

# A Case Study of Chinese University Students' Portuguese Learning Strategies in a Multilingual Environment in Macau

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**Abstract:** Aiming at the phenomenon of a large number of Chinese students studying in Macao in recent years, this study investigates the language learning strategy behaviours of two Chinese international students at University A in Macao as well as two mainland students who went to Macao for a one-year exchange as case studies. Based on the relevant theories of second language acquisition, the interviews and observation records were qualitatively analysed, and the characteristics of Chinese international students' implementation of language learning strategies in a multilingual environment and the related influences were explored. The findings suggest that language learning strategy behaviour is a dynamic process of continuous interaction between the learning context and individual learners, reflecting individual variability and uncertainty. International students need to weigh the relationship between Portuguese and English learning strategies, and to complement each other's strengths in order to improve their learning strategies. Students who come to study in Macau should make full use of the multilingual environment in order to obtain the positive effects of this environment.

**Keywords:** Language learning strategies, Multilingual environment, International students.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, affected by the Covid-19 and other factors, Chinese students have shown a tendency to study in nearby countries and regions, and in view of the current international situation, studying in Macao has become a popular choice for many students, according to the statistics of a study abroad organisation (QiDe), the customer service data from 2016-2020 shows that the number of inquiries for studying in Macau has been on an upward trend in the past five years, and the number of inquiries for studying in Macau in 2020 has increased by 46.5% compared with 2019, and has continued to grow in recent years.

As a former Portuguese colony and one of the few Special Administrative Regions in China, Macao is currently playing the role of an exchange platform for the promotion of the "One Belt, One Road" towards the Portuguese-speaking countries, where people from different countries and regions converge, and where the diversity of languages and cultures collide, constituting a multilingual environment unique to Macao. The university classrooms in Macau are also deeply influenced by this environment. Teachers from different countries and regions give lectures in different languages, and Portuguese, as one of the official languages of Macau, is taught in all universities. However, when facing a brand-new foreign language other than English, international students in Macau often face great challenges when learning Portuguese, and on the one hand, they need to make efforts to adapt to the foreign education model and living environment, and on the other hand, they need to find appropriate strategies for learning Portuguese. Therefore, this study focuses on the language learning strategies of Portuguese learners and explores three specific questions: the trajectory of Portuguese learning strategies of different individuals and the interaction between individual differences and contextual factors involved; whether Portuguese learning strategies are affected

by English learning strategies; and whether Portuguese learning strategies are affected in the multilingual environment of Macau.

## 2. Language Learning Strategy

### 2.1. Definitions of Language learning strategy

Scholars at home and abroad have given different definitions from different perspectives. Representatively, Chamot, O'Malley and others think that learning strategies are the skills, methods and conscious behaviours used by learners to assist learning; Rubin suggests that learning strategies are strategies that help learners to develop their self-constructed language system and directly affect learning; Oxford argues that learning strategies are actions taken by learners to make language learning more effective, interesting and autonomous; Ellis suggests that learning strategies refer to the mental behaviours or actions of learners associated with a particular stage in the whole process of language acquisition or language use.[1] To sum up, learning strategies are systematic strategies that learners consciously and spontaneously construct to help them learn a language, and the rational application of learning strategies by language learners can effectively improve their learning results, therefore, the teaching, research and application of language learning strategies are particularly important nowadays.

### 2.2. Factors affecting learning strategies

The research on language learning strategies started in the 1970s and mainly summarised the characteristics of good language learners from a static perspective. [2] However, with the development of psychology and the change of research trend from "how to teach" to "how to learn" in the foreign language education sector[1], In the 1990s, some researchers began to adopt a dynamic perspective to study the changes in learning strategies and the factors affected by them, and found

that learning strategies change according to the learning situation, which is a kind of complex behaviour.[3]Rod Ellis, on the basis of previous studies, attributed these factors to two categories, one is the personal differences of learners, including beliefs, affective states, learner factors, learning experience, which focuses on the learning experience. The second category is situational social factors, which focuses on individual factors, including age, aptitude, learning style, motivation and so on. The second category is situational-social factors, in which situational factors include target language, setting, task performed, and social factors are mainly gender factors.[5] This study will focus on the differences in individual strategies and the influence of the learning environment.

### **2.3. Research on Language Learning Strategies of Chinese Overseas Students**

In recent years, second language acquisition researchers have gradually emphasised the application of ecological perspectives as well as cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives to understand the process of language learning, and have argued that language learning is not only the cognitive acquisition of knowledge, rules and sequences of the target language by learners, but also the socialisation process of adapting and integrating into the learning environment and the community of language speakers[6,7], in this case, It is worth exploring and studying the language learning strategies of the university students in the multilingual environment of Macao and whether the environment has any influence on the language learning strategies.

However, there is not enough research on language learning strategies of foreign students in China. Gao Xuesong is an early researcher in China who applied qualitative research methods to explore the language learning strategies of Chinese students in foreign and overseas study contexts. He examined the use of English language learning strategies of a number of mainland Chinese students when they studied abroad in universities in the UK and Hong Kong, and found that, through longitudinal investigations and horizontal comparisons, the language learning strategies of Chinese students were influenced by their past learning and growing environments, as well as the specific social and cultural environments during their study abroad. Through longitudinal investigation and cross-sectional comparison, he found that the language learning strategies of Chinese international students are influenced by their past learning and growing up environments, as well as the specific socio-cultural environments during their study abroad, and these influences continue to shape the learners' knowledge, understanding and ability to cope with the learning situation, resources (including learning materials, teachers and classmates, etc.), and the learning process.[8]

Based on the research of Gao Xuesong, Huang Zhiguang explored the English and Thai learning strategies of Chinese international students in Thailand. He conducted a longitudinal case study of three university students studying in Thailand, and found that language learning strategy behaviour is a dynamic process of continuous interaction between the learning context and individual learners' factors, which embodies the unity of certainty and uncertainty, and that certain episodic events in the past experiences may also have unpredictable effects on learning strategies. The study found that the behaviour of language learning strategies is a

dynamic process of continuous interaction between the learning context and individual learners.[8]

In view of the fact that there are few studies on the learning strategies of language learners in China using a case study approach, and few of them deal with the learning strategies of non-generic languages[10], the present study focuses on two Portuguese interpreting students studying at the University of Macao A and two mainland students who went to Macao for exchange programmes, and through the survey, attempts to reveal the language learning strategies they adopted from the time they enrolled in the university until their third year of university, as well as the related influencing factors.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Participant**

Two of the four participants in this study (hereafter referred to as EFGH students) started their studies at the University of Macao A in August 2020 and majored in Chinese-Portuguese/Chinese Translation, while the other two went to Macao for a one-year exchange programme in their third year of university and also majored in Chinese-Portuguese/Chinese Translation. According to the four participants, none of them had any basic knowledge of Portuguese before enrolling in the programme, and all of them started learning Portuguese from scratch.

### **3.2. Research tools and research process**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology and the data collection tools used included semi-structured interviews, observations, and a follow-up web-based chat tool (WeChat). The data for the study consisted primarily of audio recordings of interviews with each of the four participants on 25 July 2023 and the corresponding text transcripts. The interviews were one-on-one online semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text for data analysis.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Portuguese Learning Strategies**

Student A combines her hobbies with her Portuguese learning strategies, using Portuguese films and videos to improve her listening skills, and using the Portuguese information she comes across in her daily life as her learning materials. However, when she first came into contact with Portuguese, she said: "I would focus on copying and writing, and put all the work in to practice, whether it was memorising words or grammar. However, she later realised that this seemed to make her mute, so she made Portuguese learning a daily routine, once she had the opportunity to communicate with native speakers, she bravely opened her mouth to practice even when she could not fully understand what they were saying. Obviously, A. reflected on her own learning strategies during the process of learning Portuguese, and then summarised a more flexible learning strategy that suited her own set of learning strategies.

Student B's most important learning strategy is not to memorise but to become familiar with it. She "becomes familiar" with the word or grammar by inputting a large amount of information in Portuguese, such as sentences rich in complex grammar and new words, and by repeating the information over and over again, without intentionally

carrying out the action of "memorising" it. She repeats the information without intentionally "memorising" it, thus "familiarising" herself with the word or the grammar, from the first impression to the later one that she knows by heart. At the same time, she has been influenced by the theory of second language acquisition in the process of learning Portuguese, and she thinks about her own learning strategies from the perspective of a pedagogue, and learns in a result-oriented way. She describes: For example, if I think I should improve a certain part of my speaking, I will create a situation for myself to improve, and I will learn in a targeted way, instead of launching into all aspects of my learning without a sense of direction. It can be seen that Student B has always had a clear awareness of learning strategies and has used second language acquisition theory to review her original learning strategies, which is attributed to her good foundation in language learning as well as her motivation and knowledge of the language resulting from her continuous accumulation of learning experiences.

When C first started learning Portuguese, she adopted a traditional learning strategy, using the method of organising notes, recording what the teacher said every day in small points, recording to a certain number, then summarising by topic, and then subdividing into the different knowledge involved, so as to establish a basic system. In the process of memorising the basics, whether it is vocabulary or grammar, she uses the traditional rote learning method, however, she reflects on this learning strategy and thinks: "Some of the vocabulary is in fact very difficult to use, and some of it exceeds my Portuguese language ability, so rote learning without prioritisation wastes a lot of time to memorise things that are not so important at the moment, resulting in more basic and more important things that should be mastered not being mastered." After a lot of contact with native Portuguese speakers and receiving a lot of Portuguese teaching from foreign teachers, she realised that she did not need to memorise a lot of words, but also adopted the "familiarity" strategy used by Student B. By repeating a lot of inputs, she was able to master the Portuguese language. It can be seen that the experience of studying in Macau has enabled student C to gradually get rid of the concept of rote learning at home, and to develop a learning method of Portuguese through the use of the Portuguese language.

In the case of student D, the accumulation of vocabulary and grammatical applications was achieved by reading and memorising a large number of articles in Portuguese. She said that in order to consolidate what she had learnt, she usually needed to use vocabulary and grammatical structures in real life by making sentences or intentionally applying them. In the second semester of her second year of study, she started to pay more attention to the accumulation of learning through reading and deliberately applying them in her daily life to achieve the purpose of memorisation. Moreover, due to her outgoing personality, she would seize the opportunity to communicate with native speakers of Portuguese in Australia, such as exchange students from Portuguese-speaking countries and tutors, and imitated their pronunciation and communication styles, so as to improve her listening and speaking skills. Overall, D has made good use of the multilingual environment in Macau, both in the classroom and in her daily life after school, and she has been able to make effective use of the information around her.

As we can see, there are some similarities between the four participants' Portuguese learning strategies, but there are also

some differences, as they all gradually got rid of the traditional rote learning method and chose a more flexible and comprehensive learning strategy, which is reflected in the fact that they pay more attention to the practical use of the language, as well as the accumulation of linguistic knowledge outside of the classroom, and so on. Depending on their personalities, they choose their own learning styles[11], either through communication with native speakers or through reading, film and television.

#### **4.2. Portuguese Learning Strategies Influenced by English Learning Strategies**

It was because of the good response to the use of films and music as English learning resources that Student A tried to access Portuguese films and music during her Portuguese learning process, however, Portuguese resources are not as abundant as English resources, so she often faced more difficulties in finding such resources. She said that the learning strategies she used in learning Portuguese were generally the same as those used in English.

B's Portuguese learning strategies were also influenced by her English learning strategies, for example, her Portuguese learning strategies of repetition and familiarity were also due to the obvious positive feedback from her English learning practice. She said: firstly, English is closer to Chinese than Portuguese, so she would use the English learning process as a kind of reference and inspiration; secondly, she believes that many methods of learning a foreign language are similar, for example, the methods of intensive and extensive reading, mimeographing, dictation, etc. in English, which she would also use in Portuguese.

For C, the influence of language learning strategies on Portuguese learning strategies is two-sided, there are both positive and negative influences. For example, when she first started to learn Portuguese, she used the same strategy as she did for English learning, starting with word memorisation, however, she found that it was difficult for her to make great progress in a short time with this rote learning method, and she found it difficult to follow the progress of the professor in the foreign language classes. However, she found it difficult to make much progress in a short period of time and to keep up with the progress of the professor in the foreign teacher's class. However, learning English in the past did bring a lot of convenience to Portuguese learning, she said: "Learning English did help me to make fewer detours when learning Portuguese, for example, by applying the habit of organising my notes that I had developed when I was learning English to Portuguese learning, so that I could be more organised when I started to learn Portuguese, and it was easy for me to review and check them, so as to lay a good foundation for my future learning.

D has applied the good learning strategies she developed when learning English to her Portuguese studies, and has been implementing the practice of accumulating language knowledge through reading and organizing excerpts. She said, "I will organize and excerpt all the notes I take in class in another book for reviewing at a later stage. I think this is a method of learning a foreign language accumulated in the process of learning English in the past, which is very helpful for me to learn Portuguese. " And she summarized the shortcomings of English learning strategies and gradually shifted her focus to listening and speaking.

It can be seen that the learning strategies of Portuguese, as the second foreign language learnt by the four participants,

are all influenced to some extent by the English learning strategies, however, they all have some adjustments to make and will continue to follow the effective language learning strategies and improve the insufficient learning methods according to their own situation.

### 4.3. Influences on Portuguese Learning Strategies in a Multilingual Environment in Macau

Students A and B were both Mainland university students who came to Macau for a one-year exchange programme, and their learning strategies were affected to some extent during their stay in Macau. Both of them said that in the mainland China, they usually learnt Portuguese in Chinese, focusing on grammar and linguistic phenomena, the accumulation of corpus, etc. In Macau, however, Portuguese is usually taught by native Portuguese speakers, who do not have clear plans and requirements for each lesson, and use a very procedural approach to teaching as mainland teachers do, but rather present a phenomenon of language interaction, which enables them to understand more about the way native speakers think, thus deepening their language learning, and in the multilingual classroom, they will pay more attention to their listening and speaking skills, and outside the classroom, they will also get to know native Portuguese speakers so as to practise their oral communication skills. The ubiquitous presence of Portuguese signs in Macau had a different impact on the two participants, with student A stating that most of our Portuguese learning behaviours in other parts of China are active and self-motivated, but in an environment such as Macau, where you can see signs in Portuguese everywhere you go, and you can read official notices in Portuguese too, there is always a subtle effect of learning in this environment. And student B said: There is some influence, but not as much as I thought. Because she tends not to pay too much attention to these trivial and fragmented information. Comparing to students C and D, students A and B, when they first came to study in Macau, they could not keep up with the pace of the professor and could not understand the accents of different regions, such as Brazilian accent, but in the course of one year's study, through optimising the learning strategies and methods, such difficulties have been gradually overcome. In general, the impact of Portuguese learning strategies in a multilingual environment in Macau varies from person to person, and the degree of impact varies from one individual to another, but the impact is mostly positive and more favourable to the participants' learning of the Portuguese language, which needs to be fully utilised by the learners.

## 5. Conclusions

Focusing on the language learning of four participants at University A, this study demonstrates the dynamic nature of language learning strategies as well as their individual variability. Each of them implemented strategic adjustments to overcome the Portuguese learning difficulties they encountered in the face of changes in the learning environment and the cognitive changes that resulted from them. The four participants' strategies for learning Portuguese were somewhat similar, but at the same time underwent different developmental trajectories, reflecting the dynamic nature of language learning strategies, their certainty and uncertainty, and the challenges posed by the multilingual environment to the participants' learning and use of the

language, as well as the benefits of overcoming these challenges. Strategies for learning a foreign language show a certain degree of correlation, with the learning strategies of the first foreign language influencing the learning strategies of the second foreign language to a certain extent, and all four participants followed the effective strategies for learning English in the past, and then combined them with their own situations to form a new mode of learning. The multilingual environment in Macau had a positive impact on the two mainland participants who studied in Macau, mainly in terms of multilingual teaching in the classroom and communication with native Portuguese speakers.

Thus, educators need to understand the diversity of learning strategies and individual differences, not to change learners' learning strategies forcibly, but to help learners understand the complex impact of the learning environment and the characteristics of their own individual factors on their learning, as well as the advantages and disadvantages, so as to optimise their own learning strategies.[12] For international students in multilingual environments, they should actively adopt effective ways to integrate into the local environment, actively explore new effective learning methods, coordinate the relationship between English learning strategies and Portuguese learning strategies, and make appropriate strategic adjustments according to the specific situation to ensure the smooth progress of their studies.

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