore	12	20
	Yet to be completed	–	–

population. The Primary teachers have a longer year of teaching experience with a mean of 10.4 years (SD 9.0 years) when compared with the Secondary teachers with a mean of 6.9 years (SD 6.2 years).

In 2014, three-quarters of the Primary teachers taught mainly upper primary classes, whereas two-thirds of the Secondary teachers taught upper secondary or pre-university classes. Of the two groups, around 70 % were Singapore citizens. Besides, there are more permanent residents among the Primary group but more Chinese nationals among the Secondary group. All teachers completed their professional training and most of them did so in Singapore, more among the Primary teachers.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire lists 55 LLS adapted from Hsu (2012) who compiled the strategies with reference to Oxford (1990) and Schmitt (2000) for a master's thesis in Taiwan involving Chinese students learning English as a second language. There are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, social strategies, metacognitive strategy, and determination strategies (see Appendix for the list of LLS). When adapting the items for use in the present study, they were rephrased in the context of *teaching* in place of learning and presented in Chinese. An example of the rephrasing is shown below:

> Original student version: *I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in Chinese*.
> Adapted teacher version: 指出当前要学的字词和以前学过的字词之间的关系。*Point out the relationships between what is already learned and new words to be learned.*

For each LLS, the respondent was requested to indicate familiarity (or the lack of it) by choosing *Yes* or *No*. If familiar, the respondent was to indicate frequency of using the LLS by endorsing 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Occasionally*, 2 = *Frequently*, or 3 = *Regularly*. In addition to these closed-ended questions, the respondents were also asked to indicate which of those they have used to be *the most helpful to the students.* This is followed by a request to describe any other strategies they have used and found effective. And the respondents were also invited to indicate the students' most difficult tasks in learning Chinese language as they have observed. The questionnaire ends with questions asking for personal information related to gender, teaching experience, nationality, and professional preparation. The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the training course with a time limit of 20 min.

Analysis

Percentages were calculated for responses to questions on familiarity, uses, perceived effectiveness for the teaching strategies, and perceived student difficulties. While the percentage for familiarity was based on the total number of teachers in a group, the percentage for strategy use was based on the number of teachers in each group *who indicated familiarity with the LLS*. The differences between the Primary and Secondary teachers were evaluated via the chi-square test of association and a p-value of 0.05 was adopted in general (Preacher, 2001).

Results

Familiarity and Use

To evaluate familiarity and use, endorsement of 75 % was adopted as the cutoff. For the 202 respondents, the standard error of percentage is 0.21 %, and this allows for a rather small sampling error (fluctuation) such that the percentages can be trusted as reliable. A LLS which has obtained 75 % endorsement of *Yes* for familiarity was therefore taken to be of high familiarity, otherwise low familiarity. Likewise, a LLS which has 75 % endorsement of *Frequently* and *Regularly* combined was considered as of high use, otherwise low use. With the two criteria combined, each LSS was classified as falling into one of the following four categories:

1. HFHU: High familiarity, high use
2. HFLU: High familiarity, low use
3. LFHU: Low familiarity, high use
4. LFLU: Low familiarity, low use

As shown in Table 7.3 for Primary teachers, 75 % of the listed LLS met the criterion of familiarity, but for Secondary teachers, only 56 % of the LLS did. The chi-square's p-value of .071 indicates that the two groups did not differ in familiarity

Table 7.3 Familiarity and use of Primary and Secondary teachers

	Familiarity		Use	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
75 % or more	41 (75 %)	31 (56 %)	19 (35 %)	8 (15 %)
Below 75 %	14 (25 %)	24 (44 %)	36 (65 %)	47 (85 %)
Chi-square test	Yate's chi-square = 3.257 d.f. 1, p = .071		Yate's chi-square = 4.909 d.f. 1, p = .027	

when p < .05 is adopted as the criterion. At the same time, for Primary teachers, 35 % of the LLS met the criterion of Use, and for Secondary teachers, it is 15 %. The chi-square's p-value of .027 indicates that the two groups differed with statistical significance.

When the two groups were pooled, 63 % of the LLS met the criterion for familiarity but only 25 % did for use. This indicates that the teachers as a whole were familiar with two-thirds of the 55 listed LSS but they used only one-quarter of them frequently or regularly.

Strategy Types

It is also useful to see the familiarity and use of the 55 LLS in terms of strategy types. The patterns for Primary and Secondary teachers are shown in Table 7.4. As can be seen therein, generally, Primary teachers have more items in the high familiarity, high use category (31 %), and Secondary teachers have more items in the low familiarity, low use category (42 %), although the two groups are equal for high familiarity, low use items.

Of the five strategy types, Primary teachers have *higher* percentages for memory, metacognitive, and determination strategies, and Secondary teachers have *higher* percentages for metacognitive, determination, and social strategies. For the four strategy categories, the chi-square's p-value of 0.015 indicates that there is statistically significant group difference between Primary and Secondary teachers.

Perceived Effectiveness

The teachers were requested to indicate which of the 55 LLS they found effective for their students. The percentages were calculated using the numbers of mention as the base and the LLS were classified into four categories. Table 7.5 shows their responses in terms of categories and items. As shown in the last column of Table 7.5, of the 55 listed LLS, the teachers considered only four of moderate or high effectiveness, whereas the rest were considered as only of some effectiveness or even not at all. It is not known whether this pattern of response is based on actual experience or mere speculation, since the teachers showed low rate of LLS use.

Table 7.4 Patterns of familiarity and use by strategy types

	High familiarity, high use	High familiarity, low use	Low familiarity, high use	Low familiarity, low use
Primary				
Memory strategies (25)	9 (36)	13 (52)	0 (0)	3 (12)
Cognitive strategies (13)	3 (23)	3 (23)	1 (8)	6 (46)
Social strategies (6)	1 (17)	3 (50)	0 (0)	2 (33)
Metacognitive strategies (7)	2 (29)	4 (57)	0 (0)	1 (14)
Determination strategies (4)	2 (50)	1 (25)	0 (0)	1 (25)
Total	**17 (31 %)**	**24 (44 %)**	**1 (2 %)**	**3 (5 %)**
Secondary				
Memory strategies (25)	1 (4)	12 (48)	0 (0)	12 (48)
Cognitive strategies (13)	1 (8)	6 (46)	0 (0)	6 (46)
Social strategies (6)	1 (17)	3 (50)	0 (0)	2 (33)
Metacognitive strategies (7)	4 (57)	2 (29)	0 (0)	1 (14)
Determination strategies (4)	1 (25)	1 (25)	0 (0)	2 (50)
Total	**8 (15 %)**	**24 (44 %)**	**0 (0 %)**	**23 (42 %)**
Chi-square test	Yate's chi-square=5.939 d.f. 1 $p=0.015$			

Notes: Figures in parentheses are percentages of numbers of items in each strategy

Table 7.5 Perceived effectiveness

% of mentions	Primary (N=161)	Secondary (N=73)	Combined (N=234)
0 Noneffective	**5, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 22, 24, 27, 29, 33,** 36, **37, 40, 41, 43, 44, 50** [**17**/19 items]	1, 2, **5, 7,** 8, 10, 12, **13, 14, 15, 16,** 18, **20,** 21, **22,** 23, **24,** 25, **27,** 28, **29,** 30, **33,** 35, 36, **37, 40, 41, 43, 44,** 46, **50,** 52 [**17**/33 items]	1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 35, 36, 37, 40, 41, 43, 44, 50 [28 items]
1–5 Some effectiveness	1, 2, **3,** 4, **6,** 8, 10, **11,** 12, **17,** 18, **19,** 21, 23, 25, **26,** 28, 30, 31, **32, 34,** 35, **38, 42,** 46, **47, 48, 49,** 51, 52, **53, 54, 55** [**18**/33 items]	**3,** 4, **6, 11, 17, 19, 26, 32, 34, 38, 42, 47, 48, 49, 51, 53, 54, 55** [**18**/18 items]	3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 17, 19, 23, 25, 26, 32, 34, 38, 42, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55 [23 items]
6–10 Moderately effective	**39** (8 %) [1 item]	31 (8 %), **39** (8 %) [**1**/2 items]	31 (6 %), **39** (8 %) [2 items]
11 and above Highly effective	**9** (15 %), **45** (11 %) [**2**/2 items]	**9** (16 %), **45** (12 %) [**2**/2 items]	9 (15 %), 45 (11 %) [2 items]
Chi-square test	Yate's chi-square=6.164 d.f. 1 $p=0.013$		

Note: (1) Numbers in bold show items shared by Primary and Secondary teachers. (2) For chi-square calculation, the three higher effectiveness categories were combined and then compared with noneffective category to ensure sufficient cell frequencies for the former

At the same time, Primary teachers found 33 items of some effectiveness and Secondary teachers found only 18 items of some effectiveness. The two groups of teachers shared 18 such LLS. Moreover, there are three items which Primary teachers found moderately or highly effective and also four such items for Secondary teachers. The two groups shared three such items. The chi-square *p*-value of 0.013 confirms that the two groups have statistically significant different views of effectiveness.

When the responses of Primary and Secondary teachers were pooled, there are 28 items in the noneffective category, 23 items of some effectiveness, and four items of moderate or high effectiveness. The four LLS of moderate or high effectiveness are these:

1. Memory strategy: Link new words with the students' life experiences.
2. Cognitive strategy: Ask students to take notes during lessons.
3. Social strategy: Ask students the English equivalents of new words.
4. Metacognitive strategy: Use Chinese songs, films, and news in lessons.

Additional Strategies

The teachers were also requested to name strategies they used and found effective but not in the list of 55 LLS. Primary teachers made 19 responses. Of these, six have to do with dramatization or role-play, three have to do with ICT, two mention mind-mapping, and two reported group activities. The remaining six are single miscellaneous responses. Secondary teachers made 18 responses. Of these, four have to do with games, three have to do with ICT, three mention application activities, and two are about dictation. The remaining six are single miscellaneous responses.

With these limited responses and the nature of the "other strategies," it may be safe to conclude that the 55 LLS used in the survey questionnaire are reasonably exhaustive.

Students' Learning Difficulties

Teachers were asked to name their students' learning difficulties which were found most challenging. Primary teachers made 79 written responses and Secondary teachers 51. The written responses were classified into nine categories as shown in Table 7.6, with sample responses.

As Table 7.6 shows, according to Primary teachers' responses, memory is the most severe problem because students could not remember what they have learned. Next in difficulty is written expression in terms of sentence structures and choice of words. The third most severe difficulty lies with the writing of Chinese characters and linking between words and word meanings. Interestingly, there is no mention

Table 7.6 Students' learning difficulties

	Sample response	Primary (N=79)	Secondary (N=51)	Total (N=130)
Speaking	*Seldom have Mandarin conversation. Students have no Mandarin-speaking environment*	3 (9)	0 (9)	2 (9)
Reading	*Seldom read in Chinese. Difficulty in reading comprehension. Little reading of Chinese outside the class*	6 (8)	6 (6)	6 (8)
Vocabulary	*Limited vocabulary. Attend to pronunciations and not meanings. Mixing up characters that look alike. Word recognition and understanding of meanings*	11 (5)	24 (2)	16 (2)
Memory	*High forgetting rate. Forgetting words they have learned. Difficulty in remembering low-frequency characters*	22 (1)	31 (1)	25 (1)
Writing	*Serious problem of wrong strokes. Difficulty in linking pronunciations with characters. Difficulty in reconstruction of sentences from scrambled words. Do not understand the structure of Chinese characters*	14 (3)	4 (8)	10 (5)
Written expression	*Difficulty in writing complete sentences. Grammatical errors. Difficulty in using words correctly and wring correct sentences*	15 (2)	8 (5)	12 (3)
Application	*No chance to apply what they have learned. No environment to apply. Low frequency of using*	8 (7)	12 (3)	9 (6)
Background	*Mixing up Chinese and English. Foreign students. Lack cultural background and find related texts difficult*	9 (6)	4 (8)	7 (7)
Attitude	*Lack of interest. Lack of confidence. Learn for examination and lose interest. Do not value Chinese language; not required for university admission*	13 (4)	12 (3)	12 (3)

Note: (1) Figures in parentheses are rank orders. (2) Spearman's rank difference correlation between Primary and Secondary is $\rho=0.52$

of difficulty with listening, suggesting that this is not a problem at all among the primary students.

As seen by Secondary teachers, memory is also the most severe problem. This is followed by difficulty in vocabulary (this is ranked fifth by Primary teachers). In the third place of difficulty are application (which is ranked seventh by Primary teachers) and student attitude.

When the responses of Primary and Secondary teachers were pooled, the three most severe difficulties are memory, vocabulary, and written expression. Note that the Spearman's rank difference correlation between the two groups' responses is

only a moderate 0.52. This indicates that Primary and Secondary teachers tend to face different difficulties in their teaching. This could well be due to the different expectations for and learning needs of students at the Primary and Secondary levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Before a discussion on the implications of the findings, the survey results are summarized as follows:

1. Generally, the Chinese language teachers are (or so they claimed) familiar with most of the 55 listed LLS. However, they have not been using them extensively; this is especially so among Secondary teachers.
2. For Primary and Secondary teachers combined, there are only four LLS which they considered as of moderate effectiveness or better. They considered 23 LLS as of only some effectiveness and the remaining 28 LLS as being noneffective.
3. The teachers mentioned very few additional strategies which they have tried and found effective.
4. When combined, the Primary and Secondary teachers mention memory, vocabulary, and written expression as the top three difficulties of the students in learning Chinese.

In view of the patterns of familiarity and use, the results have implications for training the teachers in the use of LLS to enhance their lessons and thereby raise the students' achievement in learning Chinese.

Since the teachers claim to be reasonably familiar with the LLS but under-utilizing them, there is a need to conduct workshops to (1) encourage teachers to use more frequently the LSS with which they are familiar as and when suited to the learning tasks and (2) train the teachers in those LLS that they are not yet familiar. This is especially needed for teachers teaching in secondary schools. For the training to be effective, it needs to focus on where the deficits are found, that is, cognitive strategies and social strategies for Primary teachers and memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and determination strategies for Secondary teachers. Moreover, for greater relevance to the students' learning needs and hence the teachers' instructional needs, the training has to emphasize the application to areas where difficulties are perceived by the teachers, namely, memory, written expression, and writing for Primary teachers and memory, vocabulary, and written expression for Secondary teachers. In addition, the use of dramatization, ICT, mind-mapping, language games, and even dictation may be introduced as LLS in addition to the listed LLS, as these were mentioned by some teachers who have used them and found them effective.

Besides practical implications for training, three points of conceptual as well as practical significance need be discussed.

It is not known why the teachers have not used the LLS more frequently than desirous although they claim familiarity. Two possible reasons are hazarded here. Firstly, they might not know that the effectiveness of LLS has been evidenced by research, since reading research literature is not a normal part of the teachers' professional activity. Secondly, they feel the urge to cover the syllabus and textbooks (*running from cover to cover*, so to speak) within the limited time and therefore tend to adopt a teacher-centered approach, with little time for teaching anything else but the text and doing this by telling. They might think teaching LLS is extraneous to their normal teaching and can therefore be seen as a waste of the already limited instructional time. This is especially so among Secondary teachers as reflected in their much lower use of LLS.

The finding that not many *additional* strategies have been mentioned in response to the open-ended question suggests two things. First, the list of 55 LLS is exhaustive enough to cover almost all strategies known to the teachers. Second, as alluded to above, the teachers have to rush through the syllabus and textbooks, leaving them with neither mind nor time for more innovative and effective instruction such as using the LLS so that the students *learn how to learn.*

It is noteworthy that both memory and written expression are at the top of the list of student difficulties as perceived by both the Primary and Secondary teachers. In addition, Primary teachers find writing (of Chinese characters) and Secondary teachers find vocabulary difficulties of their students. That memory is a learning problem obviously has to do with the Chinese writing system being logographic and therefore posing much greater demand on memory and learning. It is an oft-heard discontentment that, when compared with other subjects in the school curriculum, Chinese requires disproportionate time to learn and yet so difficult to score.

Generally, Chinese characters are relatively isolated from one another with little cues to pronunciation and meaning, and combinations of Chinese characters may take on other unrelated meanings making memory even more challenging. For instance, *east* (东) and *west* (西) when combined means *things* (东西). At times, the same two Chinese characters when placed in different sequences have different meanings, for instance, 痛心 (sad) and 心痛 (heartache) and 感情 (Affection) and 情感 (Emotion). Moreover, for some Chinese characters, even a change in the position or shape of a stroke or an addition of one stroke results in different characters and meanings, for example, 大 (big), 太 (overly), 犬 (dog), and 尤 (especially, or used as a surname). Such a writing system is really a great challenge to both the teacher and students.

That written expression is a top difficulty is also understandable, since memory for Chinese characters is already identified as a problem discussed above. At a lower level, difficulty in written expression could mean students having problems writing grammatically acceptable sentences without the interference (negative transfer) of English. This, as research on interlanguage has shown, is inevitable when learning two languages concurrently and may even a necessary transitional stage to effective bilingualism.

Added to this, at a higher level, is the Chinese tradition of respect for literary works (*wenxue zuopin* 文学作品). Chinese Language teachers may consciously or

subconsciously value and therefore encourage students' compositions of some literary quality and devalue compositions of factual knowledge or information. In fact, it has been a tradition and common practice of Chinese Language teachers to select students' works of perceived literary quality for school and media publications. In addition, it is a traditional Chinese belief that writings are carriers of moral values (*wen yi zai dao*, 文以载道). Thus, students, especially those in the Secondary schools, may be asked to write essays on moral themes for which they have neither the moral maturity nor the needed concepts and vocabulary. This naturally makes written expression a problem. As for the vocabulary problem of Secondary students, this could well show up in their written expression with limited choices of words, perhaps as a result of limiting the learning of Chinese language to the prescribed textbooks and little reading beyond these.

Admittedly, these are more deep-rooted problems of teaching Chinese in Singapore schools and require long-term and concerted efforts to solve, although they may be partially minimized through training courses and workshops to equip teachers with memory strategies and re-orientation with regard to the goal of learning Chinese in the Singapore context.

In conclusion, although Chinese language may not be the *most* difficult language to learn, it is definitely among the difficult languages of the world. Its difficulty is mainly attributable to the writing system and, added to this in the Singapore context, the limited language instructional time and lack of opportunity of practice and application. The fact that English is easier to learn may cause the young students (and, perhaps, their parents, too) to exaggerate the difficulty of Chinese language.

Since learning the two languages is a given condition, there is the need for Singapore to train Chinese Language teachers in the use of LLS which research has found helpful in the learning of second languages so that the students can emulate them and learn Chinese language with greater ease and better attainment and, hopefully, greater joy and deeper appreciation as well. In this regard, the findings of the present study provide useful specific information for identifying areas of needs where strategies for learning and teaching of Chinese are concerned.

Admittedly, in view of the well-known difficulty of learning and hence teaching of Chinese language, in Singapore and other countries, the findings of the present study may look common-sensical. However, the findings provide empirical evidence for what has been commonly believed and suggest some solutions to the problems, partially at least.

As the data are derived from surveying Primary and Secondary teachers, it may be tinted by their personal experiences and expectations and may not totally reflect the reality. This means the findings need be interpreted with due caution against possible response bias such as acquiescence – the tendency to agree. On the other hand, there is also no reason to suspect the teachers consciously fake as they have no motivation to do so, since the completion of the questionnaire is anonymous.

It is recognized that much of the listed LSS are found to be helpful to learners of English but may and may not be equally effective to help in the learning of Chinese in view of the differences between the two languages which Singapore students are learning concurrently. However, many of the LLS are also cognitive or psychological

in nature and not language-specific. There is, therefore, a value in researching into the LLS (the listed 55 and those suggested by Chinese Language teachers) to identify those that are particularly useful to young learners of Chinese language in the school context, taking into consideration that Chinese learners are increasingly diversified here in Singapore schools in terms of ability and home background.

Appendix

Language learning strategies

Memory strategies
1. Point out the relationships between what is already learned and new words to be learned 指出当前要学的字词和以前学过的字词之间的关系。
2. Imbed new words in sentences for presentation 把生字新词容纳在句子中提出。
3. Link the pronunciations of new words with relevant images 联系生字新词的读音和有关的图像
4. Ask students to imagine relevant situations for the new words 要学生想象可以用生字新词的情境。
5. Help students learn new words through rhymes 利用押韵的字词帮助生字新词的学习。
6. Present new words by using flashcards 利用字卡(闪烁片)提出生字新词
7. Use actions to present the meanings of new words 用动作表达生字新词的意思。
8. Point out the locations of new words in the texts 指出生字新词在课文中的位置。
9. Link new words with the students' life experiences 联系生字新词和学生的生活经验。
10. Organize new words into groups for learning 把生字新词分成几组,让学生学习。
11. String new words into story lines to help students remember 把生字新词串连成故事情节去帮学生记忆。
12. Analyze the components of new Chinese characters 分析单字的部件结构。
13. Analyze the pronunciation components of Chinese characters 分析单字的读音组成。
14. Ask students to read aloud the new Chinese characters 要学生大声读出字音。
15. Ask students to imagine the new Chinese characters 要学生闭目想象字形。

16. Present new words in Chinese idioms
用成语提出生字新词。

17. Ask students to imagine situations relevant to word meanings.
要学生用字义想象情境。

18. Ask students to write synonyms and antonyms
要学生写下同义词或反义词。

19. Ask students to repeat the pronunciations of new words
要学生重复念出生字的读音。

20. Ask students to classify words into groups (e.g., animals, etc.)
要学生把生字新词归类(例如动物、用具、蔬菜等)。

21. Ask students to think of Chinese characters of similar sounds
要学生联想已经学过的同音字。

22. Ask students to imagine new characters being learning
要学生想象当前所学的生字。

23. As students to break new Chinese characters into components and to think of relevant situations
要学生把生字的部件分解,并且用它们去联想有关的情境。

24. Teach words with same meanings together
把同义字词合起来教。

25. Teach Chinese characters of same radicals together
把有相同部首或偏旁的字合起来教。

Cognitive strategies

26. Revise new words with students regularly
和学生经常复习生字新词。

27. Present word lists for students to learn
用生字表和词汇表提出,要学生学习。

28. Ask students to read aloud new words repeatedly
要学生重复念出生字新词。

29. Ask students to write new words repeatedly
要学生重复写出生字新词

30. Let students learn new words by using word lists
要学生用生字表学习。

31. Ask students to take notes during lessons
要学生在上课时做笔记。

32. Use the *Vocabulary* in the texts to teach word meanings
用课文中的词语解释教学生字新词。

33. Use audio-recording to teach new words
用录音带帮助生字新词的教学。

34. Ask students to compile own word lists as personal records of learning
要学生设立自己的词汇表,记录新学的生字新词。

35. Ask students to label objects to help in learning new words
要学生把字词写成标签,贴在有关的物件上。

36. Ask students to copy word meanings found in dictionary
要学生记下生字新词在字典中的所在。

37. Ask students to copy examples of word meanings given in dictionary
要学生写下字典中解释生字新词的例子。

38. Ask students to make own flashcards and carry them
要学生自制生字新词的卡片,随身带着。

Social strategies

39. Ask students the English equivalents of new words
问学生生字新词的英文翻译。

40. Ask students for words with similar meanings
问学生意思相同的单字或词语。

41. Ask students for the meanings of new words
问学生字词的解释。

42. Let students learn new words through group activities
让学生在小组活动中学习生字新词。

43. Arrange for students to interact with people who speak good Mandarin
安排学生跟讲纯正华语的人交谈。

44. Arrange for students to interact with Mandarin-speaking people, though not necessarily good in it
安排学生跟讲华语但不一定纯正的人交谈。

Metacognitive strategies

45. Use Chinese songs, films, and news in lessons
在教学时利用华语歌曲、影片、新闻等。

46. Guide students to regularly revise words they have learned
带学生时时复习学过的字词。

47. Arrange for students to read Chinese newspapers and magazines
安排学生阅读华文报纸和刊物。

48. Arrange for students to read books other than textbooks
安排学生于都课外书籍。

49. Use various methods to ensure students understand the meanings of new words
用不同的方法确保学生了解生字新词的意思。

50. Focus teaching only on new words which will be assessed
集中能力只教和考试有关的生字新词。

51. Help students to regularly revise new words taught
帮助学生定期复习教过的生字新词

Determination strategies

52. Adopt the components approach to teach Chinese characters
利用部件教学。

53. Guide students to guess word meanings from different parts of texts
引导学生根据前后文推测字义。

54. Ask students to make use of bilingual dictionary
要学生利用双语词典。

55. Ask students to use single-language Chinese dictionary
要学生利用华语词典。

Note: Adapted from Hsu (2012)

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