

# A Study of Taiwan's Technical College Students' English

## Learning Strategies

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### Abstract

The English proficiency of students in Taiwan's technical colleges has become increasingly worse over the years. Teachers face the difficult challenge to help improve technical college students' English proficiency in a short amount of time. In fact, many factors are responsible for EFL college students' poor English competence. Based on a review of the literature, learning achievement is not only correlated with learning motivation but also with learning strategies. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to determine which learning strategy was most commonly used by technical college students when learning English. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) defined learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques--such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task--used by students to enhance their own learning". Oxford (2003) also showed that when the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning. Also, Oxford classified learning strategies into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent and autonomous lifelong learners. However, students are not always aware of the power of consciously using L2 learning strategies to learn more quickly and more effectively (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993). The research instrument was an English Learning Strategy Scale designed by Li et al. (2006) who revised it from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), and the subjects were 170 students enrolled in the General English course at Meiho Institute of Technology in southern Taiwan. Based on the data collected from the English learning strategy scale, the findings show the ranking of learning strategies employed by the subjects from the highest to the lowest was the compensatory strategy, social strategy, affective strategy, cognitive strategy, memory strategy, and metacognitive strategy. Finally, the researchers drew a conclusion and provided some implications to English learners and instructors.

**Keywords : technical college, strategy, compensatory, cognitive, metacognitive affective, social**

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## **Introduction**

The researchers have taught English in institute of technology for many years and find most of their students' English ability is low. However, those students will become major manpower of the country in the future. In order to increase global competition, possessing enough English ability is important. Therefore, it is worth considering how to promote college students' English ability. The researchers find that most of their students didn't have any successful English learning experience or they were English-phobia when they were in junior high school. Those students lost confidence in learning English, so they are afraid of learning English. The researchers believe previous English learning failure has a great effect on the following learning. Only when those students experience learning achievement, they will get their confidence again and their learning motivation will be arouse. The researchers think employing English learning strategy will help students access English much more easily. The researchers apply English learning strategy questionnaire to understand students' English learning preference. After analysis of the data collected by questionnaire, the results could be taken as reference of English teaching.

## **Literature Review**

Whether learning strategy has some effect on language learning get some researchers' attention. In fact, Yang (1999) indicated that there are four reasons why English learning strategy being paid attention. Therefore, it seems worthy to study the relationship between language learning and language learning strategy.

### **1. Research on learning strategy use**

As matter of fact, we need to keep in mind that there are no good or bad strategies, there is good or bad application of strategies just as Cohen (1998) mentioned that, with some exceptions, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively.

Some researchers studied the kinds of language learning strategy learners like to use. For example, Fillmore (1989) found bilingual children would use many cognitive strategies and skills to help them learn language. Moreover, Bremner (1999) employed the strategy scale designed by Oxford (1990) to investigate the language learning strategy used by Hong Kong university students, and found that compensatory strategy and metacognitive strategy were the most commonly used by them, and affective strategy and memory strategy were used the least. And Sheorey (1999) showed that Indian university students preferred to use functional strategies to promote their English communicative ability, and they prefer to use memory strategy to help them get high scores in language tests.

Besides, Chen (2002) found that both high and low English proficiency college students used compensatory strategies most frequently; high English proficiency college students seldom used memory strategies; low English proficiency college students employed cognitive strategies the least frequently. Moreover, Wu (2003) found that both proficient and female EFL learners used reading strategies most often. Also, Ong (2005) found that compensatory strategy was the highest rank used by college students despite their majors, and cognitive strategy was the lowest rank used by the participants, however, different majors/schools actually had significant differences in the strategy use.

In addition, Hsu (2005) found that female junior high students scored higher grades in cognitive strategy and compensatory strategy than male students, and seventh graders scored higher grades in memory strategy, cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy than ninth grades; students' English learning time more than three years scored higher grades than English learning time under one year in cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy. Furthermore, Liu (2005) indicated that high school students used compensatory strategies most frequently and social strategies least often. Then, in 2006, Hsieh found that junior high school students seemed to use compensatory strategies most frequently and affective strategies least frequently. In the same year, Lin (2006) showed that the language learning strategy category with the highest average frequency for EFL technological university students was compensatory, followed by cognitive strategies, social strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and memory strategies.

Recently, Lo (2007) found that comprehensive high school students used compensatory strategies most often, followed by cognitive strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and the least, social strategies; and Chou (2007) indicated that the most common strategies used by senior high school students are the cognitive practice strategies and the least used strategies are functional practice strategies, moreover, Lin (2007) found that college students use cognitive strategy the most, and seldom use affective strategy; besides, Chuang (2007) showed that the sixth graders used more memory, cognitive strategies than fifth graders; and students learning English more than 5 years used more cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies than those learning English 2-4 years.

Without doubt, language learning strategy use still attracts some researchers' attention, for example, Lee (2008) found that compensatory strategy had the highest frequency, and affective strategy had the lowest frequency used by cadets in Taiwan, and Hsu (2008) showed that the situations of the usage of English learning strategies of junior high school students in Taiwan and China are pretty close.

From those studies, in the past thirty years, language learning strategy use has continued to be an issue in language learning, and some researchers focus on different areas, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, or vocabulary learning strategy, such as He (2002), and You and Joe (2002). And, Nassaji (2003) indicated that different strategies would result in different successful inference, and successful inference was more significantly related to the quality of strategy use than the quantity of strategy use.

Moreover, Wu (2003) found that “reading strategies” were most often used by vocational high school students, and the “speaking strategies” were least often used; greater use of EFL learning strategies was found among proficient EFL learners. Both proficient and female EFL learners used reading strategies most often. At the same year, Fan (2003) investigated how Hong Kong students used vocabulary learning strategy to learn vocabulary, and found that those students did not frequently use mechanic strategy mentioned by Schmitt (1997), neither frequently use repetitious nor imaginary strategy. The finding suggested Asian students did not like to use imaginary strategy and grouping to learn vocabulary. Besides, Fan (2003) found though Hong Kong students used more guessing strategy than dictionaries, they thought dictionaries were more useful for them.

Later on, Wu (2005) found the use of electronic dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, and guessing from context are the most popular strategies shared by students from different age groups when they learn vocabulary. And, Lee (2008) investigated the EFL learning strategies used by 164 cadets in Taiwan, and found that compensatory strategy had the highest frequency, and affective strategy had the lowest frequency; the strategy of guessing was most frequently used to understand unfamiliar English words; the strategy of keeping diary to write down English learning feelings was the least used. And, then Wu (2007) found that the reading strategy ‘Guessing the approximate meaning by using clues from the context of the reading material’ ranked the first of all language learning strategies by college students; the listening strategies were the most frequently used ones among the four strategy categories.

In short, based on the results of those studies, the use of language learning strategy varies with the subjects. Sometimes they use the same or similar strategies when learning language, but sometimes they use greatly different strategies to learn language. Therefore, it is worth more researchers to do more detailed research.

## **2. The relationship between learning strategy and various background factors**

In the past twenty years, quite a few researchers studied the relationship between learners’ language learning strategy and their background factors. Some focused on the learners’ gender or learning experience; some learners’ parenting style, or SES.

Although some of their studied findings were inconsistent, they have the value of reference for the later studies. For example, regarding to the relationship between learning strategy and learners' gender, Young (1991), Chang and Chang (1998), Sheorey (1999), Chien (2004), Hsu (2005), Hsieh (2006), Hsueh (2006), Huang (2006), Tsai (2005), Tseng (2005), Tseng (2005), Chou (2007), Chuang (2007), Lin (2007), Wu (2007), Chen (2009) found there was significance between them. Moreover, most of them found female learners significantly use more language strategy than male ones, no matter the subjects were elementary school students, high school students, or college students.

However, some studies got different results, for example, Kuo (2001), Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) and Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), Wu (2003), Hsu (2007), Lo (2007), Lee (2008) found that no significant differences were reported between the male and female readers in the study no matter how old the learners were. In other words, the relationship between language learning strategy and learners' gender has not reached consistence. And it implies there needs more studies to involve the related research.

Regarding the relationship between learning strategy and other factors, such as learners' cultural, family, educational backgrounds, learning experience, learning length, and so forth, Chang and Chang (1998) found that junior high school students' English learning experience, experience of traveling abroad, and social economic status (SES) were the factors having impact on their English learning strategy. Moreover, Tseng (2005), Hsu (2007), and Chen (2009) also found students' learning experience was related to their language learning strategy use. Hsu indicated that more experienced students tended to use language learning strategies frequently. In addition, Lin (2007) also showed that experience of traveling abroad would have effects on their language learning strategy. On the other hand, Sheorey (1999) found that Indian university students' cultural background and educational background seemed to have some effect on their use of some learning strategies. Moreover, Tseng (2001) found that learners' employment of English learning strategies is significantly affected by their personality types. And, Huang (2004) indicated that 529 middle school students' family background variables significantly affected the family educational capital and students' English learning strategies.

Besides, Tseng (2005) found that 803 fifth and sixth graders' differences of the frequencies of English learning strategies use were significantly related to their school region, grades, and prior English learning experience. And, Tsai (2005) investigated the English cram school for elementary school sixth graders, their English learning attitude and English learning strategies and found that students whose parents paid greater concern to schoolwork, students whose parents received high (vocational)

school education or higher, students who began English learning in first grade showed better English learning strategies. Furthermore, Tseng (2005) found that 1885 vocational high school students' English learning strategy use would vary with their school, major, learning experience, and English learning length. And Chuang (2007), Hsu (2007), and Chen (2009) also found that students' English learning length was related to different language learning strategies; Chuang (2007) indicated that students learning English more than 5 years used more cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies than those learning English 2-4 years. Moreover, Hsu (2007) showed that municipal elementary school students were better at use language learning strategies in comparison to those of rural ones, and districts adjacent to urban areas also showed a better performance in language learning strategies use.

Hsiao (2007) found that elementary school students' frequency of using English learning strategy was at middle level, and there were significant differences on the subjects of diverse parenting style in terms of English learning strategy. Hsu (2007) and Chen (2009) also showed some similar findings. Hsu indicated that 740 sixth graders' frequency of using language learning strategies was at medium to low level, and Chen mentioned that the situation of 457 sixth graders' English strategies is up middle level.

Regarding the relationship between language learning strategy and experience of attending cram school, Lin (2007) found that 526 college English majors' experiences of cram school would affect their language learning strategy use. Chen (2009) also found that 457 sixth graders' language learning strategy was related to their attendance experience of cram classes after school. Moreover, Chen also mentioned that English learning strategies were correlated directly with English learning attitudes, and Lin showed that students' cognition of English material would also affect their language learning strategy use.

From the above studies, many studies explored the relationship between subjects' background factors and their language strategy use; some had similar findings, but some did not. In other words, the relationship between subjects' background factors and their language strategy use is very complicated, and it is worthy to pay more attention to those related studies.

### **Methods**

The sample in this study was 170 students enrolled in the General English course at Meiho Institute of Technology in southern Taiwan. The researchers applied purpose sampling and employed Li et al.'s (2006) English learning strategy scale (as shown in Appendix) as the instrument. The English learning strategy scale can explain 59.89% variance and the value of coefficient (Cronbach's) alpha for English learning strategy scale is .924. In other words,

the English Learning Strategy Scale has good validity and reliability. At the same time, the researchers asked the subjects some background questions to conduct the study. The researchers collect the data in the end of the first and second semester; then the data collected was to be analyzed through SPSS software.

### **Findings and Discussion**

After collecting and analyzing the data, the researchers found 49.4% of the subjects used compensatory strategy when learning English, 30.6% social strategy, 27.6% affective strategy, 26.5% cognitive strategy, 20.6% memory strategy, 17.1% metacognitive strategy, respectively; the ranking of learning strategies employed by the subjects from the highest to the lowest was the compensatory strategy, social strategy, affective strategy, cognitive strategy, memory strategy, and metacognitive strategy. Comparing with other studies, Bremner (1999) found that compensatory strategy and metacognitive strategy were the most commonly used by the subjects, and affective strategy and memory strategy were used the least. Besides, Chen (2002) found that college students used compensatory strategies most frequently. Fan (2003) found that Asian students did not like to use memory strategy; though Hong Kong students used compensatory strategy than cognitive strategy, they thought cognitive strategy was more useful for them.

Moreover, Ong (2005) found that compensatory strategy was the highest rank used by college students and cognitive strategy was the lowest rank used by the participants, and Liu (2005) indicated that high school students used compensatory strategies most frequently and social strategies least often. Lin (2006) also showed that the language learning strategy category with the highest average frequency for EFL technological university students was compensatory, followed by cognitive strategies, social strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and memory strategies.

In addition, Lo (2007) found that comprehensive high school students used compensatory strategies most often, followed by cognitive strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and the least, social strategies. And, Wu (2007) also found that compensatory strategy in reading English ranked the first of all language learning strategies by college students. Then, Lee (2008) found that compensatory strategy had the highest frequency, and affective strategy had the lowest frequency used by the cadets in Taiwan, and Lee (2008) found that compensatory strategy had the highest frequency, and affective strategy had the lowest frequency. Interestingly, Sheorey (1999) showed that Indian university students prefer to use memory strategy to help them get high scores in language tests, but Fan (2003) and Lin (2006) found that Asian students did not like to use memory

strategy. Maybe that is because of the cultural difference.

On the other hand, some studies had different results, for example, Wu (2005) found cognitive strategies were the most popular strategies shared by students from different age groups when they learn English vocabulary. And Chou (2007) indicated that the most common strategies used by senior high school students are the cognitive practice strategies and the least used strategies are functional practice strategies. Lin (2007) also found that college students use cognitive strategy the most, and seldom use affective strategy.

Moreover, the researchers found that the subjects' major was related to their compensatory strategy and the subjects' educational background was related to their memory strategy and social strategy when learning English. Ong (2005) found that students with different majors/schools actually had significant differences in the use of English learning strategy. Furthermore, Tseng (2005) also found that vocational high school students' English learning strategy use would vary with their major.

The researchers also found that whether the subjects owned an English certificate was correlated with compensatory strategy and affective strategy, and the subjects' English learning experience was correlated with memory strategy, cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, and affective strategy. And the subjects' use of internet was related to their memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy.

Additionally, the researchers found that the subjects' English learning-hour was related to memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, and affective strategy. Hsu (2005), Tseng (2005), Chuang (2007), Hsu (2007), and Chen (2009) also found that vocational high school students' English learning strategy use would vary with English learning length. Though Hsu (2005) and Chuang (2007) showed that students' English learning span was related to their strategy, Hsu (2005) found that students' English learning time more than three years scored higher grades than English learning time under one year in cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy, and Chuang (2007) found that the students learning English more than 5 years used more cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies than those learning English 2-4 years.

In this study, the researchers found that the subjects' gender and experience of traveling English-speaking countries were not correlated with their use of English learning strategy. However, Young (1991), Chang and Chang (1998), Sheorey (1999), Chien (2004), Hsu (2005), Hsieh (2006), Hsueh (2006), Huang (2006), Tsai (2005), Tseng (2005), Tseng (2005), Chou (2007), Chuang (2007), Lin (2007), Wu (2007), Chen (2009) found there was significance between learners' learning strategy



and gender. Hsu (2005) found that female junior high students scored higher grades in cognitive strategy and compensatory strategy than male students, and Chang and Chang (1998) found that junior high school students' experience of traveling abroad was one of the factors having impact on their English learning strategy. Lin (2007) also showed that experience of traveling abroad would have effects on their language learning strategy.

### **Conclusion and Implication**

Based on the findings, the researchers drew the following conclusions. First, the ranking of learning strategies employed by the subjects from the highest to the lowest was the compensatory strategy, social strategy, affective strategy, cognitive strategy, memory strategy, and metacognitive strategy. Second, the subjects' major was related to their compensatory strategy and the subjects' educational background was related to their memory strategy and social strategy when learning English. Third, whether the subjects owned English certificates was correlated with compensatory strategy and affective strategy, and the subjects' English learning experience was correlated with memory strategy, cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, and affective strategy. Fourth, the subjects' use of internet was related to their memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy, and social strategy. Fifth, the subjects' English learning-hour was related to memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategy, and affective strategy. Sixth, the subjects' gender and experience of traveling English-speaking countries were not correlated with their use of English learning strategy.

According to the conclusions, the researchers provided some implications for English learners and instructors. First, English learners could learn different learning strategies to learn English to enhance learning efficiency. Second, English instructors could provide learners different learning strategies based on learners' major. Third, English instructors should encourage students to get English certificate and to use internet to help them learn English and. Fourth, English learners should expose to English as long as they can, like reading English magazines, newspaper, novels, and listening to English radio or watching English movies or shows.

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## Appendix

- 一、你是 ( ) 男性 ( ) 女性
- 二、你就讀的科系是 \_\_\_\_\_ 系
- 三、你之前畢業於 ( ) 綜合高中 ( ) 高職 ( ) 普通高中 ( ) 專科 ( ) 其他
- 四、你一週自我學習英文 ( ) 不到 1 小時 ( ) 2-5 小時 ( ) 5-10 小時 ( ) 10 小時以上
- 五、你曾經去過英語系國家(如美、加、英、澳、紐)嗎? ( ) 是 ( ) 否
- 六、你擁有英語文檢定證照(如英檢、多益、托福)嗎? ( ) 有 ( ) 否
- 七、你以往的英語學習經驗愉快嗎? ( ) 是 ( ) 否 ( ) 不知道

英語文學習策略調查表	一直是 這樣	常常 是這 樣	有時 是這 樣	完全 不這 樣
1. 我會不斷地書寫，來幫助我記得所學的英文。	4	3	2	1
2. 我會用一些奇特、有趣的聯想來幫助我記住英文。(M)	4	3	2	1
3. 我會把英文課本或會話中的單字、片語，做成表格來幫助我記得英文。	4	3	2	1
4. 我會把新學的英文詞彙跟國語或台語、客語、原住民語等連結以方便記得英文。	4	3	2	1
5. 學到新的英文字詞時，我會回想曾經學過的內容來做聯想和比較。	4	3	2	1
6. 我在看英文時，會把重要的地方劃線或做記號。	4	3	2	1
7. 我會模仿外國人或老師說英文的樣子、聲音、腔調。	4	3	2	1
8. 我看英文時，會先大概看一遍了解大意後，再仔細看內容。	4	3	2	1
9. 我經常使用字典或參考書來幫助我學習英文。(C)	4	3	2	1
10. 我會把學到的英文單字、片語自己練習造句。	4	3	2	1
11. 如果我想不出正確的英文用法時，我會用不同的方式來表達。	4	3	2	1
12. 我會利用手勢或其他動作來幫助我表達我想說的英文。	4	3	2	1
13. 當我看到不懂的英文時，我會利用文章中的插圖或標題來猜猜它的意思。(Compensatory)	4	3	2	1
14. 如果遇到不懂的英文時，我會請教他人。	4	3	2	1
15. 我會主動找機會練習英文。	4	3	2	1
16. 我會模仿英文錄音帶或錄影帶來修正自己的發音及語調。	4	3	2	1
17. 當老師問其他同學英文問題時，我會試著自己回答。	4	3	2	1
18. 我會找尋或安排適合學習英文的地方。	4	3	2	1
19. 我會隨時提醒自己是不是都了解所學過的英文。	4	3	2	1
20. 我會常常告訴自己要用功學英文。	4	3	2	1

21. 如果我學英文覺得很累時，我會聽聽音樂或動一動使自己舒服一些。	4	3	2	1
22. 我會用寫日記或與朋友聊天的方式來發洩或紀錄我學英文的情形。	4	3	2	1
23. 如果我達到預定的學習結果(例如考試考得很好)，我會鼓勵自己或獎勵自己(例如看一場電影或吃一頓大餐)。	4	3	2	1
24. 我會請別人糾正我的英語發音或我英文有錯誤的地方。	4	3	2	1
25. 上完英文課之後，我會和同學一起討論或借同學的筆記看我有沒有抄錯或漏掉的地方。	4	3	2	1
26. 如果有不會的作業，我會請教老師或同學。	4	3	2	1
27. 考試前，我會和同學一起討論考試可能會考的地方。	4	3	2	1
28. 和別人聊天時，我會專心聽對方講話及注意對方的感覺。	4	3	2	1