

Title:

Understanding the Current Stages of Three English Morphemes between two Groups of Chinese Learners.

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Biography:

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Abstract

A few researchers have conducted studies on how a second language has been developed by learners in different contexts (Rivers, 1998; Talburt and Stewart, 1999; Yoshino, 1992 and McMeeKin, 2003). However, not enough research has been conducted on learners developing a second language in a homestay context. In fact very little research has been carried out specifically for Chinese learners of English learning in a homestay context. In order to shed light specifically on Chinese learners of English, this study investigates the current stages of the acquisition of three English morphemes between two groups of Chinese learners studying in different contexts. One group has been living with English native speakers in a homestay context for at least six months and the other group has been living with non-native speakers for the same period of time. The aim is to predict whether learners who study in a homestay context can outperform learners who do not immerse in the same context. The three English morphemes studied in this investigation are past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular morphemes. Following the developmental hierarchy for English morphology advanced by Pienemann (2005), the findings of this study show that the learners studying in the homestay contexts outperformed the group who live with the non-native speakers in terms of these three morphemes.

Key words: Three English morphemes; Chinese Learners; homestay and non-homestay context

I. Introduction

Students, researchers and teachers alike suppose that truly practical competence in a second language acquisition requires spending time living in the country where the language is spoken. Frees (1995) stated that it is beneficial for language learners to experience communicating with native speakers in natural settings about real-life matters. This general impression is reinforced by students returning from abroad, who frequently demonstrate significantly improved second language skills and who testify to the value of the experience. In order to validate the above statement, a few researchers investigated how learners improve their language skills in targeted language countries.

Some research has been conducted in different countries such as Rivers' (1998) study of American L2 learners of Russian in Russia; Talburt and Stewart's (1999) research on African-American female students learning Spanish in Spain; as well as Yoshino (1992) and McMeeKin's (2003) study of foreign students learning Japanese in Japan. One of the common claims made about the above research is that the contexts are too different from one another to come to a significant conclusion. Furthermore, not enough research has been conducted in a dormitory or homestay context. Additionally, there is no research specifically studying how Chinese learners of English develop English skills in an English speaking context, especially in a homestay context.

The study reported in this article aims to describe the current stages of English between two groups of Chinese learners; a homestay group of learners who have been living with native speakers for at least six months and a non-homestay group who have been living with non-native speakers for the same period of time as the non-homestay group. The present study specifically focuses on understanding the different stages of three English morphemes: past -ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular. The main reason that the researcher has chosen these three morphemes is that a few researchers have done investigations on these three morphemes in order to discover and compare the learners' degree of progress (Heath, 1983; Calvin, 1999; Allen, 2002; Batstone, 2002; Bradley, 2003). In addition, Krashen (1985) declared that these three morphemes consist of identification of the grammatical category and diacritic features of lexical items that can be validly used to show the learners' proficiency stages or acquisition pace.

II. Literature Review

A series of studies investigated how language learners, who study in the target language context, develop their language skills and improve their language proficiencies (Krapels, 1990; Krashen, 1985; LaPierre, 1994; and Lapkin, 1983).

These studies can be significant because they offer a unique opportunity to observe the language learning process from a number of different perspectives (Anderson, 1990; Ellis, 1994; Freed, 1990). For example, one interesting perspective concerns the influence of the target language culture towards learners. Being immersed into another culture and another language can be challenging but profitable for language learners from different cultures. Polanyi (1995) stated that the host culture and environment sometimes have a positive influence on the language learners regarding acquiring targeted community beliefs, and getting access to specific ways of communication. This claim is supported by Talburt and Stewart (1999), who examined an African-American female student studying Spanish in Spain over one year. The student immersed herself in a Spanish community and learned that the Spanish believed that their language was an 'intergroup language' (Talburt & Stewart, 1999. p, 98), which indicated that speakers should actively take part in communication even if their language proficiency is minimal. Her Spanish communication skills developed rapidly after becoming aware of the belief. In this way she developed some accurate Spanish ways of communication.

Separate from researching on cultural perspective, some research takes the perspective of observing and comparing learners who stay in the dormitory and who stay with homestay families. For example, In Rivers' (1998) exploration, it was found that students living with other American L2 learners of Russian in a dormitory actually outperformed homestay students in terms of gains made in speaking. Surprisingly however, the homestay students outperformed the dormitory students in reading gains, which suggests that the homestay students spent more time reading Russian than interacting with their hosts.

Allen (2002) partly supported Rivers' statements; furthermore, he debated that the success of the homestay experience appears to have a lot to do with how hosts and learners perceive their respective roles. This claim is supported by Knight and Schmidt's (2002) study. The Spanish and Mexican host mothers in their study viewed themselves as surrogate mothers to the learners and took on the roles of conversation partner and teacher. Also in the Mexican context, learners in Law's (2003) study reported spending hours conversing with their host mothers, thereby generating ample input, practice and feedback for their language learning. In contrast, some of the host mothers in other studies (Kinoshita, 2001; Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b) have been characterized by learners as mere landladies so learners were less willing to communicate with the hosts; poor input in turn affects the learners' language development even in the targeted language context.

Apart from researching learners' experience in different living contexts and perspective of roles, some researchers conducted their studies from the perspective of how learners' characteristics influence their language development in the targeted language context. Knight and Schmidt's (2002) study revealed that those who have more open and mature characters improve their language proficiency more quickly

than those who are conservative and timid after studying in the targeted language environment. This finding is strongly supported by Churchill & Margaret's (2006) research. Their results indicated that the development in language proficiency, fluency and accuracy may be related to exposing oneself to some combination of modified and unmodified input in the immersion setting. In other words, it is beneficial for learners who are more outgoing to develop their language skills when they are immersed into the targeted language situation.

Overall, the studies summarized in this review suggest that firstly, the targeted language culture plays a significant role in the learners' language development journey. Secondly, when learners live in dormitories, their speaking skill is improved because they have more chances to communicate with their dorm-mates; while if learners live in a homestay context they are likely to enhance their reading skills. Thirdly, how hosts and learners perceive their respective roles partly determines whether learners successfully develop their language. Finally, the learners' personalities have great influence on learners' language development in the targeted language context. The more extroverted the learners are; the greater the development in their target language acquisition.

While there have been considerable contributions to our understanding of language learners studying abroad in the targeted language context in the past ten years, 'the research ... having largely followed the trail cleared by studies in SLA ... is still in its infancy' (DuFon & Churchill, 2006, p. 26). DuFon & Churchill (2006) also suggested that the results of studying how learners develop language skills in the targeted language context could prove to be a valuable resource for future learners who will go to study abroad. The results are especially valuable for learners to choose appropriate learning strategies when they study in the targeted language context. As Paige et al., (2004) declared 'better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own learning personality, purpose of learning that language, and type of language when immersing in the study abroad context' (Paige et al., 2004, p. 94). Therefore it is essential for researchers to explore this area which is in its infancy to help learners who study abroad to develop their language learning skills and strategies.

Despite how important the research would be as mentioned above, little research has been specifically targeted at the stages of development of Chinese learners of English after immersing themselves in the targeted language context. The four conclusions drawn from the prior research cannot be randomly applied to Chinese learners of English in the context of studying abroad. There is no consistent research carried out to test these conclusions either. It is evident that this is a research gap that researchers can fill with non-empirical studies. In order to shed light on this research area, the present study targets understanding the stages of three English morphemes between two groups of Chinese learners learning in a targeted language context, which includes one group of learners living in a homestay context and

another one living with non-native speakers.

The present study attempts to address the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the current stages of the two groups in terms of the three morphemes (past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular)?
- 2) Have the homestay group of learners English development outperformed the non-homestay group in terms of the three morphemes (past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) after living in the targeted language country for at least six months?

Based on the previous outcomes the research hypotheses of this study are:

- 1) The current levels of acquisition of the two groups is considerable in terms of the three morphemes (past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) after living in the targeted language country for at least six months.
- 2) The homestay group of learners' English development outperformed the non-homestay group in terms of the three morphemes (past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) after living in the target language country for at least six months.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

According to Bernard (1994), the number of informants chosen in in-depth interview should be determined by the dimension of the study. This is supported by Boudah (2011) by confirming that the number of informants is considerably related to the range of the research. Six Chinese learners of English therefore were chosen in the present study which included two females and four males. Their ages rang from 25 to 30 years; and they are current students studying at the University of Canberra in Australia majoring in economics, accounting and computing.

The informants were divided into two groups: a homestay group of three students and a non-homestay group. The characteristics of all the informants are that they have obtained IELTS no more than two years ago, and scored at least 5.0 overall. All have already been studying in Australia and living either with native speakers for the homestay group, or non-native speakers for the non-homestay group, for at least six months.

Among the homestay group, all three informants lived with native speakers who were Australians. More specifically: Informant One (Tom) lived with an Australian family (parents and two children); Informant Two (Grant) lived with an Australian family (single mother and three children); and Informant Three (Gavin) lived with an Australian lady who was 70 years old. Among the non-homestay group, all three informants lived with non-native speakers. Informant Four (Lucy) lived with four Chinese students currently studying either at UC or at the Australian National University; Informant Five (Matt) lived with two Chinese students and two Vietnamese students; Informant Six (Lily) lived with her husband.

B. Materials; procedures & framework

The informants were chosen from fifteen respondents to questionnaires which were handed out to Chinese learners of English studying at University of Canberra. According to the criteria of the present study six learners as described above finally were selected as the informants for this research.

An informed consent form was delivered to the six informants prior to the data collection process. The data collection was an in-depth interview as suggested by Bernard (1994). All three Chinese learners of English in each group were interviewed in English. The one-on-one interview was structured in format, lasting from 10 to 15 minutes in order to get sufficient data. The interviews were recorded and then decoded by transcribing the spoken English into written scripts. (Please see Appendix 5 for an example of the transcribed data). The three morphemes (past –ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) were then identified and PT was later utilized as a framework to justify which stage each informant was at so the difference between the two groups would be identified.

PT is the sounding framework chosen for this study. In order to explain the L2 developmental sequences of morphemes, PT puts forward that L2 morpheme learning is a routine of processing sequence. It emphasizes that L2 learners cannot develop a new structure/morpheme until they can process it. Furthermore, it claims that the acquisition sequence of L2 cannot be revised and the learners' developmental stages cannot be skipped.

PT has been utilized in various research areas of Second Language Acquisition (SLA): interlanguage variation (Tarone & Liu, 1995), form-focused instruction (Pienemann, 1998, 2005; Spada & Lightbown, 1993), L2 assessment (Mackey et al., 1991; Pienemann & Johnston, 1987), and interaction studies (Mackey, 1995, 1999; Mackey & Philp, 1998). One common principle of PT concluded from the above research is that through grammatical information exchange for agreement, L2 developmental sequence for morphology can be testified. The following table is the hierarchical developmental sequence for English morphology.

Stage/Procedure	Outcome	Structure	Example
4. S-procedure	Interphrasal morphology	3 rd person singular –s	Peter loves rice
3. Phrasal	VP morphology	Aux + V <i>Have +V-en</i> <i>Be + V-ing</i> <i>Modal + V</i>	They have walked I am cooking You can go now
	NP morphology	Phrasal plural –s	These girls Many dogs Three black cats
2. Category	Lexical morphology	Past –ed Plural –s Verb –ing	Mary jumped I like apples He working
1. Lemma	Invariant forms	Single words formulas	Station, here My name is Pim

Table 1 Developmental sequence for English morphology

Adapted from Pienemann (2005) Bettoni and Di Biase (forthcoming) cited by Zhang & Widyastuti (2010).

In the present study, the above hierarchical developmental sequence for English morphology in PT theory is adopted to assess the stages of the two groups' English morphology in order to answer the two research questions.

C. Analysis

The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The three morphemes (past–ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) were marked in different colours in the obligatory contexts. The tokens of the three morpheme suppliance were signaled; and the ratio between the suppliance and the obligatory context were calculated as well. The over-suppliance morphemes were also identified. The next step was the quantitative analysis of the results according to the acquisition criterion. Two criteria were used to assess the data. The appearance and development of L2 were the accuracy criterion and emergence criterion that are mentioned by Pienemann (1998). During the process of analysis, the ungrammatical forms and the

forms repeated by the interviewees were excluded.

The accuracy criterion is a percentage set by researchers prior to carrying out the study and it is used to testify language acquisition. This criterion was adopted in this study to investigate how much the informants have learned so that the analysis would be adequate and valid. The accuracy criterion in this study was set at 70% correct suppliance of the morphemes in obligatory contexts by considering the informants' majors and English backgrounds.

The emergence criterion, according to Pinenmann (1998), is the first regular usage or appearance of a form that learners show. In this study the appearance of the phrasal plural-s and the past-ed were observed. The emergence point was set at 6 in the obligatory contexts in this study. The ungrammatical phrasal plural-s and the past-ed were excluded.

IV. Results

The in-depth interviews lasted for one hour and twenty six minutes for all six informants in total. The results of the in-depth interviews are listed in table two and table three for the homestay group and the non-homestay group respectively. The numbers in front of the slash are suppliances used in the obligatory contexts, and the numbers after the slash are their total contexts. The ratio is calculated through dividing suppliance numbers by the total contexts, which are shown in brackets. The over-suppliance is presented after the sign > (Please see table 2 and table 3 of the statistical results, table 4 is a comparison between these two groups).

Results of homestay group -accuracy criterion:

The results of each informant in the homestay group are calculated first. According to the accuracy criterion set prior to the study which is 70%, the following results can be concluded for the three informants in the homestay group. For the

morpheme of past –ed, both Grant and Gavin have achieved the level of accuracy because their results are 89% and 76% respectively. For the morpheme of phrasal plural –s, only Gavin has reached the level of accuracy (84%) which is much higher than either Tom (49%) or Grant (52%). For the morpheme of 3rd –s the three informants have not achieved the level of accuracy, the results for them are Tom (38%); Grant (54%) and Gavin (57%) correspondingly. From this data it can be concluded that Tom is still at stage 2. Unlike Tom, Grant has already passed stage 2 and he is at stage 3. Gavin however, surpassed both Tom and Grant and Gavin is at the highest stage (stage 4).

Results of homestay group- emergence criterion:

According to the set emergence criterion the results for all the three informants are satisfactory. All of them have started using past –ed and phrasal pl-s morphemes. For the 3rd –s morpheme only Tom's results (3 suppliance) show that he has not started to use it yet. Both Grant and Gavin have started to use the 3rd –s morpheme based on their results (7 suppliance for Grant and 8 suppliance for Gavin). It indicates that both Grant and Gavin have reached stage 4; while Tom has reached stage 3 in terms of starting to use these three morphemes.

Results of non-homestay group -accuracy criterion:

The results of this group are different from the homestay group. All the informants in this group have not reached the level of accuracy for these three morphemes according to their results. No informant's results have passed 70%. These designate that three of the informants in the non-homestay group have not mastered the accuracy usage of these three morphemes; therefore they are still at stage 1.

Results of non-homestay group - emergence criterion:

Three informants have started to use the morpheme of past –ed because their results for this morpheme have surpassed the set criterion 6, which indicated that all of them have reached stage 2. For the morpheme of phrasal pl-s, only Matt has

appeared to start to use this morpheme and his results are 7 suppliance, while Lucy gets 5 suppliance and Lily gets 4 suppliance. Based on this observation it can be concluded that for phrasal pl-s only Matt has reached stage 3 among the three of them. For the morpheme of 3rd-s the results are similar to the phrasal pl-s which have shown that only Matt (7 suppliance) has started to use 3rd-s but not Lucy (1 suppliance) and Lily (4 suppliance). This shows that Matt has reached stage 4 but not the other two informants.

A general conclusion is drawn that the stage of the homestay group of these three morphemes is higher than the non-homestay group. The best informant in the homestay group is Gavin who has reached stage 3 in terms of the accuracy criterion and stage 4 in terms of the emergence criterion. The best informant in the non-homestay group is Matt. Even though he has not reached an accurate usage level for the three morphemes, he has reached stage 4 in terms of the emergence criterion. This indicates that there is one informant in the non-homestay group who has actually reached a very high stage in commencing to use the morphemes.

Name	Tom	Grant	Gavin
Morpheme			
Past -ed	16/27 (.59) >7	17/19 (.89) >3	13/17 (.76) >6
Phrasal pl-s	11/23 (.49) >4	9/17 (.52) >3	16/19 (.84) >2
3rd -s	3/8 (.38) >2	7/13 (.54)	8/14 (.57)

Table 2- individual informant result of homestay group

Name Morpheme	Lucy	Matt	Lily
Past -ed	8/21 (.38) >8	13/23 (.57) >3	11/23 (.48) >3
Phrasal pl-s	5/19 (.26) >4	7/26 (.27) >5	4/18 (.22) >2
3rd -s	1/12 (.08) >4	7/15 (.47)	4/14 (.29) >2

Table 3- individual informant result of non-homestay group

The comparison table below aims to show a broad idea of the statistical difference between the homestay group as a whole and the non-homestay group as a whole. The two groups' results are consistent with the general results of the individual informants'.

Stage	Morpheme	Homestay group	Non-homestay group
2. Category Procedure (lexical Morphology)	past-ed	46/63(.73) >16	32/67(.47) >14
3. Phrasal Procedure (NP, VP)	phrasal pl-s	36/59(.61) >9	#16/63(.25) >11
4. S-procedure (interphrasal Morphology)	3 rd -s	#18/35(.51) >2	#12/41(.29) >6

Table 4 The three morphemes learning results
#Non-emergence

V. Discussion

The results of this study contribute to and support the findings in the literature review which claim that studying and learning in the homestay contexts are beneficial for learners. However, the previous research (Talbert and Stewart, 1999; Yoshino, 1992 and McMeeKin, 2003) has mainly investigated from other perspectives of learning in a target language context rather than on morphemes. Furthermore, the study is unanimous with Rivers' (1998) statements which conclude that learners in a homestay context outperform learners in a dormitory context. The results of the present study support the findings that living in the homestay contexts assists learners to develop morphemes to some degree.

Another important profile of the study is that it is consistent with the developmental acquisition sequence/stages claimed by PT theory. Therefore, the study also offers another piece of evidence to argue that even though learning abroad is a beneficial method for learners to acquire their language proficiencies, it cannot be guaranteed that learners can develop their language rapidly or skip their learning stages after immersing themselves in the target language context even for a certain period of time. This is because 'learners output often follow paths with predictable stages in the acquisition of a given structure followed by PT' (VanPatten & Williams, 2008, p. 151).

DuFon & Churchill (2006) stated that investigations about learners developing language in the target context is at an infancy stage, let alone research on Chinese learners of English learning in the target context, specifically in a homestay context. The present study has filled the research gap since it initiates the first step for teachers and researchers to investigate on this less-researched area. In addition, the study contributes to the understanding of what the stages of the three morphemes are in the target language context and the results are particularly useful for Chinese learners of English to be aware of their own stages when learning in a homestay context.

The study answers the two questions and supports the two hypotheses that proposed by the researcher. It is important to point out that the results support the two hypotheses despite having some unexpected findings. In other words, the results do not provide robust data to support the hypotheses. Therefore, some reasons for the results are offered especially the results on the phrasal plural -s and third person singular morphemes. This is because according to the accuracy criterion set in this study (70%) both of the groups get relatively poor results in spite of the fact that the homestay group outperformed the non-homestay group.

As Long (1981) suggested, learners choose the strategy that is considered useful for them especially when they reach to an intermediate degree. In this study the researcher believes that this is one of the learning strategies informants have chosen.

For instance, in the interview with Tom, he initially says that his father has ‘three turtles’, later whenever he talks about these three turtles, he substitutes ‘they’ for ‘three turtles’ instead. The other two informants in the homestay group also avoid using expressions consisting of phrasal plural –s but instead use ‘they’ in a lot of sentences. This feature eventuates in influencing the numbers of the results of phrasal plural –s.

The researcher would like to argue that the informants of the homestay group have already reached stage 3 for the phrasal plural –s. The justification is that even though some of the informants have already mastered how to use the phrasal plural –s, they only use the substitute ‘they’ as a strategy to avoid repeating information. The results therefore are not as good as expected.

Long (1981) and Siegal (1998) proposed the ‘omission strategy’ which states that the learner will avoid using structures he has not mastered yet. In the findings, this research showed that when the informants cannot use ‘they’, or when the informants cannot find a substitute for a certain word or morpheme, they use omission strategy. The researcher of this study believes that this is another one of the main reasons why the results are not satisfactory on the performance of third person singular –s. The informants in this study use omission strategy to skip using the morphemes that they are not familiar with or they do not know. For example, Tom uses ‘kind of’, ‘like’, ‘you know’ a lot immediately after uttering the subjects of sentences. What is more, when he utters the verb parts in sentences he deliberately makes his voice lower and speaks faster than any other parts of sentences to ‘omit’ the verbs. This phenomenon does only apply to Tom in this study which indicates that some learners know they have acquired certain morphemes, however; they try to use various kinds of strategies to conceal their learning shortcomings. One of the strategies is trying to manipulate their voice or their speaking speed to ‘omit’ the words they really used.

Apart from using substitutes and omitting words, they use ‘chunks’ to answer questions which is another method for them to avoid using third person singular –s. For example, two informants from the homestay group use ‘she’s like’, he’s like, or ‘she goes’, ‘he goes’ a lot. Some researchers believe these expressions are often used in spoken English, and therefore they are authentic. Nevertheless, the researcher of this study would like to point out that these expressions cannot be counted in this study as an indication of learners’ acquisition of third person singular –s. As Pinenmann (2005) suggests ‘chunks’ like these can be uttered without processing them in human brains. Therefore in this study all these expressions (she’s like, he’s like, she goes, he goes) are not included in the data analysis.

All of the above reasons (using substitutes; omission and using chunks) can give some explanations as to why the results are not as satisfactory as the researcher has anticipated; however, the overall outcomes are applied with the research

hypotheses.

VI. Limitations

It cannot be denied that this study has its limitations. One difficulty which the researcher encounters is in the data analysis. The researcher uses a mobile phone to record all informants' responses during the interviews. Later in the data transcribing process some information is not clear enough to the researcher mostly because of the quality of the recordings. For instance, when the informant says 'she eats' in a sentence, it can be clearly revealed if the informant is writing it down, but when they speak, some informants' voices are not loud enough for the researcher to distinguish the difference. Even a native speaker listening to the recording again for the researcher is not helpful. This indicates that choosing the instruments for conducting research is essential and it can have a marked influence on the data collection and can finally influence the validity of the research.

Another limitation lies in the timing constraints of conducting this research. If the researcher has sufficient time, the design for this study can follow the one conducted by Morimoto & Loewen (2007). As IELTS results of all informants are considered as a benchmark in this study, applying Morimoto & Loewen's (2007) methods by conducting pre-test; post test one and post test two for learners can be a precise way to assess learners' general scores so that the findings can be more precise.

The researcher is also keen to mark a limitation which existed in choosing the two groups of informants. The study aims to differentiate the stages of the three morphemes between the two groups of students learning in a different language context. Therefore the non-homestay group's data would be more reliable if the non-homestay group has been chosen from China. By doing so, the data of the research can show more precise difference of the stages of these three morphemes. However, considering the time limitation and the lack of resources the researcher chose the non-homestay group in Australia. In the future study, these elements should be taken into consideration in order to get more valid and supportive data.

VI. Conclusion

The study investigated the developmental stages of three English morphemes (past -ed; phrasal plural-s and third person singular) between two groups of Chinese learners of English in different contexts. The findings support one general observation drawn from other research (Krapels, 1990; Krashen, 1985; LaPierre, 1994; and Lapkin, 1983) which is, learners learning in a target language context surpass or outperform those who do not study in the target context, explicitly at morphological stages. This study explicitly investigates morphological stages in language development and it has come to be clear that the stages of morphemes of Chinese learners of English who stay with native speakers exceed those who stay with

non-native speakers. Furthermore, the study re-enforces that learners cannot skip the hierarchical developmental sequence of English morphemes in spite of them have been immersed in the target language context for certain period of time. Moreover, the study shows that even though it can be advantageous for learners who learn in the target language context of homestay context; there is no guarantee that their second language developmental sequence can be processed faster than other types of learners.

This study has its own limitations as stated above. In the future studies, researchers, who are keen to investigate this area, can take these limitations into consideration. This study and future studies on this topic will be of practical usage for learners to choose appropriate strategies to improve their English learning.

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