

# **From the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong: Understanding shifts in mainland Chinese students' English learning strategy use**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis reports on a longitudinal ethnographic inquiry into mainland Chinese undergraduates' shifting strategic engagement in acquiring English competence on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong. Taking a sociocultural perspective, the inquiry had three research stages and adopted largely ethnographic data collection methods in research. In the first stage, twenty two mainland Chinese students were interviewed about their language learning experiences on the Chinese mainland, immediately after their arrival in Hong Kong. In the second stage, the study used a variety of means, including regular conversations, strategy checklist, observation, field notes, and email correspondence, to follow six case study students' language learning experiences in Hong Kong, of which four cases are presented in this thesis. In the third stage, fifteen out of the twenty two participants who were interviewed two years ago were interviewed for the second time about their language learning experiences in Hong Kong.

This multi-method approach allowed the study to project a holistic picture of dynamic changes in the participants' strategy use in response to the shifting learning contexts. The inquiry identified that the participants' strategy use in both contexts was closely related to the mediation of various social agents, including family members,

teachers, and peers, who attempted to transmit dominant societal discourses into the participants' value/belief systems underlying their strategic learning efforts. In addition, artifacts such as high stakes exams were also found to have mediated their strategy use. These findings lend support to an argument that language learners' strategy use results from the interaction between learner agency and learning context. In other words, learners' strategy use is often a constrained choice or a choice made possible by contextual conditions, but nevertheless a choice made by language learners. This means that agency is a prerequisite to making choices in strategy use for language learners. This also means that language learners adopt particular learning strategies within a learning space constrained or facilitated by contextual realities. Therefore, these findings imply that language learners need to be not only advised on strategy use but also empowered to create and sustain a supportive learning niche for using particular strategies. The findings also suggest that language teachers' learner development practices be broadened to include sociocultural and micro-political capacities, not just strategic learning capacity. In addition, language learners should be encouraged to examine and re-examine the value/belief system underlying their strategic learning efforts. Further research is needed to explore the role of contextual mediation on learners' strategy use and help teachers provide appropriate support to language learners in particular learning contexts.