An Empirical Study on the Learning Strategies of Trilingual Learners

BU Jianfeng[a],[b],*

[a]Doctoral student, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.
[b]Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Huizhou University, Huizhou, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Double-foreign-language programs have been set in many Chinese universities in the past 20 years. In these universities, some learners have succeeded in learning the second and the third languages, whereas others have not. To explore tentatively the reasons of the learners' success(or failure) in the language acquisition, the researcher conducts the current research from the perspective of learning strategies. By investigating 126 Chinese-English-Japanese trilingual learners in a Chinese university, the research attempts to answer the two questions: 1. Are learners succeeding in learning the second language also successful in learning the third one? 2. What are the differences between the successful trilingual learners and the poor learners in terms of their use of learning strategies? Based on the data of the test results, questionnaires and interviews on the said participants, the researcher finds that learners successful in the second language learning tend to be successful in the third one. Meanwhile in contrast to poor learners, the good trilingual learners have stronger and more balanced motivations in learning both languages, and they use the metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies more frequently.

Key words: Language learning strategies; Good language learner; Third language acquisition; Double-foreign-language program

1. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is the global norm, whereas monolingualism is the exception. Third language acquisition is common in many parts of the world, especially among populations of immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, traditionally, research on monolingualism has largely been prioritized over multilingualism (Cummins 2009; Hirosh and Degani 2018). The research of third language acquisition(TLA) had not been regarded as a separate area from second language acquisition(SLA) until the beginning of the 21st century. Nevertheless, third language acquisition is a dynamic cognitive system that is qualitatively different from second language acquisition(Cummins 2007), and multilinguals have demonstrated advantages over monolinguals or bilinguals in terms of linguistic repertoire, metalinguistic awareness and learning strategies, etc. Realizing the important difference between TLA and SLA and the former's advantages, third language acquisition has become a magnet in the field of language acquisition research in recent years. Yet related studies are far from being mature, especially the research on learning strategies of trilingual learners is rarely found.

In Chinese schools, trilingual learners are mainly from two groups. One group is the students from ethnic minorities, whose mother tongue is the minority language, Mandarin being the second language and English the third language learned at school. The other is the group of students who are native Chinese speakers and study two or more foreign languages in university. The program of learning two or more foreign languages in China's universities are called Double-foreign-language Speciality or Multilingual Speciality. The current research

will confine to the students of Double-foreign-language Speciality. Learning two foreign languages with a 4 or 5-year program is really a difficult task for the students. Some of them have succeeded and some others have not. Motivated by this observation, we will conduct the current research to explore tentatively the reasons of the trilingual learners' success(or failure) in the language acquisition from the perspective of learning strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Double-Foreign-Language Speciality in China's Universities

Double-foreign-language study is a new speciality set in some universities in China. The aim of setting up the speciality is to cultivate language talents with good commands of two foreign languages, so that they can better meet the diversified demands of the society and hence can be more competitive in the job market. The cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents can be traced back to as early as the 1980s when Shanghai Foreign Language University initiated the speciality of Spanish and English study. The cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents was encouraged by the Chinese government, as in 1999 the Foreign Language Teaching Committee of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education proposed the cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents to be one of the cultivation modes of foreign language talents. In responds to the proposal, some universities established the speciality of double foreign languages. Among them, there are not only some prestigious comprehensive universities and universities specialized in foreign language studies, like Beijing Normal University, Beijing Foreign Language University, Shanghai Foreign Language University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, but also some local universities of intermediate level, like Huizhou University where the researcher works. Huizhou University established the four-year program of English+Japanese in 2006, and then Japanese+English two years later.

As the goal of setting up the speciality is to cultivate bi-foreign-language talents, that means graduates should have very good command of one foreign language, and meanwhile have adequate knowledge and language competence of the other. They are expected to use both the two foreign languages skillfully in their work after graduation. However, this is not a goal that can be easily achieved for the students, no matter they are from famous universities, or from common universities. This is partly due to the learning context in China, where students usually have little opportunities to use the foreign language in daily communications outside classroom, i.e. students learn the language in a foreign language learning context rather than a second language context.

Prior studies indicate that one of the major problems faced by the students of double-foreign-language study is the lack of time for self-learning after class as a result of heavy burden of in-class study--the students usually have 28 class hours or more per week(Chen 2009; Bu 2018). Therefore the only way out seems to enhance their learning efficiency by improving the learning strategy. In reality, some students of this speciality do succeed in learning both the two languages, whereas some others do not. Thus to explore tentatively the reasons of the learners' success(or failure) in the language acquisition, so as to shed light on the problem of improving learning efficiency, the researcher conducts the current research from the perspective of learning strategies.

2.2 Third Language Acquisition

As the current study investigates university students from the double-foreign-language speciality, who are actually trilingual learners, so the study will involves the issue of third language acquisition. Third language acquisition, or TLA usually denotes "the acquisition of a language that is different from the first and the second, and is acquired after them"(Cenoz 2013), and TLA also refers to the STUDY of third language acquisition. Before 21st century, TLA had not received much attention from researchers, and traditionally it was even considered as a subsidiary branch of the second language acquisition research. Nevertheless, with more research into this area, recognizing that there are fundamental differences between TLA and SLA, many researchers propose that TLA should be studied as a field independent from SLA(Zeng and Li 2010). Then in recent years third language acquisition has become a relatively new area that has expanded rapidly, and also a magnet of research in such areas as language acquisition, language processing and multilingualism.

The research fields of TLA that have drawn most attention are cross-linguistic influence on the acquisition of a third language and the influence of bilingualism on it. The major findings in relation to these two research areas are: 1. There is cross-linguistic influence from the languages that are known by learners; 2. Learners' prior experiences of language learning would influence the learning of a third language. That is to say, both the prior linguistic knowledge and language learning experiences of the learner may influence the subsequent learning of a new language. Such influences, particularly the influences from the later, tend to be positive--many studies confirm the advantages of bilingualism over monolingualism when learning a new language.

Most research suggests that bilinguals have advantages over monolinguals when they learn an additional language. Many case studies of multilingual speakers report that previous acquired languages are useful and that these languages are used as a basis during the process of their acquisition of an L3, L4, or L5(e.g. Tonkin 2009; Todeva 2009). Studies on learners in bilingual programs

find that bilingual learners outperform monolingual learners in the third language in terms of oral and written proficiency and pragmatic competence(e.g. Cenoz and Valencia 1994; Lasagabaster 2000; Sanz 2000; Safont 2005). Laboratory studies of artificial grammar also report that multilingual learners demonstrate greater flexibility than monolinguals in the use of learning strategies(Nation and McLaughlin 1986; Mclanghlin and Nayak 1989; Nayak et al. 1990).

Most researchers explain the advantages of bilinguals over monolinguals in TLA with three reasons. Firstly, higher level of metalinguistic awareness. Second, wider range of learning strategies. Thirdly, broader linguistic repertoire available in TLA as compared to SLA. TLA shares many characteristics of SLA, but there are also differences. TLA learners have at least mastered two languages, and they can use this linguistic repertoire when learning a new language. For instance, they can relate new grammar, new lexical items, and new expressing ways to the two previous acquired languages. In addition, learners who have learned a second language are more experienced in language learning. They probably have developed certain learning strategies. When learning a third language, these strategies can be reactivated and used for new learning tasks(Cenoz 2013).

2.3 Learning Strategies

Another research issue related to this study is language learning strategy. Learning strategies are defined in various ways. Oxford's definition is a widely-adopted one: "Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations"(Oxford 1990). However, Oxford's definition does not include beliefs on learning, which are considered by some researchers crucial to effective language learning and should be a integral part of learning strategy(e.g. Cheng 2002; Wen 1996). Thus the current research will define the term in this way: language learning strategies are the techniques or deliberate actions taken by learners in order to make the learning more successful, and they also include learners' beliefs on language learning.

Research of language learning strategy originates in the studies of the "Good Language Learner", or GLL. Rubin's release of her research findings in the article "What the 'Good Language Learner' can Teach us?" in 1975 can be regarded as the beginning of research of this area. In her study, Rubin(1975) discussed 7 strategies used by successful language learners: 1. preparedness to guess; 2. attempt to communicate; 3. willingness to appear foolish; 4. attention to form; 5. practicing; 6. monitoring one's own and other's speech; 7. attending to meaning. Following Rubin, Naiman et al. (1978) also proposed the general strategies identified on successful language learners: 1. active task approach;

2. realization of language as a system; 3. realization of language as a means of communication and interaction; 4. management of affective demands; 5. monitoring L2 performance. The focus of later research shift to the comparison of the strategies by successful learners and unsuccessful learners. For example, Huang and Van Naersson(1985) after comparing the differences between 20 high-proficiency and 20 low-proficiency Chinese learners of English, posited the following findings: 1. No significant differences between high- and low-proficiency learners with regard to formal practice and monitoring; 2. Significant differences for some functional practice strategies: speaking L2 with others, thinking in English, and participation in oral group activities. Gillette (1987) employed extensive classroom observation, questionnaires and interviews to investigate beginners of L2 Spanish and successful learners of L2 French, and identified the characteristics of successful learners: instrumental motivation; auto-authoritarian; high self-esteem or confident; tolerant of ambiguity; one learner risk-taker but other learner rarely volunteers in class; good at getting "big picture" without worrying about details; aware of learning process; "active thinking"; self-regulated; individualized approach to learning; focus on meaning rather than on conscious rules; errors seen as useful tool for learning. In 1994 Rod Ellis, synthesizing the findings of the above researchers and others, proposed five major characteristics of the successful language learner (Ellis, 1994):

1) A concern for language form;
2) A concern for communication;
3) An active task approach;
4) An awareness of the learning process;
5) A capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with the task requirements.

Language learning strategy is a relatively mature research field in second language acquisition. However, most of the language learning strategy research is about the learning of English as the second language, and research on other languages is not commonly seen; studies of the strategy use of trilingual learners are few and sporadic. Some multilingualism research suggests that there are general advantages of multilingualism, but these are not investigated in relation to learning a new language. Other TLA research focuses on learning a new language but does not explore the strategy use in depth. Language learning strategy research explores in detail the strategies used for successful L2 learning but not for L3, or multilingual learning. Therefore the current research tries to bridge these gaps.

2.4 Research Questions

By investigating the strategy use of trilingual learners of double-foreign language speciality, the research will make an attempt to answer the following two questions:

1) Are learners succeeding in learning the second language also successful in learning the third one?

2) What are the differences between the good learners and the poor learners in terms of their learning beliefs and their use of learning strategies?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Instruments

The instruments adopted in the current research are questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires include three copies: "Questionnaire on English Learning", "Questionnaire on Japanese Learning", and "Questionnaire on Bilingual Learning", each of which consists of two parts--language learning beliefs (LLB) and language learning strategies (LLS). The part of LLB is 20 statements on beliefs, such as motivation, confidence, etc. The part of LLS are 54 statements on strategies, covering 6 types of learning strategies, i.e. metacognitive, cognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social strategies. Participants are required to rank how well each statement represent them personally on a scale of 1(never) to 5 (always).

The design of the questionnaires is based on SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) by Oxford(1990) and the Language Learning Approach System by Wen Qiufang (1996). SILL is probably the most widely adopted instrument of language learning strategies, which is proved to have very high reliability and validity in many prior studies. SILL was designed on Oxford's classification of language learning strategies, which categorizes strategies into six types, namely, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social strategies. Wen's Language Learning Approach System is established based on the actual situations of Chinese learners' foreign language learning, proposing that language learning strategies should include two domains--beliefs on language learning and methods for language learning, the latter of which mostly correspond to the learning strategies by Oxford. Therefore, based on Wen's proposal, we divided the questionnaires into two parts-- language learning beliefs and language learning strategies. We constructed 20 statements on language learning beliefs, making it the first part of the questionnaires, and then adapted Oxford's SILL to our study, selecting 54 statements constituting the second part of the questionnaires.

The interviews, containing three questions about the negative language transfer, transference of language strategies and confidence on trilingual learning, are the further investigation into trilingual learning strategy.

3.2 Participants

126 adult trilingual learners participated in this study. They were seniors of Japanese+English Specialty in Huizhou University, who were studying for their 8th semester when the investigation was conducted. All of them have 10-13 years of English learning experience at school, and began to learn Japanese after entering the university, none having experiences of travelling or studying abroad in the target language countries(English-speaking or Japanese-speaking ones) for over a week. All these students' final exam scores for two major courses of English and Japanese from the 4th semester to 7th semester were collected for later analysis.

Based on the final exam scores of the 7th semester, 15 students whose scores of English and Japanese final exams both rank the first 20% among all the students in the same grade were selected as the "good language learners", while another 15 students whose scores rank the last 20% were selected as the "poor language learners". These 30 students would be the subjects of questionnaires. And 4 students selected randomly from the good learners and 4 from the poor learners would be interviewed face to face.

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the final exams and the questionnaires are analyzed with R version 3.6.3. The data analysis comprises two steps. The first is to analyses the correlation (Pearson Correlation) between the scores of English exams and the Japanese exams for the 126 participants. The second step is to analyses the data from the questionnaire. The mean scores for each type of strategies/beliefs on the questionnaires are calculated, and then compared with *T*-test between the good learners and the poor learners.

The qualitative data from the interviews are also examined as supplementary explanation or clarification for the questionnaire data. The answers of the interviewees are recorded, coded and then analyzed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Results of Exam Scores

With regards to the first research question examining whether learners succeeding in learning the second language are also successful in learning third one, results indicate that there are moderate to high correlations between the scores of English exams and the Japanese exams. The exam scores of the 126 students from 4 classes were analyzed in terms of class and semester, to find out the correlations between English exams and Japanese exams. As the data was normally distributed according to the test of normality, parametric statistical tests were appropriate. After the data were examined with Pearson Correlation tests, we obtained the following results (Table 1).

As is shown in the table, in terms of class, there is a significant positive relationship between the English and Japanese exam scores (p<0.05). The average correlation coefficients range from $0.61 \sim 0.67$ for the 4 classes,

indicating a moderate to high correlation between the two scores. In terms of semester, there is also a significant positive relationship between the English and Japanese exam scores (p<0.05). The average correlation coefficients range from 0.49∼0.73, indicating a medium to high correlation between the two scores. Meanwhile, correlation coefficients increase with time, becoming highly correlated in the 6th and 7th semesters (r=0.70, r=0.73). The average correlation coefficient based on both class and semester is 0.63. In sum, there is a moderate to high correlation between the English and Japanese exam scores.

Table 1
Correlations between English and Japanese Exam Scores

Class	Semester 4	Semester 5	Semester 6	Semester 7	Average correlation of 4 semesters
Class A	0.48	0.57	0.67	0.75	0.62
Class B	0.50	0.67	0.71	0.72	0.65
Class C	0.48	0.55	0.69	0.71	0.61
Class D	0.51	0.70	0.71	0.75	0.67
Average correlation of 4 classes	0.49	0.62	0.70	0.73	0.63

N=126
p<0.05

4.2 Results of Questionnaires and Interviews

With regards to the second research question examining the differences between the good language learners and the poor learners in terms of their learning strategies, results show that good language learners gain higher scores in the items of intrinsic motivations and beliefs on bilingual learning, and use metacognitive, affective and social strategies more frequently, as compared with poor language learners. Thirty participants, of which 15 were good language learners, and the other 15 were poor language learners, were required to fill in the questionnaires. They were asked to rank how well each statement on the questionnaires represent their actual situations on a scale of 1(never) to 5 (always). The means of scores for the questionnaires were calculated in terms of each types of learning beliefs/strategies, and the means for each domain were compared between the good learners and the poor learners with *T*-test. The results of the items, of which the scores of good language learners are significantly higher than that of poor language learners, are summarized in Table 2.

As seen from the table, in terms of intrinsic motivation, good learners gain significantly higher scores than poor learners no matter for English or Japanese, and motivations for good learners are more balanced than poor learners. As for the item of "beliefs on bilingual learning",

the data shows that good learners gain significantly higher scores than poor learners, indicating good learners are more confident in learning. The scores of the use of metacognitive, affective and social strategies for good learners are significantly higher than poor learners.

Table 2
Differences between Good Learners and Poor Learners on Strategy Use

Learning Beliefs and Strategies	Good Language Learner (Mean, N=15)	Poor Language Learner (Mean, N=15)
Intrinsic motivation for English learning	4.11	3.45
Intrinsic motivation for Japanese learning	4.32	2.46
Beliefs on bilingual learning	4.40	2.87
Metacognitive strategies	4.51	3.01
Affective strategies	3.94	2.45
Social strategies	4.36	3.03

p<0.05

In the interviews, the learners are asked in more detail, the questions about their beliefs on bilingual learning, their learning strategies, and their solutions when encountering some problems of language transfer. The results of the interviews show that all the good learners are very interested in both languages and cultures of the target language countries, and are confident about their bilingual learning. They are highly motivated and active learners. In contrast, the poor learners lack confidence and feel it difficult to learn both languages well, but mostly they do not seek help from others. Meanwhile, for the use of learning strategies, the good learners are flexible in using language learning strategies in accordance with different tasks (e.g. Watch Japanese videos to improve listening ability). Finally, all the good learners interviewed mention that they would transfer some methods of learning English to the learning of Japanese; to improve learning efficiency, they also make comparisons of the grammar, vocabulary of the two languages (L2 and L3), sometimes even of the three languages (L1, L2 and L3).

5. DISCUSSION

For the first research question, we had predicted that learners who are successful in learning the second language can also succeed in learning the third one. The research results largely support this hypothesis as the learners' English exam scores have positively moderate to high correlations with their Japanese exam scores. Moreover, with the enhancement of learners' language proficiency, the correlation reached the high level. At the macro level, these results corroborate the findings of previous studies that have demonstrated significant advantages of multilingual learners over monolingual

learners (Cenoz, 2013). For instance, studies on learners in bilingual programs find that bilingual learners outperform monolingual learners in the third language learning in terms of oral and written proficiency and pragmatic competence (e.g. Cenoz and Valerncia, 1994; Lasagabaster ,2000; Sanz, 2000; Safont, 2005). Many case studies of multilingual speakers report that previous acquired languages are useful and that these languages are used as a basis when they acquire an additional language (e.g. Tonkin, 2009; Todeva, 2009).

For the second research question examining the characteristics of good language learners' beliefs and strategy use, we predicted that good language learners would have higher intrinsic motivations and confidence in language learning, and more frequent use of metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The results support this hypothesis. In terms of intrinsic motivation, good learners gain significantly higher scores than poor learners no matter for English or Japanese, and motivation for good learners are more balanced than poor learners. Since for the item of "beliefs on bilingual learning" in the questionnaires, the related statements are "I believe I can learn both languages well", "It will be easier to learn another one if one has mastered a foreign language", the data shows that good learners gain significantly higher scores than poor learners, indicating good learners are more confident in learning. The scores of the use of metacognitive, affective and social strategies for good learners are significantly higher than poor learners. This suggests that good learners are good at managing their own study, using affective means to encourage themselves, decrease the anxiety from study. They tend to seek opportunity to communicate with others using the language.

The results of the questionnaires are also supported by later interviews. In the interviews, when being asked "Are you confident in learning both the languages well?", all the 4 good learners answered "Yes", whereas all the poor learners responded with "No". These findings conform to those of prior studies which find that good language learners have strong motivations for learning(e.g. Rubin 1975; Ellis 1994). Meanwhile, good language learners use metacognitive, affective and social strategies more frequently than poor learners. Prior studies on learners of second language suggest that they have high awareness about their language learning process, and are good at assessing, managing and controlling their own learning(O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Ellis, 1994). The current research shows similar features for trilingual learners as they frequently use metacognitive strategies to help with the learning. As for the use of affective and social strategies, results of the questionnaires and interviews show that good language learners tend to lower their anxiety in learning by encouraging or

awarding themselves, and they are generally active in communicating activities and flexible in using strategies. These results also conform to most prior studies of bilingual learners (e.g. Rubin, 1981; Huang and Van Naersson, 1985; Ellis, 1994).

It is interesting that all the 4 good learners who were interviewed mentioned that they would transfer some methods of learning English to the learning of Japanese; to improve learning efficiency, they also made comparisons of the grammar, vocabulary, expressing ways of the two languages, sometimes of the three languages (together with the first language). For example, a learner reported that she memorized the Japanese loaded words with the help of the corresponding English words, as many of the Japanese loaded words originate from English. Oxford (1990) classifies the strategies of "switching to mother tongue" as compensation strategies. Most researcher's thinks that compensation strategies tend to cause negative learning effects in bilingual learning, so it is less used by good learners. However, in trilingual learning, good learners sometimes rely on the second language to learn a new one and can produce positive results, so are compensation strategies useful or not, it may be a problem worth further exploration.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates the common features in learning strategies by successful trilingual learners as well as the positive correlation between L2 and L3 learning. Findings suggest that learners who are successful in the second language learning tend to be successful in learning the third one, good trilingual learners have stronger and more balanced motivations in learning both L2 and L3, and they use the metacognitive, affective and social strategies more frequently, as compared with poor learners. Finally, good learners would transfer some strategies of learning the second language to the learning of the third one. We propose that the features in learning strategies by successful trilingual learners observed here may be attributable to higher awareness of language and learning strategy than that of poor learners. As TLA learners have at least two languages in their repertoire, they can use this linguistic repertoire when learning a new language. Moreover, as they have had successful experiences in L2 learning, they probably have developed certain learning methods (or strategies). So when they are faced with the new task of learning an L3, they would reactivate or transfer these strategies in the learning. Nevertheless, the transference of language learning strategy (or compensation strategies as termed by prior research) was not examined in depth in the current study, and this interesting phenomenon remains to be explored in future research.

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