Language Learning Strategies: What You Need To Know

Everyone has their own philosophy as to how languages are best learned. This therefore influences the approach they take and the learning strategies they use. However, are their strategies necessarily the best ones?

Language learning strategies are techniques consciously or unconsciously employed to enhance learning and communication (i.e. helping you be more proficient at getting the language 'in' and getting it 'out'). Sometimes they are observable (e.g. asking a clarification question) and sometimes non-observable (e.g. forming a mental picture of the word in your head). The overall goal is to help you be more efficient at learning and using Chinese, hence becoming a self-directed and intrinsically motivated language learner who has acquired the necessary skills to continue *learning* long after *studying* stops.

Learning Strategies can best be viewed as 'problem-solving' techniques. The necessary investment of mental energy involved in solving each 'problem' leads to deeper, and hence, more effective learning, as opposed to simply being given the answer by your teacher. For example, you discover that Chinese has two words for 'serious' - yan2zhong4 and yan2su4. "But where lies the difference?" you ask yourself. So you get your friend or teacher to give you a few sentence examples from which you (hopefully) deduce that yan2zhong4 refer to 'matters' and yan2su4 refers to 'people'.

Some language learners just naturally use lots of good learning strategies; if you're not that sort of person, there's still hope as you can *teach* yourself to become a more effective learner by imitating the strategies that good language learners use.

The good language learner uses a greater *quantity* as well as a wider *variety* of strategies. The secret of success is the ability to match the strategy with the demands of the task in hand, e.g. getting difficult-to-remember vocabulary into your long-term memory by

using the 'Vocabulary Box' (see the article Memorizing Vocabulary). So, a varied repertoire (i.e. a 'bag' full of good strategies) is key, so that at any time one can be pulled out and pressed into service as and when needed. Note, however, whether the strategy is suited to your present *level* in Chinese, e.g. although watching television is often helpful, when you only understand very little of the content, you would be better using other strategies more appropriate to your present level.

Although your Learning Style (i.e. your preferred approach to learning Chinese) will affect which strategies you like to employ, you should also be willing to use strategies that don't suit your *style* if the strategy fits the learning *task*. This will mean being willing to step out of your comfort zone at times, e.g. if you are strongly visual but your listening comprehension is weak, you should be willing to regularly use strategies that will strengthen your listening, e.g. joining in a conversation with Chinese people (= more challenging) or listening to recordings of other Chinese textbooks (= less threatening), even if you don't enjoy this quite so much.

It is important to regularly *reflect* on your language learning – especially your thought processes (e.g. are you more analytical or more intuitive?), as well as the methods you are using – as this will give you fresh insights as to how effective your overall approach is, e.g. you note that the way you normally learn the new vocabulary in each lesson is simply to work through the vocabulary list in the textbook. However, you begin to think: "Just how effective is my method? Is there a better way?". Writing a language learning journal will therefore help you better reflect and evaluate the use of your learning strategies.

So, in summary, first plan which strategy best fits the task in hand, then put it into action, and finally reflect on how effective it was.

The two articles Language Learner Strategies 1 and Language Learner Strategies 2 give you many helpful ideas as to how to get Chinese in (memory strategies) and how to get it out (communication strategies).