An Investigation of Language Learning Strategies of Bilingual Korean-Chinese University Students

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This study investigates the language learning strategy use of bilingual Korean-Chinese students learning English in China. The study also examines the relationship between learning strategy use and the influence of individual background variables, such as gender, academic major, and self-rated English proficiency. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford, 1990) was distributed to 109 Korean-Chinese university students to measure their use of language learning strategies. The findings of the current study revealed that compensation strategies were most preferred by Korean-Chinese students, while memory strategies were least used. The study found female students as more frequent users of strategies than male students. Humanities majors reported more use of learning strategies than other majors. The linear relationship between self-rated English proficiency and strategy use was found, indicating that learners with higher English proficiency reported more frequent use of learning strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies of language learning have attempted to investigate multiple aspects of language learners and how they choose to learn language. Language learning strategies have been utilized as a tool for assessing how language learners approach to language learning. Language learning strategies are defined as "*specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations*" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Learning strategies can foster learners' autonomy in language learning (Holec, 1981) and assist learners in promoting their own achievement in language proficiency (Bremner, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Küpper, 1985; Politzer, 1983). Learning strategies, therefore, help learners become efficient in learning and using a language.

Recent Studies have looked at how choice of language learning strategies is affected by

various learner characteristics such as gender (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1993; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983; Wharton, 2000), age (Purdie & Oliver, 1999), second language proficiency (Bialystok, 1981; Chamot & Küpper, 1989; Gy-Pyo Park, 1997; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Phillips, 1991; Politzer, 1983), and beliefs about language learning (Yang, 1999).

There is a common assumption that bilingual or multilingual language learners may have different ways to approach to learn a new language compared to monolingual learners, which lead bilinguals or multilinguals to "good language learners." For instance, Thomas's (1988) study found that bilingual students performed better than the monolinguals, and bilinguals with previous experiences in formal training in first and second languages also performed better than bilinguals who acquired a second language in a natural setting without formal instructions. Nation and McLaughlin (1986) also reported that multilingual or bilingual groups showed superior performance to that of monolingual group in implicit learning.

Korean-Chinese university students as bilingual learners in the current study have acquired and learned both Korean and Chinese formally and informally since an early age. Since China and Korea agreed to open their doors to each other in 1992, more and more Korean-Chinese students have enrolled in universities or colleges in Korea for their higher education. Currently more than 5,000 students from China attend universities or colleges in Korea, and two-thirds of that population are bilingual Korean-Chinese students (Hei Long Jiang News, 2005). The increasing number of Korea-Chinese students in Korea has focused the attention of teachers and researchers to the special needs of these students, especially the need to overcome any academic difficulties caused by socio-cultural and educational differences.

No research has been done on Korean-Chinese students' use of language learning strategies to date. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to investigate the language learning strategy use of bilingual Korean-Chinese students currently engaged in learning English in China. The second goal is to determine the influence of individual background variables (e.g., gender, academic major and self-rated English proficiency) on use of language learning strategies. In order to fulfill these purposes, the following research questions were designed:

1) What are the reported language learning strategies of bilingual Korean-Chinese university students?

2) What is the relationship between strategy use and individual background variables, such as gender, self-rated English proficiency, or academic major?

1. Bilingual Korean-Chinese in China

Owing to the lengthy absence of diplomatic relations between Korea and China (pre-1992), to date, little is known about Korean-Chinese as an ethnic minority in China. The settlement

of Korean immigrants in China began in the late 1880s when thousands of poor Koreans fled to Northeast China (Manchuria) to escape from drought and famine (Pyong-Gap Min, 1992). Later, when Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910, a considerable number of Koreans moved to Northern China to avoid Japanese oppression. Furthermore, during the Japanese control of Korea (1910-1945), the Japanese government forced thousands of Koreans to move to the northeastern part of China (Yanbian) for political reasons (Jongmok Lee, 1999; Pyong-Gap Min, 1992). Because most Koreans could not go back to their homeland when the Chinese-Korean border was closed in the late 1940s, they remained in the Yanbian area and nearby provinces. Due to the minimal number of North Korean immigrants to the Yanbian region and the ban on South Korean visits to China since 1949 when the Communist government was established, the Korean population in China has remained ethnically homogeneous for four generations, with little to no intermarriage outside the Korean culture.

Korean-Chinese represent the second largest number of overseas Koreans[1] — over two million. The largest Korean settlement (42% of the entire Korean population in China) is concentrated in the Yanbian area in the Jilin Province which is closed to the North Korean and Russian borders (Kiwoo Huang, 2004). Seventy percent of population in Jilin Province is Korean-Chinese. Forty percent of the population in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture is Korean-Chinese and 57% is Han Chinese (Yanji Network, 2005). Although Koreans in this area have been isolated from South Korea for a half century and have had minimum contact with North Korea, they historically have avoided assimilating into the Chinese culture. They have maintained their Korean culture, Korean language, and a strong sense of ethnic identity and a high level of ethnic autonomy. This is attributable to the establishment of Korean ethnic schools (schools run and attended solely by Koreans for the purpose of maintaining Korean culture and tradition) in Yanbian area. The Yanbian Koreans maintained their high academic achievement and literacy rates, especially in contrast to other ethnic groups. In 1952, the Chinese government established the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (Jongmok Lee, 1999; Pyong-Gap Min, 1992). Since then, Chinese policies governing minorities have encouraged and even financially supported the Korean community to continuously maintain their culture and language through their ethnic-based educational system (Kiwoo Huang, 2004). In China, they are publicly perceived as a highly motivated ethnic-minority group committed to educating their generations and maintaining their language, culture, and ethnic identity (Jongmok Lee, 1999).

2. Bilingualism in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture

One of the factors contributing to the highly preserved Korean culture and ethnicity in

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[1] According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2003), the total population of overseas Koreans is estimated at 6,076,783. Korean-American (2,157,498) are the largest group in terms of population, followed by Korean-Chinese (2,144,789).

China was the use of the Korean language (Kiwoo Huang, 2004; Jongmok Lee, 1999; Pyong-Gap Min, 1992). Since the autonomy of Koreans in the Yanbian region was declared in 1952, the Yanbian Korean government has published all government documents and other publications in Korean and also translated Chinese documents into Korean (Pyong-Gap Min, 1992). Children in the Yanbian Korean community acquire Korean as their first language at home, and more than 90 % of Korean children in the Yanbian area attend Korean ethnic schools (Kiwoo Huang, 2004; Jongmok Lee, 1999). The curriculum of Korean ethnic schools currently includes Korean language classes which are allotted 7-8 hours a week in primary school beginning in the 1st grade and 3-4 four hours a week in secondary schools. All textbooks, teaching and learning materials are printed in Korean, and any school materials written in Chinese are translated into Korean. Naturally, the language of instruction in classrooms is Korean.

However, the Yanbian government has consistently included Chinese language education in schools to support children's success in adjusting to Chinese society. There has been considerable attention to bilingual education (teaching Korean and Chinese) in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Chinese language classes are given, allotting 5-6 hours in primary schools beginning in the 2nd grade and 4 hours a week in secondary schools (Taehyung Park, 1995). As a result, almost all Korean students in the Yanbian area are bilingual.

3. Foreign Language Instruction in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture

Japanese and English are the two major foreign languages being taught in secondary schools in the Yanbian area. Traditionally, foreign language education in Korean ethnic schools focused on teaching and learning Japanese. Many Korean students in secondary schools choose Japanese as a foreign language for their college entrance examination (Kumhae Park, 2000). It is relatively easy for Korean-Chinese students to learn Japanese, due to the similarities in grammar structures and phonology between Korean and Japanese. Choosing Japanese as a foreign language for the entrance examination often results in higher scores on the test, which put Korean students in a better position to apply for better universities.

Teaching English in Korean ethnic schools began in the early 1990s. While current trends in English education in Han Chinese schools have shifted in focus to promoting communicative competence (Huang & Xu, 1999), a shortage of trained English teachers and lack of knowledge about more balanced teaching and learning has put the current state of English education in Korean ethnic schools in jeopardy. Teaching methods today remain traditional and are based on a grammar-translation approach focusing on reading comprehension exercises, analyses of sentences, rote memorization, and translation from English to Korean or Chinese, or vice versa. The Yanbian Korean communities in China have begun to realize the important role of English in the information age which has led

them to improve English education for their younger generations. As a result, the Yanbian Korean government today is focusing on improving English education in secondary schools and higher education systems.

II. METHODS

1. Participants

The participants in the current study were 109 bilingual Korean-Chinese university students enrolled at a university in Yanbian, China. The university is one of two ethnic higher education institutions in the Yanbian area. It was established in 1992 and currently has approximately 1,300 enrolled students according to 2004 enrollment data. The majority of enrolled students are bilingual Korean-Chinese (over 90%). As shown in Table 1, the Korean-Chinese students were 49 males (45%) and 60 females (55%). Participants consisted of 25% Freshmen (n=27), 42% Sophomores (n=46), 21% Juniors (n=23), and 12% Seniors (n=13). The academic choices of subjects consisted of 27% Social Sciences majors (n=29), 31% Humanities majors (n=34), 37% Engineering majors (n=40), and 5% Science majors (n=6).

The participants use both the Korean and the Chinese languages consistently in their daily lives. Participants reported speaking both Korean and Chinese fluently both at home and with friends. As shown in Table 2, at home, the majority of participants (90%) preferred to use Korean while 10% of students favored Chinese. Eighty three percent of students usually spoke Korean with friends while 17% of the group preferred to use Chinese with friends. Furthermore, the majority of Korean-Chinese students rated their Korean proficiency at an advanced level (84%). Forty percent of them rated their Chinese at advanced level. However, only 2% of students rated their English at advanced level.

TABLE 1
Demographic Information of Korean-Chinese Students (N=109)

Category	Description	n	%
Gender	Male	49	45.0
	Female	60	55.0
Academic Year	Freshman	27	24.8
	Sophomore	46	42.2
	Junior	23	21.1
	Senior	13	11.9
Academic Major	Social Sciences	29	26.6
	Humanities	34	31.2
	Engineering	40	36.7
	Science	6	5.5

TABLE 2
Language-Related Experiences of Korean-Chinese Students (N=109)

Category	Description	n	%
Language Use at Home	Korean	98	89.9
	Chinese	11	10.1
Language Use with Friend	Korean	90	82.6
	Chinese	19	17.4
Self-rated Overall Korean Proficiency	Beginning	5	4.6
	Intermediate	13	11.9
	Advanced	91	83.5
Self-rated Overall Chinese Proficiency	Beginning	4	3.7
	Intermediate	61	56.0
	Advanced	44	40.4
Self-rated Overall English Proficiency	Beginning	62	56.9
	Intermediate	45	41.3
	Advanced	2	1.8

2. Instrument

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESL/EFL 7.0 version, Oxford, 1990) was used in this study to measure the strategy use of Korean-Chinese students in China. The SILL is a self-report questionnaire, and the 50 items in the questionnaire are grouped into six categories: memory strategies for storing and retrieving information (9 items), cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language (14 items), compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning (6 items), metacognitive strategies for centering and directing learning (9 items), affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation (6 items), and social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning (6 items).

The SILL uses a five-point Likert-scale system for each strategy ranging from 1 to 5 (never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and always or almost always true of me). Oxford (1990) also provides the following reporting scales to tell students which groups of strategies they use the most in learning English; 1) 'High Usage' (Always Used with a mean of 4.5-5.0 or Usually Used with a mean of 3.5-4.4); 2) 'Medium Usage' (Sometimes Used with a mean of 2.5-3.4); and 3) 'Low Usage' (Generally Not Used with a mean of 1.5-2.4 or Never Used with a mean of 1.0-1.40).

The Individual Background Questionnaire (IBQ) was developed by the researcher and distributed to the participants along with the SILL in order to collect any individual background information, such as age, gender, academic major, and language proficiency. Two questionnaires were translated into Korean to increase understanding of each statement.

3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The Korean version of the SILL questionnaire and IBQ were administered to intact classes at a university in China. The instruments were distributed during the class hours by the instructors of the classes with a brief explanation about the purpose and nature of the study. After the completion of the instrument, the questionnaires were collected by class instructors and given to the researcher for data analysis.

In order to analyze the collected data, several statistical techniques were used: Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) for summarizing demographic information and language strategy use, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) for exploring any statistically differences in language strategy use between variables (gender, major, and self-rated English proficiency).

III. RESULTS

1. Overall Strategy Use

All SILL items were grouped into Oxford's (1990) six categories to examine the overall use of six categories of strategies. Means and standard deviations of overall use of six categories of strategies for each group were calculated. Table 3 shows the mean score of strategy use and differences in six categories of strategies of Korean-Chinese students. The most preferred group of strategies used by Korean-Chinese students was compensation strategies (M=3.36) followed by metacognitive strategies (M=3.29), social strategies, (M= 3.20), cognitive strategies (M=3.15), and affective strategies (M=2.92). The least preferred was memory strategies (M=2.76). All strategies were in medium usage (3.4≤ M ≥2.5). The

TABLE 3
Overall Use and Difference in Six Categories of Strategies

Variables	M	SD	Rank	F	Sig	Difference*
Memory	2.76	0.55	6			
Cognitive	3.15	0.59	4			
Compensation	3.36	0.65	1	14.09	0.00	Com, Met>
Metacogntive	3.29	0.70	2			Mem
Affective	2.92	0.63	5			
Social	3.20	0.68	3			
Total	3.11	0.67				

Note. Com=Compensation Strategies; Met=Metacognitive Strategies; Mem=Memory Strategies
* p<.05 (Scheffé post-hoc test)

results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that there was a statistically significant difference among the use of six categories of strategies (F=14.09, p=.00). Scheffé post-hoc test was conducted to determine where the differences occurred. The results show a statistically significant difference between the use of compensation/metacognitive strategies and memory strategy at p<.05 level. In other words, compensation and metacognitive strategies were more frequently used by Korean-Chinese students than memory strategy.

2. Strategy Use by Gender

The overall use of strategies of male and female of Korean-Chinese students were reported and the differences between male and female among Korean-Chinese students were compared in Table 4. Females (M=3.23) reported greater strategy use than males (M=2.97). The mean scores of each category for females were higher than those for males. Males of Korean-Chinese students favored the use of compensation strategies (M=3.24) and reported the least use of memory strategies (M=2.67). Metacognitive strategies were the most preferred strategies by females of Korean-Chinese students (M=3.47) and memory strategies were the least favored (M=2.84). ANOVA test revealed statistically significant differences in overall use of strategies by gender (F=25.32, p=.00), reporting more use of strategies of females than males. When looking at the use of each categories of strategies, Scheffé post-hoc test revealed statistically significant differences in the use of cognitive (F=10.67, p=.00), metacognitive (F=9.63, p=.00) strategies by gender.

TABLE 4
Summary of Variation in Use of Strategy Categories for Gender

Variable	Male (n=49)		Female (n=60)		F	Sig.	Difference*
	M	SD	M	SD			
Memory	2.67	0.61	2.84	0.48	2.74	0.10	-
Cognitive	2.95	0.58	3.31	0.55	10.67	0.00	F>M
Compensation	3.24	0.62	3.46	0.66	3.24	0.07	-
Metacognitive	3.07	0.72	3.47	0.63	9.63	0.00	F>M
Affective	2.81	0.71	3.01	0.55	2.72	0.10	-
Social	3.09	0.76	3.29	0.61	2.36	0.13	-
Total	2.97	0.69	3.23	0.62	25.32	0.00	F>M

Note. F=Female; M=Male
* p<.05 (Scheffé post-hoc test)

3. Strategy Use by Academic Major

The summary of overall strategy use by academic major was also presented in Table 5. In the table, Korean-Chinese students majoring in Humanities reported more use of

strategies (M=3.25) than other majors, revealing a statistically significant difference in use of learning strategies among academic majors (F=6.64, p=.01). Social Science and Humanities majors preferred to use metacognitive strategies most (M=3.25, M=3.49, respectively), whereas Engineering and Science majors tended to use compensation strategies most (M=3.36). Memory strategies were the least used strategies by all majors. In addition to reporting the differences of the frequent use of strategies by four academic majors, Table 5 summarized mean scorers and standard deviation of the use of six categories of strategies by academic major in order to determine where the differences lay among six strategies. Although small differences in mean scores of strategy use among six categories of strategies were reported, no statistically significant difference in use of six strategies between majors was found.

TABLE 5
Summary of Variation in Use of Strategy Categories for Major

Variable	Social Science (n=29)		Humanities (n=34)		Engineering/ Science (n=46)		F	Sig.	Difference *
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Memory	2.64	0.48	2.87	0.58	2.77	0.55	1.41	0.25	-
Cognitive	3.13	0.61	3.25	0.58	3.08	0.58	0.73	0.48	-
Compensation	3.23	0.61	3.48	0.71	3.36	0.62	1.17	0.31	-
Metacognitive	3.25	0.58	3.49	0.72	3.17	0.73	2.12	0.13	-
Affective	2.86	0.53	3.05	0.67	2.87	0.65	1.02	0.37	-
Social	3.16	0.62	3.38	0.73	3.07	0.67	2.06	0.13	-
Total	3.05	0.61	3.25	0.70	3.05	0.66	6.64	0.01	H>SS,E/S

Note. SS=Social Science; E/S=Engineering/Science
* p<.05 (Scheffé post-hoc test)

4. Strategy Use by Self-rated English Proficiency Level

Table 6 shows means and standard deviations of the use of six strategies by self-rated English proficiency level of Korean-Chinese students and compares the differences in mean scores among the six strategies. Only two students reported their English at advanced. They were included in the intermediate level due to the small size of advanced level. Both beginning and intermediate/Advanced levels of Korean-Chinese students used compensation strategies more than other strategies (M=3.26 and M=3.51, respectively). Beginning level reported memory strategies as the least preferred strategies (M=2.59). In intermediate/Advanced level, Korean-Chinese students reported the least use of affective strategies (M=2.97). The table also shows that there was a statistically significant difference in the use of strategies by their self-rated English proficiency level between two groups (F=24.92, p=.00). When looking at the use of each category of strategies, Scheffé post-hoc test revealed that intermediate/Advanced levels of Korean-Chinese students used

more memory/cognitive/compensation strategies than did the beginning level.

TABLE 6
Summary of Variation in Use of Strategies for Self-rated English Proficiency

Variable	Beginning (n=62)		Intermediate/ Advanced* (n=47)		F	Sig.	Difference**
	M	SD	M	SD			
Memory	2.59	0.54	3.00	0.46	17.95	0.00	I>B
Cognitive	3.02	0.64	3.31	0.47	7.08	0.01	I>B
Compensation	3.26	0.61	3.51	0.67	4.13	0.04	I>B
Metacognitive	3.18	0.73	3.43	0.64	3.64	0.06	-
Affective	2.88	0.62	2.97	0.65	0.51	0.48	-
Social	3.09	0.67	3.33	0.69	3.44	0.07	-
Total	3.00	0.67	3.26	0.63	24.92	0.00	I/A>B

Note. B=Beginning; I/A=Intermediate/Advanced
* Two Advanced students were included.
* * *p*<.05 (Scheffé post-hoc test)

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study was the first research attempt to investigate how bilingual Korean-Chinese university students approached language learning in general and their use of language learning strategies when learning English. Additionally, evidence of the relative influence of individual background variables (e.g., gender, academic major, and self-rated English proficiency) on the frequency of strategy use has been also provided.

Among the six categories of strategies for Korean-Chinese university students, the compensation strategies were the most frequently used. The majority of Korean-Chinese university students preferred to make guesses, use synonyms and gestures, and look for words in their first language similar to new English words to understand others or convey their meaning. This indicates that although the Korean-Chinese students are bilingual who are considered as "expert" in language learning (Nation & McLaughlin, 1986), they compensate learning English by using gestures and making guesses in order to overcome their lack of language competence and knowledge of English language.

Metacognitive strategies reported as the second most used strategies by Korean-Chinese students, indicating their possession of high executive language learning skills which may have been acquired through learning and using two languages (Korean and Chinese) in their everyday lives. On the other hand, as previous studies have reported least use of memory strategies of bilingual college students (Bremner, 1998; Wharton, 2000), the Korean-Chinese university students also reported memory strategies as least preferred strategies, possibly because of inappropriate memory strategies for college students listed

in the SILL (e.g., acting out new words, using flash cards, or making rhymes).

The findings of current study reported gender effect on strategy use, revealing more frequent use of strategies by females than males. Furthermore, the current study found statistically significant difference in the use of cognitive/metacognitive strategies between male and female Korean-Chinese students. These findings accord with the findings of previous studies which reported females as more frequent users of learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1993).

The current study found the statistically significant influence of academic major on strategy use of bilingual Korean-Chinese students, reporting high use of learning strategies by Humanities majors. In the category of Humanities majors, several disciplines, such as language majors, education, general arts were included. It is possibly that such majors tend to seek more opportunities to practice English for their study at the university or may need high proficiency in English for getting better job in the future (e.g., language teachers).

Finally, the results of the current study found significant influence of self-rated English proficiency on strategy use, revealing a linear relationship between self-rated English proficiency and strategy use. In other words, Korea-Chinese students with higher English proficiency reported more use of learning strategies, which showed the consistency with the findings of previous studies in second language proficiency on strategy use (Green & Oxford, 1995; Gy-Pyo Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000).

This study provides information about both theoretical and practical aspects of language learning of bilingual Korean-Chinese students by exploring their preferences for learning strategies. Because this study is the first research attempt to study the choice of learning strategies of bilingual Korean-Chinese EFL learners, the results of this study should provide significant information about and implications for teaching and learning a foreign language by studying the behaviors and thoughts of bilingual Korean-Chinese English learners. Practically, this study provides empirical evidence of learning strategies of Korean-Chinese students in order to assist teachers, administrators, researchers, curriculum developers, publishers, and learners in EFL learning environments, particularly in Korean context. Although the study was conducted with a relatively large number of EFL students, the participants of the study was sampled from undergraduate students at one university in China. In addition, the sample of populations was limited to students who voluntarily participate in the study. Consequently, cautions will be required when attempting to make generalizations of the findings to larger populations in a Korean-Chinese context or other populations with different ethnic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds.

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