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Reflections ON English Language Teaching

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Socio-psychological Factors and Strategy Use in Singaporean Schoolchildren's English Literacy Learning

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ABSTRACT

Despite the plethora of literature concerning language learning strategies, there is a paucity of studies pertaining to the influence of social and psychological factors on young English learners' use of literacy learning strategies in the Asian context. As a multilingual and multicultural Asian society that implements a unique bilingual policy of taking English (which is not native to the majority of the local population) as the dominant language, Singapore provides a good scenario for the exploration of such issues. As part of a two-year intervention project aiming at promoting schoolchildren's self-regulated English literacy learning ability, we conducted a preparatory study which was aimed at finding out students' English language learning profile and identifying gaps in their knowledge of literacy learning strategies. We administered a reading survey and a writing survey to 678 Primary 3 pupils from two typical primary schools in Singapore. Results show that our informants did attempt to use different literacy learning strategies, though the average frequency of strategy use was not very high. We also found that learners' gender, motivation, self-efficacy, and out-of-school effort are related to their use of learning strategies, whereas their home languages are not. The findings highlight the necessity of strategy instruction for this group of schoolchildren and the potential importance of gender and psychological factors in literacy strategy instruction programs.

KEYWORDS: *Self-regulated learning; Metacognition; Learner strategies; Strategy-based instruction; English and literacy learning; Learner self-efficacy*

As the major working language for the government, law, and commerce, the primary medium of instruction from pre-school to tertiary education, and the lingua franca for all the ethnic groups in the country, the English language has firmly established itself as the most important language in multilingual Singapore. As a consequence, Singaporean students need strong literacy skills in English to succeed in school and beyond. Students who fail to acquire these skills will find themselves at a serious disadvantage in both social communications and the job

market. Thus, promoting schoolchildren's literacy development in the English language has become a key issue in Singapore's primary school education.

Studies (e.g., Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Zhang, 2008; Zhang, Gu, & Hu, 2008; see Rubin, Chamot, Harris, & Anderson, 2007, for a systematic review) suggest that explicit strategy instruction is conducive to students' language and literacy development. This kind of instruction is characterized by the following procedures: Teacher explicitly explaining what a strategy is; teacher modeling how to use it; students applying the strategy with teacher help; and students autonomously applying the strategy in new contexts. In order to find out whether and to what extent explicit strategy instruction is helpful to Singaporean schoolchildren's English literacy development, we started a two-year intervention project in two primary schools in 2009. To make the intervention more focused and more suitable for our target students, we conducted a preparatory study to evaluate our subjects' understanding of strategy use in English literacy learning by administering two surveys to the whole cohort of Primary Year 3 (P3) students (the would-be P4 students, with their average age being 8 years) prior to the intervention project. At the same time, we also collected demographic information about our informants and their interest, self-efficacy, and out-of-school study effort in English literacy learning. This paper focuses on reporting students' self-reported strategy use in their English literacy learning before the intervention and whether and to what extent their strategy use is related to social-psychological factors such as their gender, ethnic group, home languages, interest in reading and writing, self-efficacy, and out-of-school learning effort.

Defining language learning strategies

Language learning strategies (also known as learner strategies) have been an important theme of research in the field of language acquisition over the past three decades. However, there is still no consensus about what language learning strategies actually are. For instance, Chamot defines learning strategies as "techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information" (Chamot, 1987, p. 71), while Oxford (1990) uses the term "learner strategies" and defines it as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Cohen and Macaro (2007), in reviewing 30 years of research and practice along this line, posit that "there is general agreement that strategies are environment-dependent ... and/or task dependent. There is also general agreement that future research should base itself on task-specific situations or have skill-specific concerns" (p. 278).

Despite the differences in phrasing and focus (sometimes), various descriptions of language learning strategies offered in the literature so far bear considerable resemblance to O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) classification of learning strategies which consists of procedures such as selective attention, analysis of task, choice of decisions, execution of plan, monitoring of progress, modification of plan, and evaluation of result (see Grenfell & Macaro, 2007, for a thorough review). As

language learning comprises different aspects such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the actual realizations of these procedures may not be exactly the same (see Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Macaro, 2006; Zhang, 2003). For instance, literacy learning strategies, which are the focus of this paper, may not be exactly the same as the learning strategies used for listening and speaking, due to the different nature of spoken and written language. Nevertheless, the deliberate and strategic nature as reflected in these procedures is inherent in all language learning strategies (Gao, 2010; Goh & Taib, 2006). This is also the case for reading and writing learning strategies (Zhang, 2010b).

Reading and writing as strategic processes

Reading and writing are two basic literacy skills which are of vital importance to people's survival in modern society. Studies suggest that reading, a seemingly automatic and effortless activity in real life situations, is actually a process which involves much strategic behavior on the part of the reader. As comprehension is the ultimate goal of real-life reading activities, when we talk about reading, we are actually referring to reading comprehension. According to Block and Duffy (2008),

Comprehension is a strategic process; that is, good readers proactively search for meaning as they read, using text cues and their background knowledge in combination to generate predictions, to monitor those predictions, to repredict when necessary, and generally to construct a representation of the author's meaning. (p. 21)

Reading strategies are "deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text" (Afflerbach, et al., 2008, p. 368). It is a series of largely metacognitive events in many situations (Zhang, 2001, 2010a), which will enable successful reading comprehension if readers orchestrate clear awareness of what they do and hence chart a definite direction towards success. Writing is also a process which involves various strategic actions. According to Harris, Santangelo, and Graham (2010),

writing is a recursive, strategic, and multidimensional process central to (1) planning what to say and how to say it, (2) translating ideas into written text, and (3) revising what has been written. (p. 226)

As a productive skill, writing invites greater deliberate control and goal-directedness, because

the writer must negotiate the rules and mechanics of writing, while maintaining a focus on factors such as organization, form and features, purposes and goals, audience perspectives and needs, and evaluation of communicative intent and efficacy (Harris, Graham, Brindle, & Sandmel, 2009, p. 132).

A few studies have investigated Singaporean schoolchildren's strategy use in English language learning in either listening or literacy learning in recent years (Rao, Gu, Zhang, & Hu, 2007; Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Goh, 2006; Zhang et al., 2008; Zhang, 2010b). For example, Zhang et al. (2008) explored primary

schoolchildren's use of reading strategies when reading different texts in English using think-aloud protocols as the main data source. Although their findings are interesting and valuable, the researchers have not examined factors such as gender, motivation, self-efficacy, and out-of-school effort that are related to their success in language and literacy learning. Zhang and Goh (2006) investigated Singaporean secondary school students' perceived use of listening strategies. Zhang (2010a) examined primary schoolchildren's use of language learning strategies within the framework of sociocultural theory. He found that Singaporean schoolchildren's deployment of language learning and language use strategies in a classroom setting is one way of showing them negotiating their identity and learning of literacy.

Obviously, the perspectives taken by the studies mentioned above are insightful in many ways. But to promote learners' literacy development, it is very important to raise their awareness first about the strategic nature of the reading and writing processes and familiarize them with the strategies that good readers and writers tend to use (Zhang, 2010a). Learner variables such as gender, race, self-efficacy, motivation, and effort and contextual factors such as home languages and culture must be noted as these variables are also found to be closely related to literacy learning and strategy use, as seen in the following two sections.

Gender and literacy learning strategies

Gender differences are a recurrent topic in studies pertaining to literacy learning strategies. Several studies focus on investigating the differences in the use of language learning strategies between male and female ESL students at the college level (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Rebecca, Nyikos, & Erhman, 1988) and find that female students tend to use language learning strategies more often than their male counterparts. As these studies did not focus on reading and writing strategies in particular, they could not tell us much about whether learners of different gender would behave differently in their reading and writing strategy use. Studies about gender differences in the use of reading and writing strategies among pre-teens are scarce, though there are studies concerning gender differences in other aspects of reading and writing learning. For instance, Merisuo-Storm (2006) found that Finnish boys and girls (aged between 10 and 11) are different in their preference for reading materials and their attitudes towards reading and writing, with students' attitudes towards writing "more negative than those regarding reading" and "boys ... significantly more reluctant writers than girls" (p. 111).

While Merisuo-Storm's findings were based on Finnish students, the gender differences in attitudes towards basic literacy skills such as reading and writing may well be a contributing factor to the gap between boys and girls in literacy assessment performance in a wider context. The results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the United States over the past 17 years (1992–2009) reveal that girls in grades 4, 8, and 12 consistently performed better than their male counterparts in reading and writing achievements (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). In Australia, boys' lower achievement in literacy has also attracted the attention of some researchers, who call on educators and

school administrators to pay greater attention to gender differences in children's literacy performance at school (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). According to the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Report, the average score of Singaporean P4 girls was 567 points whereas that of the boys was 550 points (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). Although there are no published statistics about gender differences in high-stakes national examinations such as the Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE), we suspect that there is a gap between boys and girls in literacy performance as measured by the various assessment tools such as high-stakes examinations and tests. Moreover, the consequence of this gap is more serious than that in the United States and Australia due to the high-stakes nature of national examinations in Singapore. This paper, however, will not touch on gender differences in literacy assessment performance; instead, it will focus on the gender issue in literacy learning strategy use.

Self-efficacy, motivation, effort, and literacy learning strategies

Studies suggest that certain learner variables such as self-efficacy, motivation, and effort can also play an important role in literacy learning. Self-efficacy refers to learners' perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels (Bandura, 1997). According to Schunk and Zimmerman (2007), learners' level of self-efficacy can influence their choice of activities, effort expenditure, persistence, and achievement. Cole (2002) explains that learners with positive self-efficacies feel a strong sense of control over their learning and believe that they have the power to succeed whereas learners with poor self-efficacies feel just the opposite. Therefore, Cole thinks that it is important for educators to "evaluate students' self-efficacies and provide meaningful, motivational activities that will improve and enhance students' confidence in their abilities" (2002, p. 328).

Apart from self-efficacy, a number of researchers argue that motivation and effort investment are also variables that should not be neglected (e.g., Gao & Zhang, 2011). For example, Zhang and Xiao (2007) reported on the close relationships between English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students' motivation and learning strategy use in relation to learning English as a general proficiency-oriented activity, although their study did not delve into the domain of self-efficacy. As Boekaerts and Cascallar (2006) point out, learners must initiate activities that set the scene for learning, assign values to the learning activity, motivate themselves, and persevere. Teachers can teach students reading and writing strategies, but students may never reach their full potential if they do not have the intrinsic motivation to read and write and they do not invest adequate effort (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Evidently, the more metacognitive knowledge the students have, the more efficient they are in deploying possible strategies (Zhang, 2001; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

There remain few studies on whether young ESL learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ in strategy use when they are approaching English literacy learning. More investigation in this regard is needed to develop strategy instruction programs which can better accommodate learner needs.

Methodology

Participants

Six hundred and seventy-eight Primary 3 students from two typical primary schools in Singapore were involved in the preparatory study of our research project. Among them, 362 (or 53.4%) were boys and 316 (or 46.6%) were girls. Ninety-eight percent of the pupils with ages between eight and nine years participated in the study. There were 486 (or 71.7%) ethnic Chinese students, 148 (or 21.8%) ethnic Malay students, 24 (or 3.5%) ethnic Indian students, and 20 (or 2.9%) students from other ethnic groups (e.g., Eurasians, Koreans). As far as home languages are concerned, 67.8% of the participants reported that their home languages included English and their respective mother tongues and 32.2% of them claimed that only one language was spoken in their home. Among those who claimed to speak only one language at home, 9% speak only English, 13.9% speak only Chinese (or Chinese dialects), 7.5% speak Malay, and 1.8% speak Tamil or other languages.

Instruments

Drawing on studies on language learning strategies in general (Oxford, 1990; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007), and the findings concerning Singaporean upper primary (from P4 to P6) pupils' English learning strategies in particular (e.g., Gu, Hu, & Zhang, 2005; Rao, Gu, Zhang, & Hu, 2007; Zhang, Gu, & Hu, 2008), we developed two sets of survey forms for the preparatory study: One about reading and the other about writing, both of which were handed out to the participants in English when the subject matter was on learning to read and write in English. A similar version was distributed to the participants in Chinese when the questions focused on reading and writing in Chinese. We hoped that doing so would reduce the chance of confusing the children because they did not have to do the translation from one language to the other. It would also be easier for them to think about the reading and writing in the language of that particular subject. There were 42 items in the first draft of both surveys. The two survey forms were then piloted in a neighborhood primary school with a similar proportion of students from different ethnic groups. During the pilot study, we asked the students to highlight the terms that they could not understand and the language that they found difficult or confusing so that we could subsequently finetune the questionnaire. We allowed the students to ask questions in either English or Chinese inasmuch as the research team comprised four bilinguals who were biliterate in English and Chinese. Code-switching was also expected of these participants. We also noted down students' reactions when they were answering the pilot forms and the amount of time they needed in completing the surveys. We conducted an internal reliability test for the survey items based on the pilot study data and found that the reliability (alpha values) for both surveys was greater than $\alpha > 0.9$ (the benchmark value for good design is $\alpha = 0.8$). We then made some adjustments to the pilot version. We simplified

the language, reduced the number of items, and redesigned the layout of the survey question booklets and the answer sheets.

The final version of the survey forms consists of 40 items each. For each survey, there are two sections. Section One, which consists of 12 questions, gathered information on the students' personal information (age, gender, home languages, interest in reading and writing, preferred language(s) for reading and writing, effort for out-of-school reading and writing). Section Two was meant to collect information concerning their strategy use in reading or writing. In this section, there were 40 statements about what a reader or writer does in their reading or writing process. Under each statement, there were five options (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) following the scale: 1–*Never*, 2–*Occasionally*, 3–*Sometimes*, 4–*Usually*, and 5–*Always*. The students were asked to read each statement and to think about their own experience and then pick a number which best represents what they did. Appendices 1 and 2 list the strategies employed in reading and writing surveys.

Data collection and analysis

The reading and writing surveys were administered to 678 students in two schools, with the help of the English language teachers. Step-by-step survey administration instructions were provided to the teachers involved and the two surveys were administered on separate days so as not to overwhelm the students.

Data were entered into SPSS. As there were 40 items for each survey, we found it necessary to conduct a factorial analysis for each survey so that we did not have to handle too many variables in other statistical analyses. The KMO and Bartlett's tests for our datasets showed a KMO value of .955 for the reading data and .948 for the writing data, indicating that our data were suitable for factor analysis.

Through factor analysis we extracted five strategy groups for the English reading survey and seven groups for the writing survey. The five reading strategy groups can explain 47.4% of the variance whereas the seven writing strategy groups can account for 47.8% of the variance. For convenience of expression, we renamed all the strategy groups. The reading strategy groups were renamed as (1) *Goal-setting and Planning*, (2) *Comprehension Enhancement*, (3) *Attention Management*, (4) *Coping with Unknown Words*, and (5) *Monitoring and Evaluation*. Table 1 lists the specific strategies which clustered under each of these reading strategy groups. The data were then recoded according to these strategy groups and new values were computed for them as well.

The seven writing strategy groups were renamed as (1) *Activating Prior Knowledge*, (2) *Planning Techniques*, (3) *Global Planning and Monitoring*, (4) *Drafting*, (5) *Vocabulary Strategy*, (6) *Quality Control*, and (7) *Rewarding Self*. Table 2 lists the specific writing strategies under each strategy group. The data were also recoded and new values, computed.

A variety of statistical analyses were subsequently performed based on the values of these clumped strategy groups.

Table 1

Factor Analysis Results for English Reading Survey

| Item no. | Coefficient | Specific strategies |
|---|-------------|--|
| RD_Factor 1: Goal Setting & Planning | | |
| RD_Q01 | .536 | Goal setting |
| RD_Q02 | .553 | Determining reading speed |
| RD_Q03 | .542 | Determining reading purpose |
| RD_Q04 | .547 | Activating prior knowledge (knowledge about the topic) |
| RD_Factor 2: Comprehension Enhancement | | |
| RD_Q09 | .547 | Reading back and forth for main ideas |
| RD_Q10 | .547 | Differentiating important and less important information |
| RD_Q13 | .521 | Predicting by using what has been read so far |
| RD_Q14 | .492 | Asking questions while reading |
| RD_Q17 | .456 | Restating ideas in own words for better understanding |
| RD_Factor 3: Attention Management | | |
| RD_Q19 | .462 | Paying closer attention when facing difficulty |
| RD_Q20 | .700 | Concentration management |
| RD_Factor 4: Coping with Unknown Words | | |
| RD_Q25 | .647 | Guessing when unsure about the exact meaning |
| RD_Q26 | .581 | Applying linguistic knowledge for guessing word meaning |
| RD_Q27 | .566 | Using contextual clues in coping with unknown words |
| RD_Q28 | .715 | Using dictionaries for coping with unknown words |
| RD_Q29 | .599 | Asking for help in coping with unknown words |
| RD_Factor 5: Monitoring & Evaluation | | |
| RD_Q32 | .527 | Checking whether reading goals achieved |
| RD_Q33 | .516 | Checking understanding through discussion with peers |
| RD_Q35 | .477 | Checking level of understanding after reading |
| RD_Q36 | .567 | Thinking about writer intention after reading |
| RD_Q37 | .595 | Thinking about text types |
| RD_Q38 | .648 | Noting down good words/phrases for future use |
| RD_Q39 | .568 | Evaluating writer opinions |
| RD_Q40 | .564 | Evaluating text quality |

Table 2

Results of Factor Analysis for English Writing Survey

| Item no. | Coefficient | Specific strategies |
|--|-------------|---|
| WR_Factor 1: Activating Prior Knowledge | | |
| WR_Q01 | .539 | Reading for modeling |
| WR_Q06 | .547 | Gathering information about the topic |
| WR_Q10 | .516 | Activating prior knowledge (text type) |
| WR_Q16 | .453 | Activating prior knowledge (words or phrases read before) |
| WR_Q17 | .448 | Activating prior knowledge (ideas read before) |
| WR_Factor 2: Planning Techniques | | |
| WR_Q04 | .502 | Understanding task requirements |
| WR_Q08 | .653 | Planning by listing ideas |
| WR_Q11 | .481 | Making an outline |
| WR_Q12 | .469 | Using graphic organizers for planning |

Table 2
Results of Factor Analysis for English Writing Survey (*continued*)

| Item No. | Coefficient | Specific strategies |
|--|-------------|---|
| WR_Factor 3: Global Planning & Monitoring | | |
| WR_Q02 | .536 | Psychological preparation 1 (self-encouragement) |
| WR_Q03 | .462 | Psychological preparation 2 (reducing anxiety) |
| WR_Q07 | .518 | Thinking about audience |
| WR_Q27 | .664 | Quality monitoring (assessing possible reader response) |
| WR_Q33 | .528 | Thinking about readability |
| WR_Q34 | .527 | Self-evaluation (strengths & weaknesses) |
| WR_Q38 | .594 | Progress monitoring (writing quality) |
| WR_Q39 | .629 | Progress monitoring (writing ability) |
| WR_Factor 4: Drafting | | |
| WR_Q15 | .424 | Prioritizing ideas over language while drafting |
| WR_Q23 | .491 | Coining words as compensation strategy |
| WR_Q24 | .427 | Meeting task requirements |
| WR_Q28 | .680 | Revising (ideas) |
| WR_Q29 | .629 | Revising (re-organizing ideas) |
| WR_Q32 | .552 | Revising (words/phrases) |
| WR_Factor 5: Vocabulary Strategy | | |
| WR_Q18 | .555 | Using details to support main ideas |
| WR_Q21 | .453 | Consulting dictionaries for unfamiliar words |
| WR_Q22 | .654 | Using circumlocution as compensation strategy |
| WR_Factor 6: Quality Control | | |
| WR_Q19 | .451 | Ensuring coherence |
| WR_Q20 | .528 | Ensuring cohesion |
| WR_Q25 | .598 | Ensuring completeness of text structure |
| WR_Q26 | .633 | Ensuring correctness of grammar |
| WR_Q31 | .675 | Mechanics (spelling & punctuation) |
| WR_Q37 | .588 | Trying to learn from teacher feedback |
| WR_Factor 7: Rewarding Self | | |
| WR_Q36 | .733 | Rewarding self for completion of writing tasks |

Results

Overall results for reading and writing

As we can see from Tables 3 and 4, students did not report a very frequent use of the reading and writing strategies listed in our surveys, as the mean scores for all the reading strategy groups are not very high. If we take a closer look at Table 3, we find that only one reading strategy group (*Attention Management*) scored slightly above 3.5 on a five-point Likert scale, suggesting that students tried to use attention management strategies to fix their reading problems more often than other strategies.

Table 4 shows that students' reported use of writing strategies was not very frequent, either. The mean scores for five out of the seven strategy groups fared below 3.1. Despite that, students did report more frequent use of strategies related

Table 3

Mean Scores for Reading Strategies

| Reading factors | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. deviation |
|---------------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Goal-setting & Planning | 659 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.7508 | .97839 |
| Comprehension Enhancement | 659 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8200 | 1.00725 |
| Attention Management | 658 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.5304 | 1.14337 |
| Coping with Unknown Words | 655 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0791 | .89854 |
| Monitoring & Evaluation | 656 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8742 | .96509 |

Table 4

Mean Scores for Writing Strategies

| Writing factors | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. deviation |
|------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Activating Prior Knowledge | 657 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.4259 | .91844 |
| Planning Techniques | 654 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.1044 | .96438 |
| Global Planning & Monitoring | 639 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0430 | .96501 |
| Drafting | 651 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.9411 | .90904 |
| Vocabulary Strategy | 657 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.9254 | 1.04263 |
| Quality Control | 652 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.6639 | .90927 |
| Rewarding Self | 660 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8788 | 1.60060 |

to writing quality control. If we recall the specific strategies of quality control (see Table 2), we may find it not too hard to determine why this was the case. Issues such as cohesion, coherence, completeness of text structure, correctness of grammar, spelling, and punctuation are features English teachers will repeatedly emphasize to their students.

Presenting the mean scores of students' reported strategy use can only suggest whether our informants attempted to use strategies and how often they did so. As the focus of this paper is on exploring the relationship between students' use of reading and writing strategies and social and psychological factors such as their gender, ethnic groups, home languages, interest in reading and writing, self-efficacy, and other factors, further tests were performed. The following sections present the results in this regard. The reading and the writing results are presented separately in order to avoid confusion.

Reading strategy use

Social factors and reading strategy use

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to investigate whether students' self-reported reading strategy use will differ if they are grouped according to their gender, ethnic groups, and family language backgrounds. Results show that boys and girls were different only in one reading strategy group

(*Coping with Unknown Words*) ($F(1,649) = 11.45, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .017$), using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01(0.05/5). Girls reported more frequent use of strategies related to coping with unknown words ($M = 3.21, SD = .87$) than boys ($M = 2.97, SD = .91$). For the rest of the reading strategy groups, no gender differences were found. Students from different ethnic groups did not show significant differences in their self-reported use of reading strategies. No difference was found among students from different home language backgrounds in their self-reported use of reading strategies, either.

Psychological factors and reading strategy use

MANOVA tests were also conducted to determine whether students with different levels of interest in reading in English, different degrees of self-efficacy, and different out-of-school learning effort performed differently in their self-reported strategy use.

As can be seen from Table 5, the mean scores of students with the highest self-rated reading interest are significantly higher than the scores of students with fair and low reading interest. This can be observed in all the five strategy groups. In other words, students with high reading interest tended to use strategies more often.

As revealed in Table 6, students with the highest self-rated reading ability (or self-efficacy) reported more frequent use of strategies than those with fair and low abilities. The differences between high ability students and fair and low ability students are statistically significant in four out of the five reading factors. The only exception is the use of strategies related to coping with unknown words, which shows no differences. What we can deduce from this finding is that students with

Table 5
Reading Interest and Reading Strategy Use

| Dependent variable | (I) Interest in reading English | (J) Interest in reading English | Mean difference (I-J) | SE | Sig. | 95% confidence interval | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound |
| Goal-setting & Planning | Strong | Fair | .2792* | .07831 | .001 | .0952 | .4631 |
| | | Low | .7321* | .16634 | .000 | .3414 | 1.1229 |
| Comprehension Enhancement | Strong | Fair | .2967* | .08084 | .001 | .1068 | .4866 |
| | | Low | .7842* | .17170 | .000 | .3809 | 1.1876 |
| Attention Management | Strong | Fair | .5299* | .08875 | .000 | .3214 | .7384 |
| | | Low | 1.3947* | .18850 | .000 | .9519 | 1.8375 |
| Coping with Unknown Words | Strong | Fair | .2377* | .07191 | .003 | .0687 | .4066 |
| | | Low | .7271* | .15273 | .000 | .3683 | 1.0859 |
| Monitoring & Evaluation | Strong | Fair | .3396* | .07688 | .000 | .1590 | .5202 |
| | | Low | .8851* | .16330 | .000 | .5015 | 1.2688 |

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Table 6

Reading Ability and Reading Strategy Use

| Dependent variable | (I) English reading ability | (J) English reading ability | Mean difference (I-J) | SE | Sig. | 95% confidence interval | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound |
| Goal-setting & Planning | Very good | Fair | .2522* | .08171 | .006 | .0603 | .4442 |
| | | Low | .4659* | .18848 | .036 | .0231 | .9087 |
| Comprehension Enhancement | Very good | Fair | .2679* | .08406 | .004 | .0704 | .4654 |
| | | Low | .7118* | .19390 | .001 | .2563 | 1.1673 |
| Attention Management | Very good | Fair | .3923* | .09395 | .000 | .1716 | .6130 |
| | | Low | 1.1492* | .21672 | .000 | .6401 | 1.6583 |
| Coping with Unknown Words | Very good | Fair | .0990 | .07519 | .386 | -.0776 | .2757 |
| | | Low | .6178* | .17344 | .001 | .2104 | 1.0253 |
| Monitoring & Evaluation | Very good | Fair | .2499* | .08086 | .006 | .0600 | .4399 |
| | | Low | .6662* | .18652 | .001 | .2281 | 1.1044 |

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

high self-rated reading ability tended to use reading strategies more frequently than students with low self-rated reading ability.

Among the 678 informants, 397 (59%) reported that they spent extra time reading in English after school, whereas the other 41% reported that they did not do so. A MANOVA test reveals a significant difference in the reading strategy use between students who read after school and those who did not: $F(5, 632) = 5.31, p = .000; \lambda = .96; \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$. Students who read after school tended to use reading strategies more often than those who did not.

Writing strategy use

Social factors and writing strategy use

We conducted the same kind of tests as we did with the reading survey to determine whether students' writing strategy use differs when they are grouped by gender, ethnic groups, and home language backgrounds. Results show that boys and girls were different in their reported use of four groups of strategies, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .007 (0.05/7). They are: *Activating Prior Knowledge* ($F(1, 602) = 11.22, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .018$), *Vocabulary Strategy* ($F(1, 602) = 9.01, p = .003, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .015$), *Quality Control* ($F(1, 602) = 7.43, p = .007, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .012$), and *Rewarding Self* ($F(1, 602) = 11.31, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .018$). Among these four factors, girls' mean scores of the first three factors ($M = 3.56, SD = .89; M = 3.06, SD = 1.06; M = 3.80, SD = 3.61$) are higher than boys' ($M = 3.31, SD = .93; M = 2.81, SD = 1.02; M = 3.61, SD = .91$). In other words, girls tended to use strategies related to activating prior knowledge, coping

with vocabulary problems, and quality enhancement more frequently than boys whereas boys tended to use the strategy of self-rewarding more often than girls. A MANOVA test shows that ethnic Malay students reported significantly greater use of strategies related to *Global Planning and Monitoring* than ethnic Chinese students, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .007: $F(2, 601) = 5.08$, $p = 0.006$, and partial $\eta^2 = .017$. In other words, our Malay informants tended to use strategies related to global planning and monitoring more often than their Chinese counterparts. No significant differences were observed in all the other factors among students from different ethnic groups. Students from different home language backgrounds did not show any significant difference in their reported use of writing strategies.

Psychological factors and writing strategy use

Our MANOVA test results show that students with the highest self-rated writing interest reported more frequent use of six out of the seven groups of writing strategies than those students with fair or low interests (see Table 7). No significant difference was observed in the use of *Rewarding Self* among students with different levels of interest. What we can conclude from this finding is that students' interest in English writing appears to be related to their use of writing strategies.

As Table 8 illustrates, students with high self-rated writing abilities outperformed those with fair and low writing abilities for six out of the seven writing strategy groups. The only exception is *Rewarding Self*. In other words,

Table 7
Writing Interest and Writing Strategy Use

| Dependent variable | (I) Interest in English writing | (J) Interest in English writing | Mean difference (I-J) | SE | Sig. | 95% confidence interval | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound |
| Activating Prior Knowledge | Strong | Fair | .4990* | .07338 | .000 | .3266 | .6714 |
| | | Low | 1.2170* | .15391 | .000 | .8554 | 1.5787 |
| Planning Techniques | Strong | Fair | .5092* | .07892 | .000 | .3238 | .6947 |
| | | Low | .9224* | .16553 | .000 | .5335 | 1.3114 |
| Global Planning & Monitoring | Strong | Fair | .5142* | .07886 | .000 | .3289 | .6995 |
| | | Low | 1.0428* | .16542 | .000 | .6541 | 1.4315 |
| Drafting | Strong | Fair | .4645* | .07421 | .000 | .2901 | .6388 |
| | | Low | 1.0398* | .15565 | .000 | .6741 | 1.4056 |
| Vocabulary Strategy | Strong | Fair | .4577* | .08671 | .000 | .2540 | .6614 |
| | | Low | .8223* | .18188 | .000 | .3950 | 1.2496 |
| Quality Control | Strong | Fair | .3482* | .07355 | .000 | .1754 | .5210 |
| | | Low | 1.0816* | .15426 | .000 | .7191 | 1.4440 |

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Table 8

Writing Ability and Writing Strategy Use

| Dependent variable | (I) Interest in English writing | (J) Interest in English writing | Mean difference (I-J) | SE | Sig. | 95% confidence interval | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower bound | Upper bound |
| Activating Prior Knowledge | Very Good | Fair | .4170* | .08400 | .000 | .2196 | .6144 |
| | | Low | .9667* | .17709 | .000 | .5506 | 1.3828 |
| Planning Techniques | Very Good | Fair | .6017* | .08749 | .000 | .3961 | .8072 |
| | | Low | .9129* | .18445 | .000 | .4795 | 1.3463 |
| Global Planning & Monitoring | Very Good | Fair | .5800* | .08796 | .000 | .3733 | .7867 |
| | | Low | 1.0696* | .18544 | .000 | .6339 | 1.5054 |
| Drafting | Very Good | Fair | .4960* | .08315 | .000 | .3006 | .6913 |
| | | Low | .8876* | .17529 | .000 | .4758 | 1.2995 |
| Vocabulary Strategy | Very Good | Fair | .5357* | .09565 | .000 | .3109 | .7604 |
| | | Low | 1.0326* | .20165 | .000 | .5588 | 1.5064 |
| Quality Control | Very Good | Fair | .2746* | .08297 | .003 | .0796 | .4695 |
| | | Low | 1.0964* | .17491 | .000 | .6854 | 1.5074 |
| Rewarding Self | Very Good | Fair | .3178 | .15076 | .089 | -.0364 | .6721 |
| | | Low | -.0097 | .31783 | .999 | -.7565 | .7371 |

students with high self-efficacy tended to use writing strategies more frequently than students with low self-efficacy in English writing.

Among the 678 students, 62% claimed that they did spend time on writing in English after school whereas the other 38% said they did not do so. MANOVA test results show that students who wrote after school demonstrated significant difference in their use of four out of the seven groups of writing strategies from those who did not do so, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .007. These strategy groups include: *Activating Prior Knowledge* ($F(1, 602) = 25.89, p = .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .041$), *Global Planning and Monitoring* ($F(1, 602) = 19.44, p = .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .031$), *Vocabulary Strategy* ($F(1, 602) = 21.64, p = .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .035$), and *Quality Control* ($F(1, 602) = 7.82, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$). Students who wrote after school tended to use these four groups of writing strategies more often than those who did not. They did not show significant differences in their use of strategies related to *Drafting* and *Rewarding Self*.

Discussion

From what has been presented above, we can see that Singaporean schoolchildren's self-reported use of literacy learning strategies seems to be influenced by certain social and psychological factors.

Our results show that girls reported more frequent use of strategies related to dealing with unknown words in their reading than boys. In writing, girls reported

more frequent use of three groups of writing strategies than boys: *Activating Prior Knowledge*, *Vocabulary Strategy*, and *Quality Control*. Boys only outperformed girls in one strategy group, that is, *Rewarding Self*. What we can conclude from these results is that boys and girls may have different preferences in strategy use, especially when it comes to learning writing. If we recall Merisuo-Storm's (2006) comments about boys' more negative attitude towards writing and their greater reluctance in writing activities, we may not find the differences between girls and boys in their use of writing strategies very surprising. What is noteworthy here is that language educators may need to encourage boys to pay more attention to strategies which are related to prior knowledge activation, dealing with vocabulary problems, and writing quality enhancement. This is especially important and should be taken into serious consideration if lower-primary English language teachers decide to introduce strategy instruction into their teaching practice. Despite the fact that gender differences tend to be developmental and the gap between males and females will eventually level off, it is still worth bearing in mind that boys, especially lower-primary schoolboys, may need more help in their language learning in general and development of writing skills in particular.

Due to research design differences, we realize the challenges in comparing our findings with those reported in the literature on Singaporean learners of English (e.g., Rao et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2008). However, in a multi-racial society like Singapore, it is quite possible for students from different ethnic groups to have differing understanding about literacy learning and approaches to literacy learning in more strategic ways. The finding that ethnic Chinese and Malay students reported significantly different uses of writing strategies related to *Global Planning and Monitoring* seems to indicate that ethnicity might be related to students' strategy use in English learning. We also noticed that ethnic group may not be a key variable in Singapore schoolchildren's use of English literacy learning strategies, as our statistical results did not reveal any other differences among students from different ethnic groups. More investigation should be carried out if we want to have a clearer picture about the exact role of ethnicity in students' literacy learning strategy use.

As increasingly more families in Singapore choose to use English as their home language, the influence of students' mother tongue languages on their English literacy learning may become an issue of lesser importance. The finding that students with different home language backgrounds did not show significant differences in their strategy use in learning reading and writing in English seems to support such a sentiment. Nevertheless, as Singapore remains a predominantly multilingual environment, English language educators should take this scenario into account when they are conducting strategy-based reading and writing instruction.

Similar to the findings in other learning strategy studies, our findings also show that learners' interest in literacy learning, their self-rated reading and writing abilities, and their out-of-school effort in literacy learning are all closely related to their strategy use. Language educators need to consider strengthening the bilateral ties between motivation, self-efficacy, and effort expenditure and the more frequent use of learning strategies. By increasing learners' intrinsic interest

in reading and writing in English, helping them to develop their self-efficacy, and boosting their voluntary effort expenditure on literacy practice, language teachers can encourage students to further develop their strategic behaviors in literacy learning. Incorporating explicit strategy instruction into daily literacy teaching practices can raise learners' awareness of learning strategies and build up their self-efficacy, which will in turn promote students' interest and greater effort in literacy learning.

Conclusion and recommendation

The results of the preparatory study of our research project show that our informants did attempt to use different literacy learning strategies, though the average frequency of strategy use was not very high. We also found that learners' gender, motivation, self-efficacy, and out-of-school effort are related to their use of learning strategies (cf. Gao & Zhang, 2011). Students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds may be able to exert influence on the use of certain literacy learning strategies. However, the influence of home languages on students' strategy use is not validated by our data. Our findings reveal the necessity of strategy instruction for this group of schoolchildren and the potential importance of social and psychological factors in literacy strategy instruction (see e.g., Cohen, 1998; Macaro & Cohen, 2007; Zhang, 2008). One prerequisite is that teachers need to be well-acquainted with the useful strategies that can potentially raise the level of student awareness of the utility of a strategy-based approach. As scholars argue (see e.g., Goodwyn, 2010; Limbrick, Buchanan, Goodwin, & Schwarcz, 2010; Limbrick & Parr, 2010), teacher expertise is an extremely important factor in successful pedagogical practice, and we can suggest that it is equally, if not more, significant in implementing an innovative pedagogical intervention such as ours as reported in this paper. Evidently, awareness of strategy use requires a degree of sophistication and takes time. Therefore, it is recommended that in any follow-up study it would be useful to present students with actual tasks from which they could report strategy use so that the dynamic nature of strategy use can be better understood.

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Appendix 1

Inventory of reading strategies

| Item No. | Strategy | Item No. | Strategy |
|----------|--|----------|--|
| RD_Q01 | Setting a goal for reading | RD_Q21 | Applying linguistic knowledge for understanding |
| RD_Q02 | Determining reading speed | RD_Q22 | Reading difficult parts aloud for understanding |
| RD_Q03 | Determining reading purpose | RD_Q23 | Re-reading difficult parts |
| RD_Q04 | Activating prior knowledge (knowledge about the topic) | RD_Q24 | Ignoring unimportant unknown words |
| RD_Q05 | Predicting (via title/pictures) | RD_Q25 | Guessing when unsure about the exact meaning |
| RD_Q06 | Predicting (via common knowledge) | RD_Q26 | Applying linguistic knowledge for guessing word meaning |
| RD_Q07 | Using text knowledge for understanding | RD_Q27 | Using contextual clues in coping with unknown words |
| RD_Q08 | Paying attention to every word | RD_Q28 | Using dictionaries for coping with unknown words |
| RD_Q09 | Reading back and forth for main ideas | RD_Q29 | Asking for help in coping with unknown words |
| RD_Q10 | Differentiating important and and less important information | RD_Q30 | Chunking long and difficult sentences for understanding |
| RD_Q11 | Highlighting important information for better understanding | RD_Q31 | Using knowledge of grammar for understanding difficult sentences |
| RD_Q12 | Checking understanding while reading | RD_Q32 | Checking whether reading goals achieved |
| RD_Q13 | Predicting by using what has been read so far | RD_Q33 | Checking understanding through discussion with peers |
| RD_Q14 | Asking questions while reading | RD_Q34 | Summarizing important information read |
| RD_Q15 | Pause and think for better understanding | RD_Q35 | Checking level of understanding after reading |
| RD_Q16 | Visualizing | RD_Q36 | Thinking about writer intention after reading |
| RD_Q17 | Restating ideas in own words for better understanding | RD_Q37 | Thinking about text types |
| RD_Q18 | Reducing anxiety when facing difficulty | RD_Q38 | Noting down good words/phrases for future use |
| RD_Q19 | Paying closer attention when facing difficulty | RD_Q39 | Evaluating writer opinions |
| RD_Q20 | Concentration management | RD_Q40 | Evaluating text quality |

Appendix 2

Inventory of writing strategies

| Item No. | Strategy | Item No. | Strategy |
|----------|---|----------|---|
| WR_Q01 | Reading for modeling | WR_Q21 | Consulting dictionaries for unfamiliar words |
| WR_Q02 | Psychological preparation 1 (self-encouragement) | WR_Q22 | Using circumlocution as compensation strategy |
| WR_Q03 | Psychological preparation 2 (reducing anxiety) | WR_Q23 | Coining words as compensation strategy |
| WR_Q04 | Understanding task requirements | WR_Q24 | Meeting task requirements |
| WR_Q05 | Thinking about purpose | WR_Q25 | Ensuring completeness of text structure (beginning, body, and ending) |
| WR_Q06 | Gathering information about the topic | WR_Q26 | Ensuring correctness of grammar |
| WR_Q07 | Thinking about audience | WR_Q27 | Quality monitoring (assessing possible reader response) |
| WR_Q08 | Planning by listing ideas | WR_Q28 | Revising (ideas) |
| WR_Q09 | Planning about what language to use | WR_Q29 | Revising (re-organizing ideas) |
| WR_Q10 | Activating prior knowledge (text type) | WR_Q30 | Revising (reading aloud for problems) |
| WR_Q11 | Making an outline | WR_Q31 | Mechanics (spelling & punctuation) |
| WR_Q12 | Using graphic organizers for planning | WR_Q32 | Revising (words/phrases) |
| WR_Q13 | Planning by thinking about how to write | WR_Q33 | Thinking about readability |
| WR_Q14 | Planning by selecting a focus | WR_Q34 | Self-evaluation (strengths & weaknesses) |
| WR_Q15 | Prioritizing ideas over language while drafting | WR_Q35 | Other-evaluation (seeking peer feedback) |
| WR_Q16 | Activating prior knowledge (words or phrases read before) | WR_Q36 | Rewarding self for completion of writing tasks |
| WR_Q17 | Activating prior knowledge (ideas read before) | WR_Q37 | Trying to learn from teacher feedback |
| WR_Q18 | Using details to support main ideas | WR_Q38 | Progress monitoring (writing quality) |
| WR_Q19 | Ensuring coherence | WR_Q39 | Progress monitoring (writing ability) |
| WR_Q20 | Ensuring cohesion | WR_Q40 | Effort monitoring (looking out for writing opportunities) |

