

A Study of Gender Differences in English Learning Strategies of Middle School Students

Fan Xiying

College of Foreign Language, Pan Zhihua University, Pan Zhihua, China

bettyfan1988@163.com

Abstract: This paper takes Oxford Classification Standard of Learning Strategy, through questionnaire survey and interviews, conducts a study of gender differences of middle school students in memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, meta-cognitive strategy, emotion strategy, social communication strategy. The results show the females use all the strategies more frequently than males except in social communication strategy, especially memory strategy, and that there are differences in the use of other strategies, but not so remarkable. Based on this, the paper proposes measures to improve English teaching such as developing personalized English learning strategy, English learning strategy diagnosis and training and respecting gender differences to promote full development of learning strategies and so on.

Keywords: middle school students; learning strategies; gender difference; study

1 Introduction

Language learning strategy research has been conducted overseas for more than 30 years. Oxford(1990) has carried on two dimension classifications of language learning strategy, namely direct strategy and indirect strategy. The direct strategy refers to the strategy that has direct influence upon study, including memory, cognitive, compensation strategy; The indirect strategy refers to the strategy that has indirect influence upon study, including meta-cognitive, emotion and social communication strategy. Our country's English learning strategy research started in 1984.

Gender difference is an individual difference generally existing and catching widespread attention in the foreign language teaching. In the past decades, gender related research increased unceasingly. Since Holmes'(1991) publication of his paper, Language and Gender, in the beginning of 1990s, the foreign language education domain, gender difference related research has then widely conducted, and takes on a tendency of interdisciplinary development (Xu Baofang, Yuan Fengshi, Li Tao, 2007).

Although there have been many domestic and foreign researches into gender difference in language learning strategy, however, researches into gender difference in middle school English learning strategy is nearly a blank. Therefore, this article depends on the Oxford learning strategy taxonomy, uses questionnaire and interview, conducts an empirical research into gender difference in middle-school students' adoption of memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, meta-cognitive strategy, emotion strategy and social communication strategy.

communication strategy.

2 Research Design

In order to study the gender difference in middle school English learning strategy, the author has selected the method of questionnaire surveys combined with interviews.

2.1 Investigation Objects

The author has selected 217 students (105 male students, 112 female students) Grade 2011 of junior middle school and 205 the senior middle school students from Grade 2011 (105 male students, 100 female students) in Pan Zhihua City as the investigation objects.

2.2 Investigation Tool

The author adopts the Oxford learning strategy questionnaire, which includes memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, Meta-cognitive strategy, emotion strategy and social communication strategy. The questionnaire uses 1-5 level scale, representing respectively "never or seldom"(1 point), "usually not" (2 points), "sometimes" (3 points) "frequently" (4 points), "always" (5 points), and requires the objects to choose the items that fit their actual use of their learning strategy. The questionnaire's coefficient of content conformity is 0.7960. Besides quantitative investigation of questionnaire, in order to enhance the research credibility, the author simultaneously carry on sampled interview to the objects and related teachers.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This investigation has sent out 422questionnaire cop-

ies, collected effective 406copies. The questionnaire data statistics is put in the computer, analysis of the data is carried on using SPSS11.0. The means and overall average of various stratification planes of students' use of learning strategy is figured out finally independent sample T-test to the data is conducted, whose result is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 learning strategy independent sample T-test result

	Male		Female		t value	Significance
	Mean value	SD	Mean value	SD		
memory strategy						
cognitive strategies	3.1581	.7834	3.4045	.6725	-1.798	.045 *
compensation strategies	2.6923	.6553	2.7552	.6152	-1.638	.103
meta- cognitive strategies	3.1383	.7252	3.2454	.6629	-1.592	.113
emotion strategies	2.9726	.7189	3.0538	.7452	-1.259	.206
average	2.7385		2.9047		2.9867	

3 Research Findings and Discussion

This investigation discovers the middle-school students the frequency of adopting learning strategy reaches 2.95, which indicates they have certain consciousness of learning strategy. But the development of male and female students learning strategy is imbalanced. The females tend to use learning strategy more frequently (the M female: 2.99, SD=0.72; M =2.90.SD:0.73) except in social communication strategy, regardless of in cognitive strategy, memory strategy, compensation strategy, emotion strategy and meta-cognitive strategy aspect, the females slightly win over the males This tallies with some other researches.

Oxford and Nyikos(1989) once discovered that, students of different genders differ greatly in the use and choice of strategy. Ehrman(1990) has once discovered the female students use more learning strategy compared to the males. The feminine superiority is specially remarkable in the foreign language learning in senior high school stage. Some domestic investigation has found there are more female graduates to major in foreign language than the males, with proportion of approximately 3:1. Learning strategy utilization and study goal are closely related, so it's no wonder that the female student study foreign languages more initiatively, positively and strategically. Obviously, the females English academic record surpasses that of the males importantly result from their superiority in the use of learning strategy.

As can be seen from Table 1, the students most often use memory strategy, compensation strategy and

meta-cognitive strategy, with the mean value close to or higher than 3points, which is situated between "sometimes" and "frequently" between the use. But the cognitive strategy, the emotion strategy and the social communication strategy use are few, the mean value between 2.692 and 2.755, situated between "usually not" and "sometimes". Except in social communication strategy, among the other five strategies, the frequency at which the females uses is higher than the males, but except the memory strategy, the other differences have not achieved the significance level. Presently it is specifically analyzed as follows:

3.1 Memory Strategy and Social Communication Strategy

Students' frequency of using memory strategy is highest, social communication strategy, the lowest. This indicates that the student, male or female, all attach much weight to the memorization of the words, text and sentence patterns. Just as Liu Runqing (2000) remarks, memory strategy is a tradition of Chinese students. Since long ago, memorization has been attaching such importance to in China that it has been considered indispensable condition for successful learning." Comparatively, they use social communication strategy least frequently. Oral English communication is not very much valued even in the test. Chinese students seldom have real English communication, they depend more upon reading and writing to learn English and on massive memory work to review and reinforce their English. However, excessive emphasis on language study and ability developing can often suppress the use of social communication strategy. Moreover, students of different genders differ greatly in the use of memory strategy ($0.045 < 0.05$), which arrives at a significant level, and this conforms to the students' respective characteristics. In general, the females tend to use more concrete and direct study method, therefore they can choose to use more memory strategy. And as a result of the rich association ability, memorizing new words, they will associate the corresponding synonyms and antonyms. But the male students are better at creative thought, so they will make use of the word formation more to compensate their insufficient vocabulary.

Social communication strategy refers to various strategy a student adopts in order to strive for more opportunities, to maintain human relations as well as to enhance communication effect. But among the six strategies, only social communication strategy has higher frequency of use for the male students because the males have mostly a bright and cheerful disposition, outgoing, daring to speak boldly and express themselves, not afraid of making mistakes. Therefore with limited spoken language, through significance consultation, they can also achieve the social communication goal.

3.2 Cognitive Strategy

Cognitive strategy refers to the step and method a student adopts in order to complete the specific learning task. Table 1 indicates that, generally speaking, middle-school students' English cognitive strategy utilization level exist gender differences (t value), but the grade difference is not remarkable, the females using cognitive strategy more frequently than the males. Students' frequency of using cognitive strategy is low, which shows they use less the methods and strategy such as repetition, classification, inference, note-taking, deduction and so on. Oxford (1990) believes the more important in second languages or foreign language learning is cognitive strategy. The investigation result indicates that the females use cognitive strategy more frequently than the males, the females learn English more by using memorizing fixed sentence patterns, taking notes, deducting language rules, reviewing and summarizing.

3.3 Meta- cognitive strategy and Compensation Strategy

Meta-cognitive strategy refers to the strategy students plan, implement, reflect, appraise and adjust their studies. The female students score more points in the use of meta-cognitive strategy than the male students, which indicates the females are better at determining, adjusting their study goal, selecting appropriate study method and skill, appraising and reflecting the study result. The questionnaire and interview results indicate that, the females pay more attention to the choice and instruction of their attention compared to the males, self-monitoring and self management. It is not difficult to explain the fact that the female students' level of development of meta-cognitive strategy is higher, thus their overall frequency of using learning strategy is higher than the male students.

Table 1 shows that, generally speaking, there exists remarkable gender difference (the t value) in middle-school students use of meta-cognitive strategy, and the females score higher than the males in the use of meta-cognitive strategy. Both the males and females have a proper use of compensation strategy, like word guessing body language or the synonym and category substitution and so on. They use compensation strategy or conversation fillers and so on to win the time for pondering. Certainly using the compensation strategy can make up the insufficiency in English proficiency and keep the ball rolling.

3.4 Emotion Strategy

Male students or female students, group with higher marks are more positive to English study than the

group with lower marks. This indicates the academic record is possibly another factor that affects emotion and attitude. Students with good examination result in English obtain the success experience which can further strengthen their self-confidence, even stimulate their enthusiasm for English study, thus they have a more positive attitude. Obviously, the emotion and the academic record are possibly a pair of mutual cause- and -effect factors. As is seen in Table 1, there is remarkable difference in the emotion attitude and total learning strategy between the male and female students. The female students score higher than the males in the emotion attitude and the overall learning strategy.

The questionnaire result and the interview indicate that, the female students pay more attention to the adjustment and control of their moods, than the male students in English study process, overcoming their tension and anxiety, and are better at inspiring themselves with the higher study goal and study results. The female students score higher than the males in English study emotion attitude, which indicates the females have a higher interest in English study and stronger study motives. This is consistent with some findings (Eiris,1994; Burstall, 1975; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky,1989). As the emotion attitude has important influence on language learning result (Gardner,1980:Amold,1999), it's not strange that this research discovers female students' English academic record surpass the males'. As to the reason why the female students are more positive in English study, it is possibly related to social gender anticipation and the occupation tendency. The majority of people hold that work concerning language are more suitable for females. Ellis(1994) has once pointed out that "One of the major reasons why the females obtains bigger success in foreign language learning is that they generally have stronger positive emotion, and this emotion reflects their anticipation of employment seeking. Girls generally believe a foreign language has a more important professional value to them, while boys do not think so. This belief possibly comes from their parents.

4 Teaching Proposals

4.1 Developing Students' Personalized English Learning Strategy

Enough emphasis should be placed on gender differences in study emotion and learning strategy of the middle-school student English. We should carry on corresponding guidance and training in accordance with the male and female students' characteristics of physiological, psychological and cognitive development, in order that students English study emotion and learning strategy can both develop greatly.

This research shows that male and the female students differ in the learning strategy, and that the female students score higher in the use of English learning strategy than the males. This set us thinking: Are the male student not fit the school teaching or the school teaching does not fit the male students? This article believes that the primary cause is that the school does not take the gender difference in teaching seriously. Male and female students' differences in the cognitive domain and the non-cognitive domain require more importance to be attached to the gender differences in training middle-school students' learning strategy. On the one hand strategy training of the middle-school students should scientifically absorb, apply and integrate the latest fundamental research findings, for instance, the Multi-dimensional Intelligent Theory, Constructivist Study Theory and affective teaching theory and so on; On the other hand, we must act according to male, female student's actual needs, initiatively practice personalized training, unceasingly promote the students to form personalized English learning strategy, to learn to study, and to be prepared for lifelong studies.

4.2 Conducting Learning Strategy Diagnosis and Implementing Learning Strategy Training

To train the student to study and grasp effective English learning strategy may enhance the learning efficiency and lighten the study burden. It is an important task in the foreign language teaching faces now to study and train English learning strategy. English teaching should help the students to realize the importance of learning strategy, and, through teacher interviews, group discussion and self-diagnosis, and English learning strategy examination table (Cheng Xiaotang, Zheng Min, 2002) conduct objective examination and appraisal to the learners' existing learning strategy, get to know what strategies the learners have used, the frequency of use, the relationship between the use of learning strategy and the study achievement and so on, then conduct learning strategy trainings such as lectures, learning strategy courses, infiltrated teaching activity and so on, carry on learning strategy training step by step in a planned way to the learners. An ideal procedure is, "merging strategy training and the foreign language teaching into one organic whole. The teacher demonstrate the strategy combining the specific teaching content, the students practice using strategy in the process of completing the learning task. (Wang Lifei, Wen Qiufang, 2003)

For example the memory strategy is one of the most commonly used learning strategy for the middle-school student, but they tend to use more mechanical memorizing-like method, which has little effect. The teacher should teach the students more memory methods, for

example they can integrate word sound, spelling and meaning, and listen to the sound while spelling it; memorizing new words using the pronunciation rules; And they can also memorize new words using word formation rules such as synthesis, derivation, transformation and expand their vocabulary; when remember new words, they must read through the mouth, listen to them through the ear, remember through the brain, they must also write them with the hands, using the five senses at the same time; They can remember the new words using a shape-meaning, sound-shape association mnemonic system; They can also remember new words using the classification and induction or using contrast association mnemonic systems such as the synonym, antonym, consanguineous words and so on; They can remember the new words by making new word cards to carry along with them, adopting piecemeal, guerrilla warfare way and so on.

4.3 Respecting Gender Differences and Promoting Full-scale Development of Learning Strategies

As a result of the influence of such factors as the sex, individuality, age, study style, manner, motive on language learning strategy and so on, the male and female learners show gender differences in their use of English learning strategy, as is demonstrated in this investigation result. Therefore the teacher should face and respect gender differences in their use of learning strategy, especially the male female students' preference and need in their choice of learning strategy, encourage the learners to use some new strategies properly in accordance with their actual conditions. For instance the teacher can teach the memory strategy to the male students and more social communication strategy to the females. He should strengthen the learning autonomy and self-monitoring ability training to the male students, form the habit of taking notes in the classroom and planning their learning, and simultaneously reflect their own study, supervising themselves to move towards the decided goal. The female students must learn to utilize more learning strategies, flexibly apply the learned knowledge, use more memory methods, to learn more about cultural differences between the East and West, enrich their knowledge, cooperate with their classmates and enhances together. Simultaneously the teacher do not have to impose one kind of type learning strategy on the student, but should provide fully, the effective learning strategy to them, chooses the use for them, promotes the learner English learning strategy full scale development.

References

- [1] Oxford. R. Language learning strategies: What every teacher

- should know[M]. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.1990.37-135.
- [2] Cheng Xiaotang, Zheng Min. English study strategy [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing House., 2002.
- [3] Liu Runqing, Wu Yi'an. Chinese English education studies [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing House, 2000:224.
- [4] Shi Yaofang. Discussion of Study Strategy [J]. *Psychological Development and Education* (Renmin University of China Books and Periodicals Center, 1991,(3).
- [5] Wang Lifei, Wen Qiufang. English Study Strategy Training and Research in China- [J]. *Foreign Language*. 2003(6).