

# A Critical Review of “Understanding changes in Chinese students’ strategy uses of learning strategies in China and Britain: A socio-cultural re-interpretation” by Gao, X (2006)

\*Ribut Wahyudi

Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

(ribut@bsi.uin-malang.ac.id)

## Abstract

Doing a critical review of a research report in language learning is very crucial for at least two aspects. Firstly, it can sharpen the horizon of research methods and techniques for researchers, language educators, and graduate students. Secondly, it will open a broader perspective of language learning itself and its related issues. These two aspects certainly take an important role in the teaching L2 language and SLA research, upon which this critical review stands.

**Key words:** critical review, language learning, validity, reliability, triangulation.

## Introduction

This paper will critique the article entitled “Understanding Changes in Chinese student’s uses of learning strategies in China and Britain: A socio-cultural re-interpretation” by Gao, X. (2006). *System*, 34, 55-67. It is reinterpretation of his MA dissertation. Investigating what L2 learner’s strategies are and the reasons why learners employ various strategies in different settings is salient issue for language learners (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Takeuchi, 2003). This might highlight insightful contributions toward language educators (in both countries) to help learners in managing the problems. As learning a language is learning

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about culture, it is remarkably significant to view also the socio cultural issues governing learner's choices for strategy use (Rao, 2006), as this might possibly portray the way how learners cope with new cultures in language learning. These perspectives encourage me to analyse the topic.

### **The background of research**

In his theoretical background, Gao (2006) summarised that learning strategy is "process consciously selected by the language learners to enhance the learning and/or use of a second and foreign language" (Cohen, 1998 in Gao, 2006). To back up his research, he summarised several researcher's work such as (Donato and MacCormick, 1994; Ellis, 1994, Mc Donough, 1999; Wenden, 1998 in Gao, 2006). From these, he described that the majority of research in language strategy is trying to record and categorise L2 strategy use along with their relationship with a number of factors used to develop their language learning. Furthermore (Carson and Longhini, 2002; Gao, 2003; He, 2002 cited in Gao, 2006; Takeuchi, 2003) contended that strategy use for L2 learners is dynamic and context situated. Stemming from these stand points, he used a *socio-cultural approach* to comprehend learner strategy use with the 14 Chinese students in UK. In the report, he tried to answer how mediating factors such as: *discourses in language learning, object (assessment), and agents (language teachers, experts, family etc)* do mediate student's strategy use in China and Britain.

In conducting his research, the researcher used *qualitative approach* by employing *retrospective interview*, questioning learners' nine month experience living in UK, as the technique. He also identified learner's motivation and strategy use in two contexts (China and Britain) and the reasons why learners opted for particular strategies. The interview for 13 respondents was done in Chinese and for 1 respondent is not in Chinese which were recorded in

verbatim. This becomes the source of *exploratory analysis*. But the researcher did not explain why the interviews in different languages. This should be explained so that the readers know whether these would affect the result of the interview. Moreover, the researcher did not mention the proficiency level of the learners. This is salient as learners with different proficiency level might exercise different strategy use (Park, 1997; Griffith, 2008).

The result of the research denotes that Chinese learners' motivation of learning English is, most of all, to pursue social and economic mobility as well as to gain to social capital. This is according to (Gao 2006; Rao, 2006), rooted from historical and cultural development in China. This becomes *discourse of their language learning* functioning as pervasive motivational force for the learners to study in UK. *Object (assessment)* also takes prominent role in their English language learning process. In China, as English competence has to be proved by standard exams to enter academic and professional communities, it affects learning strategy use in the language classroom (Donato and MacCormic, 1994: cited in Gao, 2006; Rao, 2006). Some informants confirmed that their strategy uses in China were highly triggered by this assessment. However this strategy, to some extent, shifted in UK (Joseph, 2004). This was due to the fact that they did not have to take any English test but instead English coursework assessment. They learned more vocabularies that have something to do with their coursework study. Another aspect controlling their learning was agents (teachers, learning experts, and family etc). In China, learners usually do what teachers suggest like rote memorization strategies, learning vocabulary from the internet etc (Gao, 2006,p. 62), while in the UK they also learned words from local people, 'acquired competence' (Krashen, 1976) and leaving vocabulary notebook (p.64).

In his conclusion, he describes that *learning discourses, assessment methods, and agents (teachers, language experts, family)* determined the way of learning in China. However, the power of learning discourse in UK was diminishing as there was no English standard exam, while the influential agents, for some learners, shifted from teachers to supportive English speakers. The researcher further contended that the learners still had uncertainties about English learning and therefore needed continuous learning assistance for language learning adjustment and strategy use.

### **The critical review based on research methods.**

In conducting the critical review, this paper will explore the issue of *reliability, validity* and *triangulation*.

Since *reliability* accounts for consistency and replicability (Dornyei, 2007) it is important though to conduct the same research within the same area to know whether the researcher's findings show similar results with other researchers. Furthermore, investigator evaluation, using multiple observers to examine the same data, might be useful (Mackey and Gas, 2005). So far, through my research in online database, I have not found the similar research designating on Chinese students' strategy use in UK and China. Should this be the case, another research must be conducted to enhance the degree of reliability.

In viewing the research from Maxwell taxonomy of qualitative research, there are some aspects off *validity* in this research that must be examined. The first is *interpretive validity*. It refers to the feedback from the participants in the form of discussion of the finding with participants (Dornyei, 2007). As the researcher did not report participants' feedback on that area, it would be more plausible and insightful if those were included. But in terms of *theoretical validity*, the research has explained well the underlying theory in relation to the phenomenon

by providing adequate explanations that learning strategies are context situated and thorough explanation on socio-cultural factors such as learning discourses, assessment methods and influential agents employed in China and UK. This explained the research question about how the above socio-cultural factors mediate students' strategy use in these countries.

However, his *theoretical triangulation*, using multiple perspectives to analyse the same set of data (Mackey and Gas, 2005), by formulating *grounded theory approach* followed by socio-cultural approached in the initial analysis (p.58) needs to be explained more. The researcher might view the lack of result in grounded theory in the initial analysis and the insights why socio-cultural approach did fit best to complement it. By doing this, the readers would know the reasons why grounded theory should be supported by socio-cultural approach. In terms of *evaluative validity*, the researcher confessed that the research has limitation in many aspects. This is considered important in every research as no research is perfect (Dornyei, 2007). This illuminate future related research in language learning environment and strategy use.

### **Concluding remark**

After reading carefully this research report, I gain more insightful understanding especially in the area of learning strategies. For example, how *introspective interview* is used to get the understanding about the subtle relationship about socio-cultural factors and the shift of learning strategy use in China and UK, the procedure taken as well as the list of interview questions. However, by trying to check and confirm it to the theories in research methods, I found some rooms which might need to be fixed both in terms of *reliability* and *validity*. (1362 words)

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