

**The Reflective Learner:  
Chinese International Students' Use of Strategies to  
Enhance University Study**

by

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**Abstract**

Many international students in New Zealand universities have gained eligibility for enrolment through educational achievements in their country of origin and an IELTS result no higher than Band 6. For those who come from a very different academic tradition, these criteria do not necessarily indicate an immediate readiness to understand and adopt the learning practices which will lead to success in a New Zealand university, and therefore the use of learning strategies to overcome the limitations of their resources can be a vital element in their achievement in the new educational setting. This paper draws on findings from a longitudinal study of Chinese international students in their first semesters of study to describe the development of some key strategies in response to their growing understanding of the demands placed on them and/or their developing L2 resource, thus enabling them to better meet the expectations of the New Zealand academic staff.

## **The Situation and the Study**

Student populations in New Zealand universities have changed in many ways over recent years, not least as a result of the number of Chinese international students enrolling for undergraduate degrees. Students of Chinese ethnicity are not completely new to such 'western' institutions of higher learning, and have long had a reputation for diligence and academic success, and indeed many students continue to manifest those qualities. However, it has become clear in the last few years that some of the current diaspora have experienced difficulty in adjusting to the new academic environment and universities often lack spaces in which new understandings can be negotiated for these students, as much recent writing attests (for example, Benesch, 1999; Morita, 2004; Ridley, 2004; Zamel & Spack, 2004).

More information about the expectations these students arrive with and the processes by which they learn, or perhaps don't learn, to adjust to their new context of study and living is needed. Accordingly, in early 2004 I began a longitudinal study of a group of 12 Chinese international students who were beginning study of business or information technology at a New Zealand university. The longitudinal perspective using semi-structured interviews was chosen as a way of obtaining the students' own interpretations of the processes they were going through, and the incidents, experiences and realisations that were informing changes in their learning practices. The students were interviewed three times in their first semester of study, and half of them returned after completion of their second semester for a fourth interview. The investigation was developed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 1998), offering opportunities for the students themselves to reveal what was important for them through the use of fairly open questions, and from that locating themes of interest, firmly grounded in the data, which became the subject of further questions.

The study was not designed specifically as an investigation of the use of learning strategies in the sense, for example, of Gao's study of language learning strategies among Chinese students studying in a UK university (Gao, 2003), and so has not attempted any exhaustive categorisation and investigation of the strategies used, but it was inevitable that learning strategies would emerge as participants described how they were going about their study. Learning strategies are the measures that learners take to enhance their learning, 'operations performed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information' (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986, p. 315). There is an extensive literature on the strategies that second language learners take to improve their learning of their target language (Chamot, 2001; Gao, 2003; Griffiths, 2004; Macaro, 2001; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 2001), but less that investigates the underlying influences on the changes (Gao, 2003), or is focused on their development of strategies to enhance their use of L2 as a learning resource, though aspects of this development may be included in discussion of more general issues (e.g. Kutz, 2004; McKnight, 2004; Spack, 2004).

Before I began the study I also conducted an exploratory interview with a teacher in the business college, where most of the students were studying, to get a sense of the situation from another perspective. At the time, numbers of Chinese students in business papers had been burgeoning and there had been discussion in the media of some difficulties being experienced as a result. My respondent, however, did not feel

that numbers were in themselves a problem: ‘The question is not how many, the question is the quality. What is the quality of these students?’ Asked how he defined ‘quality’, he replied, ‘Quality is about their ability to benefit from what I am trying to do’ (interview with business lecturer, November 2003).

This response provides a useful framework for the picture of learning strategy development which forms the main part of this paper. We can see the process in terms of students recognising the limitations of their ability to benefit fully from learning delivered in the way that the university was designed to deliver it, and seeking ways to build their own ‘quality’ as university students in the New Zealand setting.

## **Use of Learning Strategies**

The participants in this study revealed metacognitive abilities in reflecting on their learning processes, often with considerable insight. Of course, it could be argued that this was purely a product of the interview process itself. That was not, however, the sense that I had as questioner, as these reports were very often in response to relatively undirected invitations to talk such as ‘What are some of the good things that have happened to you this semester?’ rather than a direct probing of their strategies. In fact, where there were particular breakthroughs the participants felt they had made (as in the case of Mike’s account of his preview reading below) they seemed almost impatient to tell me about them. Evident, too, in some of these examples is the fact that they could actually identify the moment of the metacognitive experiences which brought about the new realisations, what Garner refers to as ‘awarenesses, realisations, “ahas” ...’ (Garner in White, 2003) – though in Mike’s case, they tended rather to be “ohs”. These were certainly independent of the interview process.

Some of the themes revealed in studies of second language learning strategies are echoed here. For example, it was clear that effective learners were characterised by their ability to assess their task in the new context and adjust to its demands: their strategy use was dynamic (Chamot, 2001; Gao, 2003). It was longitudinally constructed over the period of the study in response in some cases to a growing English language resource which opened new possibilities to them, but, equally importantly, in others to a clearer understanding of the learning practices and discourse norms of their new situation, of how to benefit from what the university teachers were trying to do. The purpose of these adjustments were to optimise learning and to engage with meaning, and finding the means to achieve this produced a clear sense of agency and self-efficacy, an ability for the students to maintain their motivation for the demands of their task (Bandura cited in Oxford, 2001, p. 166)

In a brief paper, though, there is insufficient space to demonstrate all my evidence for making these claims. Faced with the difficulty of deciding which glimpses might best illustrate the point, the selected focus was on the special privilege that a longitudinal study gives in revealing the refinement of practices over a period of time, ‘quality-building’ in response to daily encounters with the difficulties to be overcome, what Lave and Wenger call the ‘dilemma-driven’ nature of learning activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). I have chosen to illustrate the process of strategies under construction in areas which seemed significant to the participants: reading, seeking help from lecturers outside class time, and the use of L1 and L2.

# Learning To Read For the University

## *1. Planning To Preview*

It was clear that the English language centres where most of the participants had previously studied had done their bit. In the initial interview, six of the students made explicit mention of their intention to prepare for their lectures by reading in advance. This seemed a promising strategy in view of the risk involved in relying on limited aural skills for a fifty-minute lecture. One of them, Mike, who was interviewed in the second week of the semester, said he had already found it very useful:

Before the lecture when I read the books and see the WebCT and then the tutor say anything I know. Because I read the books, textbooks. And I think it's not difficult. (Mike, 1<sup>1</sup>)

Mike's early optimism soon faded, though, and when he returned during the mid-semester study break, he, like five of the others, indicated that preview reading hadn't been so easy to put into practice as they had supposed. There seemed to be more than one reason for this.

Mike's difficulty was simply that he did not continue to see value in it:

No idea about what I should do and even I do that I still no idea. 'Oh, why I do that? and what I do?' ... and waste time, and open the book and for few ideas I just read little page. (Mike, 2)

His problem was, he said, that he had just read generally 'because at that time I have no idea of what is the test', and he had obviously not been able to extract sufficient meaning from the text to allow him to see the connections with the lecture materials that would make the process worthwhile. However, in the absence of that expected source of help, the lectures were incomprehensible to him:

From the first few weeks of study I have no idea. I haven't read the book and I just attend the lecture and then listen and no... [indicates no comprehension]. At home I have no read the books. (Mike, 2)

However, in Week Four, one of his courses had a test, which brought about for Mike an epiphany as far as study skills were concerned:

And nearly the test, before the test a week I read the books and I saw the notes and some materials. I found I know how to study. (Mike, 2)

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<sup>1</sup> All names used are pseudonyms. Numbers after the names refer to the interview from which the quotation is taken. 1 refers to the first interview, at the beginning of the semester, 2 to the second held during the study break after 6 weeks of study, 3 to the third held around the examination period and 4 to the fourth interview conducted on completion of the second semester of study.

I borrow my friend's last year's test, I saw that and, oh! This question relates to the textbook and my notes and I should read my notes and text carefully with the lecture notes. (Mike, 2)

Mike's experience would seem to validate pleas for explicit attention from university teachers to the discourses of academic disciplines (for example, Ridley, 2004; Zamel, 2004). The test paper, supplied by a previous student, rather than as part of the course itself, gave insight into this discourse by showing him the kind of questions that might be asked in the test and allowing him to imagine himself as the answerer of those questions. With this insight, he could begin to see what meaning might be extracted from his textbooks with a reading that was more careful and less 'general', and how that meaning did connect with the other teaching materials that made up the course. This proved an immediately successful strategy for him. In the first instance, he passed the test, but also, the cognitive strategy of reading more carefully allowed him to adopt once more the metacognitive strategy of preview reading to prepare for lectures which he had earlier abandoned, and he found he was able to understand the lectures after that point.

However, Mike's lessons in reading were not yet complete. At the end of the semester he failed this course. This led him to realise there was another step he needed to take: 'I realise when I read the text or books I think [if] I understand, I can remember, so I just general read the books and then actually I can't remember' (Mike, 3). As well as reading for understanding, he needed to be able to commit what he understood to memory in some way so that it was available for him at the time of the exam.

What is interesting about Mike's progress towards becoming a more and more competent reader for the university is that no doubt the teachers at his English language centre had worked on a range of reading strategies and introduced him to the idea of reading texts appropriately for their purpose. However, it was the imminence of the test which made that learning real for him. On the other hand, I am not sure whether the final step is one that current practice in general English courses, which is what he and most of the other participants had chosen, would lead him to. I shall return to this point later. Suffice it to say here that Mike certainly increased his 'quality' as a student through this process, but it was at considerable personal cost on various levels.

The other thing that is interesting in this development is that for Mike the source of his new knowledge of how to study clearly lay in a new realisation about what the task was and how the teaching materials linked, rather than in any important increase in his level of English.

## *2. Time Issues and Reading*

As mentioned above, there was more than one reason given by participants for failing to put into practice their plans for preview reading, and the other important one was time:

I know it is really important but I really don't have time. I just go to the lecture and after that do the reading about the first part he has taught. I don't have time to do the pre-reading. (Lai, 2)

Time pressure prevented the uptake of this and other strategies that were potentially helpful (such as consulting learning support services). Apart from the general time pressure the students experienced in trying to keep up with assignments, reading was itself a time-consuming activity. It would seem that the students' level of English was particularly germane in this case, in dictating what sort of strategies were available to them.

For example, Connor's English was assessed at IELTS band 5.5. Like Mike and several others in the study, he had gained entry to the university at that level under a since discontinued arrangement for students with a completed Diploma in Business from China. Within the spectrum that any IELTS band can contain, my observation was that certainly orally and aurally he was at a lower level than most of the other students. He several times misunderstood questions I asked, for example. Connor describes the reading strategy he had felt constrained to adopt in order to make sense of the texts he had to get through. It was a three-stage process. The first reading was very much a bottom-up approach:

First time I should find some words which I don't understand, and try to clearly what's the meaning, because sometimes word have a lot of meaning, I don't know what meaning is good, fit for the principle. Write some notes in the textbook. (Connor, 3)

The notes he wrote then allowed him to read a second time with more understanding, but still without a full grasp of the meaning:

I thought about it, but sometimes, I just know ... I know something but I hard to describe it and explain and write the whole thing, essay, for explain the question or problem. (Connor, 3)

So one more reading was called for to allow him fully to integrate the meaning into new understanding for himself:

But in the third time maybe faster, reading is faster, because I have done it twice, so ... also I should write down something and make some notes by myself. (Connor, 3)

Various observations are called for in respect to this account, the first being the determination to attain understanding in spite of difficulties, which gives the lie to the assumption made by many 'western' teachers that Chinese learners are content with surface strategies and rote learning approaches (Biggs, 1996). The second is that Connor's description helps us account for the great concern for time management which participants reported. The third is that this account calls to mind the point that Macaro makes in his survey of recent research into reading in a second language, citing Kember & Gow (1994), that where there is too great a discrepancy between the complexity and lexical weighting of the text and the level of second language knowledge, one of the strategies that readers will resort to is heavy dependence on

bottom-up processing (Macaro, 2003, pp. 130-1)). We might wish to be critical of Connor for rejecting advice which no doubt many teachers had given him not to concern himself with understanding every word in the text, but his quest for understanding could not be achieved in any other way. Macaro (p. 65) cites Laufer (1989) to the effect that for reading beyond gist level in the second language, readers will need to know at least 95% of tokens. This seems to have been beyond Connor. Connor at least persisted with his reading. Another of the students rejected reading textbooks as 'useless' preferring to solve problems by a quick phone call to a friend.

We can, however, contrast Connor's strategy with that being used in Semester Two by Gemma, the participant with the highest level of English (6.5 on arrival in New Zealand, 18 months before enrolment at the university):

Gemma: What I did was just, you know, tried to read the whole thing through without any hesitation, and then you know, just highlight the words that I didn't know and go back.

Interviewer: So you haven't interrupted the first reading?

Gemma: Yeah, you know, if I, you know, did that I find it's really hard for me to get the whole information, you know. (Gemma, 4)

Her approach was to use the opposite sequence to Connor, but one could surmise that this strategy, which we might be more inclined to applaud and recognise as 'quality', may also be longitudinally constructed, and become available only as English level allows it.

## **Getting Help from Teachers outside Class Time**

An important learning strategy for the more extrovert of the participants took the form of approaching teachers during their 'office hours' and eliciting help to explain points that puzzled, technical vocabulary, and so on. Less vocal participants avoided this strategy, professing concern about their language use, whether their questions would be appropriate, and hence what they might inadvertently reveal to their teachers about their 'poor' English. For those who did make this contact, it seemed to serve a purpose beyond merely eliciting information; it helped them to resist the invisibility imposed by the very large first year classes and thereby assist their transition from the supportive and accessible relationships they had enjoyed with their previous teachers in New Zealand language centres and Polytechnics. It is, however, a strategy that teachers within this university have indicated they perceive to be overused by Chinese students.

Although participants had reported that consultation with teachers outside class was a frequent learning strategy in China, it was one they had to re-examine in the new setting. May presents an interesting picture of a student working out and building up the skill to turn this source of help to her own advantage, using it as a key strategy until she no longer needed it. In her first interview at the end of the first week of the semester, she reported on a conversation with her friends on an appropriate approach to a tutor, investigating what was, in Bourdieu's terms, a legitimate way of speaking (Bourdieu, 1991).

One time my friend tell me, 'You can't just ask the stupid question'. I think, what's stupid? I don't understand and I can't find in the dictionary. That's a good question, not a stupid, and she said, 'If you go to that course, and you ask the tutor like that, your tutor will say, "You can't ask me that stupid question."' I say, 'Is it? I try.' ... I don't know and I can't find on the study guide and that course haven't a textbook. I can't find in the dictionary. I said, 'I must need to ask. If I don't understand what can I do?' (May, 1)

It is significant that even at this early stage she did not see it as a strategy to be called on as the first line of defence, but that there was a student obligation to seek her own understanding first.

One of the values often associated with learning in higher education is an engagement with ideas, an investigation of content, an unwillingness simply to accept and rote learn, and the importance that May attached to arriving at her own understanding of the learning material in relation to this strategy forged a degree of tolerance for the questions she asked and the time she demanded:

I remember last time I asked [a teacher] for half hour, just one question. I said, 'No, I don't understand.' She said, 'Like that, like that.' I said, 'No, I still can't understand,' and she said, 'OK, maybe the other example, and do that.' (May, 2)

By the end of the semester, May was obviously a familiar figure:

If I have problem, I just go and say, 'I want to ask you something,' and she always tell me, 'You can ask on the web.' I say, 'No, I don't know how I can ask very properly what I want to ask, and if you answer me maybe I not sure what you talking about, so I think I go face-to-face and you can solve me every problem,' ... so the tutor they know me because when I go, I knock the door, they say, 'Oh it's you, too.' I say, 'Yes, it's me.' (May, 3)

At this point, however, while May still believes fervently in her right to demand clarity, we might interpret the teacher's suggestion that she use the online discussion forum for her question as an indication that her extensive use of this strategy has come into conflict with another value of university learning, the concept of the autonomous student who is able to solve academic problems without undue reliance on the teacher.

When May returned for a further interview at the end of her second semester, a major change had occurred:

I go to ask the tutor just two times, and they just give the answers not very properly and they just to say, 'I just can tell you this, and otherwise you find by yourself'. So I try to do more on the internet to find the information, to find the solution, how to do it, and go to the library to find the books, how to do it, yeah. (May, 4)

In the first semester she had insisted on her right as a student to extract answers from the teachers, even at the risk of being accused of ‘stupid questions’, and had been unable to find answers in the course materials and the other source that suggested itself to her, the dictionary. By the end of the year she was ready to accept the responsibility they demanded of her and seek more widely for her own answers, appropriating practices more aligned with university norms, becoming a ‘quality’ student.

## Choosing Between L1 And L2

The final area of strategising that space will allow me to examine here, that of choices made around the use of the first or the second language to facilitate learning, appears to depend once again on the students’ level of English. The participants reported it as a matter of very conscious choice, choice based on providing the most efficient learning practices available in view of whatever their current L2 resource was. It is perhaps far less amenable to any kind of external influence through strategy education than the others mentioned here, but nevertheless will be of interest to second language teachers as a glimpse into the use of the language resource.

Initially it seems that participants found it at least prudent, and very likely essential, to use L1 to fill gaps left by L2 deficiencies. It allowed them to elaborate their understanding of new concepts, given that their thinking in Chinese was better than their thinking in English:

We sometimes talk to the concepts, use Chinese, because use Chinese I have idea what is it and I relate to English, oh! and I read the questions and I know what they are talking. (Mike, 2)

It was also predictably more effective for remembering given the limitations of the memory in L2: ‘But I didn’t use the English to remember. I use the Chinese, because that is my first language or something like that, is easy for me.’ (May, 3)

For that part of the learning that was about understanding the world in new ways, this appears to have been an effective strategy. It facilitated for May the calculations that were required in one of her courses, for example. However, in view of the comment above on the importance of discourse learning and the fact that assessment generally required the students to write in L2, it was a strategy that held some risk. Mike had been made aware of this the next time he was interviewed:

But my friends told me it’s not a good way because we think in Chinese and sometimes Chinese cannot directly translate to English, so when we direct translate it’s maybe wrong, or other people can’t understand. (Mike, 3)

Learning fully in L2 was not a possibility for the majority of these students during Semester One, but there was some sense of transition occurring to greater use of English. May expressed a need to have the concepts in both languages in order to feel she fully and reliably knew them:

And this time I come back to China, I will buy heaps books ... I know if read the Chinese is easy for me to understand that, and then read the English that will be easier ... now I know English, yeah, I know, but I don't know how to translate for Chinese. Maybe I found I bought one Chinese one and read together to look, so I can know English and I can know Chinese, I can both them to improve. (May, 3)

Connor, whose painstaking reading strategies we saw above, was by the end of the semester still going through initial cognitive processes in Chinese, but was now trying to remember in English, which should overcome the translation problem Mike identified above:

For the first time I will think about it in Chinese, because it is easy to understand the principle, the meaning of the principle, and maybe second time, third time I just try to remember the English because the text in English. (Connor, 3)

The further stage of exclusive use of English was identified by just two of the participants by the end of the first year of study. Scott, whose oral English was among the highest of the group, could clearly remember the moment when he made the conscious decision to adopt this new strategy:

I think personally before Week Seven I used the wrong way. I tried to read something in English and then use the Chinese, so quite tired for me. When I want to use I have to remember Chinese and translate to English again. That means I translate two times. But after Week Seven when I get used to use the English to think the English problem, so I think it is better than before, so I learning quite a lot after Week Seven, sharp change. (Scott, 3)

Gemma, the student with the highest level of English, also found a strategy of learning entirely in English worked for her. She had become quite used to it, she said, but was in fact advised to try using translation from Chinese as a useful strategy,

because [a friend] said it really helps, you know. I would say it helps with some of the terminologies, but some of the words I just found it really hard to translate into Chinese. When I write it down in Chinese, you know, when I look at it I just think, what is this? It doesn't really make sense. (Gemma, 3)

The reversion to L1 use was a strategy that she soon rejected as unhelpful.

It would seem that as their level allowed it, the students were moving towards more exclusive reliance on L2 as an efficient strategy for learning, given that both the input and the output on which their success would be judged were in that language. The metacognition involved in making this decision is of interest. At all times this decision seems to have arisen out of careful thinking about what would serve their learning purposes best at the time, initially recognising the need to supplement the limited resources of their English, and then gradually moving into more and more use of the language in which they were to be assessed. In terms of the issue of quality, one

must suppose that being able to think about and remember content and compose responses in English would optimise students' ability to benefit from what their teachers were trying to do, for example, by allowing them to participate more fully in class and to meet the time demands that so often seemed to overwhelm them. However, until that point was reached, the students themselves were obviously conscious of enhancing the quality of their learning by their judicious use of L1, and their teachers should be encouraged to accept its value for this purpose rather than frown on its use, as is sometimes the case.

## **Concluding Comments**

In framing this consideration of the developing strategies of these students with the comment from the teacher interview, I have characterised them as a means of building quality. It would seem that the students themselves saw the question in this way, and that appropriation of strategies that seemed to align them with the expected practices of the university brought a sense of competence in their roles as university students in New Zealand, which boosted their confidence. These personal innovations were therefore successful, if not in giving them a 100% pass rate, at least in providing a sense that there was a way ahead. However, progress was made at some personal cost on various levels: half of the participants failed at least one paper in their first semester. There were, too, some who could see that their existing strategies were not working, but who could not see how they might be adjusted. For these students, it was very much harder to muster enthusiasm and motivation for the demanding task they had taken on.

Although some of these participants arrived at the university with an unusually low level of English, the development of strategies that provided them with a sense of greater agency (Mike's 'I found I know how to study', for example) did not co-relate exactly with English level as measured by the IELTS band. In general, it would seem that at 5.5 or 6, the English resource available to students to make ready sense of the material they are presented with and to speak and write about it at the level required for university study is extremely limited. It stands to reason, then, that success in the university will be very dependent on their being able to develop learning strategies that allow them to overcome these limitations to some degree. Given that many are not at present required to do any specific preparation for the new academic culture (English for academic purposes, for example), and that a high proportion of students in general English classes nowadays are intending to do university study, I would like to posit some implications for pre-university experiences in English language centres.

In the face of the difficulty of understanding lectures, most of the students themselves identified reading, however time-consuming it might be, as a key to their learning, either explicitly or through implication. Perhaps a stronger emphasis on this skill is called for in general English courses, extending the reading programme, though, beyond the familiar relatively short texts around the unit theme which is brought to a close at the end of the week, to introducing students to the challenge of dealing with longer texts, and, in general, to dealing with longer time frames of learning. Having reason to read for retention as well as immediate understanding might spur students on to develop more advanced strategies at an earlier point in their study in New Zealand.

It would be foolhardy however to assume that tweaking the English language centre experience would be fully effective in preparing students for their university experience, as it would certainly seem that it was the high stakes environment that forced the participants to adopt new strategies, and while their enrolment can be achieved by an IELTS result alone, it may be difficult to persuade them to see beyond that and really to take cognisance of what will be required of them in the university. The university also has responsibility to ensure that teachers are resourced and educated to provide the kind of mediation to the discourse requirements of their disciplines (such as sample test questions and examples worked in class) that will ensure that there is clearer support for first year students to understand what is required of them.

I would like to round off this account with final remarks from two of the participants which testify to their own assessment of the process as one of building quality. Although some of the participants at times expressed resistance to aspects of the learning experiences they were subjected to, most, by the end of the first semester or at least the first year, expressed satisfaction at the gains they had made in their learning strategies. I will leave the last words to Gemma and Sky, reflecting as they do the value that they personally found in their new learning practices:

I would say I'm a better student here than I was before. (Gemma, 3)

I think I learn a lot in New Zealand than in China, because in here I learn how to learn, I learn how to thinking. (Sky, 3)

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