Chapter 7

Chinese Students' Learning Strategies in Learning Spanish as a Second Language:
Experiences From a Language Immersion Program in Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 21st century, international education has grown at an extraordinary rate, and even countries like Uruguay, which has not been a recipient country of a significant flow of international students, has experienced an important increase of students from other countries and cultures. L2 Spanish learners from several Chinese universities travel to a Spanish-speaking country in the third year of their major to attend Spanish and culture lessons during two academic semesters. The aim of increasing the knowledge of Chinese approaches to learning is part of the interest of researchers and teachers in expanding their understanding of individual differences in learning. This chapter summarizes the research carried out at Universidad ORT Uruguay that focuses on identifying and understanding L2 (Spanish) strategies to learning.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, international education has grown at an extraordinary rate (Monitor, 2017) and even countries like Uruguay, which has not been a recipient country of a significant flow of international students, has experienced an important increase of students from other countries and cultures. In 2012, based on an academic agreement signed between Harbin Normal University in China

(HNU) and Universidad ORT Uruguay, this South American country regularly welcomes a group of Chinese students of Spanish as a second language (L2) within the framework of an interuniversity program.

L2 Spanish learners from several Chinese universities travel to a Spanish speaking country in the third year of their major (September to June) to attend Spanish and culture lessons during two academic semesters. In the case of Uruguay, the limited knowledge about Asian students in general, and particularly Chinese students, can lead to a stereotypical view of the Chinese students. This can involve the view of Chinese students as rote- memory learners, with a surface approach to learning and with an excessive respect for authority (Li, 2012).

Biggs and Watkins (2001) argue that most of the research on Chinese students have a Western look at Chinese approaches to learning. Western teachers may wrongly assume that Chinese learners show overuse of memorization strategies at the expense of comprehension, when in fact, Chinese students frequently use repetition strategies to make sure they retain the information at the same time they deepen their understanding of the subject. This is what Biggs and Watkins call "the paradox of the Chinese learner" (Biggs, J. Watkins, D.A., 2001).

The aim of increasing the knowledge of Chinese approaches to learning its part of the interest of researchers and teachers in expanding their understanding of individual differences in learning (Dörnyei, Z. Ryan, S., 2017). Nowadays, nobody seems to question the influence of individual differences in learning (2017). According to Oxford (2011) L2 learning strategies are one of the key factors that help to determine in which way and how efficiently students learn a second language.

This paper summarizes the research carried out at Universidad ORT Uruguay (hereafter, ORT) that focuses on identifying and understanding L2 (Spanish) strategies to learning among Chinese students of The BA in Spanish attending two semesters of language studies at the University.

Another dimension to be considered is the educational context versus cultural background. Some authors argue that individual differences in learning (ID) like learning strategies are very difficult to change (Newman, Y. Beckerman, Z., 2001). On the other (Kee-Kuok Wong, 2004) maintains that despite certain initial difficulties, Chinese students can adapt very well to other educational systems. This implies that those difficulties are a result of previous experiences (teaching methodologies, assessment types, classroom dynamics, syllabus design) and are less related to culturally ingrained factors which are very difficult to modify (Kee-Kuok Wong, 2004). It is interesting to identify possible changes in the L2 learning strategies of Chinese students during their studies in Uruguay.

OBJECTIVES

- Identify the prevalent L2 Spanish language strategies of Chinese higher education students following Oxford´s taxonomy of L2 language learning strategies.
- Identify possible changes in learning strategies during their Spanish language studies in a private university in Uruguay.
- Understand the possible explanation that learners give to the changes occurred during their study abroad semesters.

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