An investigation of Chinese Characters and Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Language strategies refer to methods and approaches that learners use in order to improve their language performance (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). From an information processing perspective (McLaughlin, 1983), the uses of strategies are often conscious (Oxford, 1993) and reflect users’ internal cognitive processes such as memory, attention, and association. Grounded in this cognitive framework, the present study investigates cognitive and metacognitive Chinese characters and vocabulary learning strategies among learners of Chinese as a second language (L2).

73 non-native learners of Chinese participated in this study. All the participants completed a background information questionnaire, a vocabulary knowledge test, and a strategy inventory for Chinese characters and vocabulary learning. Through descriptive statistical analyses, the study first identifies 10 most commonly used and 10 low frequently used Chinese characters and vocabulary learning strategies. Then based on the participants’ performance on the vocabulary knowledge tests, the study uses the median split method to divide the participants into two proficiency groups: the more proficient learners and the less proficient learners. A two-way ANOVA and t-test are used to examine the differences in frequency between how these two groups use learning strategies.

The analyses of the descriptive data reveal that when Chinese L2 learners learn characters and vocabulary, they favor the use of elaborative strategies such as using contextual information from textbooks or notes. The use of such strategies facilitates learning by actively involving learners in the study and by helping learners process the information more deeply. The data also shows that learners avoid using similarity-based strategies such as grouping visually or auditorily similar characters together. Additionally, the two-way ANOVA and t-test results demonstrate that more proficient learners tend to use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies than less proficient learners. Specifically, more
proficient learners use three metacognitive strategies (structured preview, error summary, and clear learning goals) significantly more frequently than less proficient learners. Pedagogical implications include: 1) introduce new words with detailed elaboration and with multisensory presentation; 2) avoid summarizing characters based on visual or auditory similarities; and 3) intentionally raise students’ attention and awareness of using metacognitive strategies.

Reference


