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# Strategy use to Overcome Difficulties in EMI Courses in Higher Education

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**Abstract** – A proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses has been witnessed in the past two decades in mainland China, which calls for attention to students’ problems in this new learning context. This research focuses on the difficulties Chinese EMI learners face and the learning strategies they use. We investigated 100 seniors majoring in Education who have experiences in learning EMI courses at University G. The data were collected by using semi-closed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the participants encountered difficulty in speaking and reading most when learning EMI courses. The findings also show that they presented a medium-high level in their overall use of learning strategies, among which communication strategies were regarded most effective to overcome difficulties in speaking; cognitive strategies were highly appreciated to solve problems related to reading and listening, while meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies could help overcome obstacles in writing.

**Keywords** – English-medium Instruction, Higher Education, Learning Difficulty, Language Learning Strategy.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has been a recent trend for universities in both international and Chinese settings. English-medium courses has been regarded as one of the most necessary educational actions in higher education in order to promote internationalization. In the document released by the Ministry of Education of China in 2001, universities are required to supply more courses taught in English. Since then, more and more universities in China began to adopt English-medium instruction (EMI) and offer more English courses to qualify students for EMI (Mou, 2017). In recent years, EMI courses have spread widely and been welcomed in higher education. Students have shown their positive attitudes towards EMI courses for they not only can improve their English proficiency but also broaden their horizons on their specialization.

However, problems have emerged in EMI practice: due to limited exposure to English in their middle schools, students are not prepared in English speaking and listening skills when they come to higher education (Naoko & Naeko, 2006). Moreover, after entering university, many learners find the opportunities to learn English in EMI courses are too limited because many EMI teachers don’t regard English as their teaching objectives, and they refuse to teach language in their class (Marta, 2013). Therefore, many students admit that EMI courses present major challenges to their learning and increase their study burden, for which they have experienced numerous frustrations and difficulties (Wang, Yu & Shao, 2017).

It is critical to help these learners overcome obstacles in learning EMI courses and create a better learning environment for them. For EMI teachers, they need to recognize what difficulties have confronted students in

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EMI courses, directed by which they can make appropriate adjustments in their teaching to help students handle the problems.

As for EMI learners, they are not supine or inactive when facing difficulties. Many of them are seeking and trying various strategies to address their difficulties in EMI courses (Wang, Yu & Shao, 2017). It is worth ascertaining what strategies could help EMI learners succeed in overcoming difficulties in learning. This study tries to explore the EMI learners' difficulties in learning and their strategies to overcome the difficulties, and thus to bring enlightenments to EMI teachers to improve their teaching.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *A. Difficulties of EMI Students*

Learning subject content in English is a language behavior, and according to Spolsky (2009, p. 6), "language behavior is determined by proficiency." English language proficiency serves as a significant factor that causes negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, frustration) of EMI learners. Scholars have demonstrated that English learners' language proficiency would influence the way they perceive psychological stresses and respond to them (Marbley, 2011).

Chou (2018) investigated anxiety, strategy use, and difficulties of 638 second-year undergraduate students from four universities in Taiwan, two of which offered full EMI courses, and the other adopted partial EMI. He found that both partial and full EMI students exhibited high speech anxiety and negative feelings. His article provides us with a clear vision of students' negative perceptions of EMI learning.

Yeh (2014) probed 476 EMI students' learning experiences and general attitudes towards EMI courses. The participants came from 25 EMI courses at six universities in Taiwan. The authors found the participants inclined to owe the difficulties they have faced in EMI courses to their low proficiency in English. Due to their language incapability, they suffer difficulties in understanding specialist terms and learning content in EMI courses, which cause a heavy learning load for them. Moreover, EMI teachers' perceptions of learners' English language proficiency would affect their instruction. Instructors would simplify or reduce the teaching content due to the language difficulties stemming from EMI, while the reduced content might be insufficient for EMI learners to attain an understanding of professional knowledge in their specialized fields (Hu, Li & Lei, 2012).

Previous studies have indicated that students have suffered difficulties in learning EMI courses, which are mainly caused by their low English proficiency. These difficulties bring them anxiety, frustrations, and depression in their learning experiences in higher education.

### *B. Strategy use of EMI Students*

Many scholars have demonstrated that EMI students would make every effort to seek effective learning strategies to overcome their difficulties.

Soruc and Griffiths (2017) conducted a study of 39 Turkish university students who faced difficulties in EMI courses. A key finding of their work was seeing that the students were able to list numerous difficulties related to language as well as numerous strategies to resolve their difficulties. According to Yeh (2014), when confronted with difficulties in comprehension, EMI learners tended to use cognitive learning strategies to make compensation. These two studies reveal that EMI students would seek solutions to their problems.

Li (2014) investigated the impact of learning contexts upon the use of learning strategies of EMI learners and EFL learners. She compared the strategies used by 122 EMI learners and 119 EFL learners (Chinese-medium instruction) in the same city in Mainland China. The author found that the EMI learners demonstrated a higher level in their overall use of learning strategies than the other group. Li's article looks specifically at the positive responses of EMI learners when they face difficulties in learning. Moreover, Chou (2018) found that students' learning in full EMI context exhibited lower speech anxiety, less negative feelings and more confidence than those in partial EMI context (because of their higher level of strategy use). These two articles expand our understanding of students' perceptions of EMI learning and demonstrate the positive outcomes of EMI context.

In short, research in this area has shown the difficulties students face in EMI courses and the strategies they use. However, some studies only focus on difficulties and students' negative perceptions, and some mainly focus on their strategy use. There is very limited research building a connection between difficulties and strategy use systematically. Moreover, studies on strategies focus more on students' overall level of strategy use, what has not been revealed yet is whether the strategies they use are effective or not.

### **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### *A. English-medium Instruction*

The definition of English-medium instruction we adopted here is “use English to settings in which the course books and examinations are in English, but the translation of concepts and code-switching in lectures is allowed (Poon, 2013).” We chose this definition because, in mainland China, there are very few EMI courses in which teachers use English only, and many EMI teachers would use Chinese when explaining the concept and giving examples.

#### *B. Language Learning Strategies*

Oxford (1999) described learning strategies 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). To succeed in learning EMI courses, students should make full use of language learning strategies to resolve their language difficulties. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are divided into six categories: cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, affective strategies, and compensation strategies.

In order to explain what the six strategies are, Oxford (1990) subdivided them into a total of 19 strategy sets. Cognitive strategies are subdivided into practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output. Meta-cognitive strategies are sub-categorized into centering one's learning, arranging and planning one's learning, evaluating one's learning. Social strategies include asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others. Memory strategies include creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, employing action. Affective strategies include lowering one's anxiety, encouraging oneself, taking one's emotional temperature. Compensation strategies include guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

#### *C. Language Proficiency*

Different definitions and measures of language proficiency have been developed in different parts of the world-

-d because of various political, social, cultural and economic reasons. Although it is a complex multi-dimensional system, listening, reading, speaking and writing abilities are always regarded as its major components, and are tested in many international proficiency tests, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). In recent years, many Asian countries and regions have set these four abilities as the major testing components in their English standard tests, such as NEAT (the National English Ability Test) in South Korea (Hyejeony, 2015), and GEPT (the General English Proficiency Test) in Taiwan (Viphavee, 2012). Moreover, according to China's Standards of English language (CSE), capabilities of listening comprehension, reading, speaking, English writing and translation are the five factors used to describe learners' English language proficiency (Liu, 2019). Therefore, this research mainly focuses on difficulties and strategies related to listening, speaking, reading and writing.

This research tries to reveal EMI learners' major difficulties relevant to language and the features of their strategy use, and then bridge the two parts to find out the effective strategies used by EMI learners in resolving certain difficulties. This research aims to answer 3 questions:

1. What are the major difficulties students have met in EMI courses in higher education?
2. What are the features of learning strategy use among the EMI learners?
3. What strategies can help EMI learners overcome a certain kind of difficulty?

#### **IV. METHOD**

##### *A. Participants*

A total of 100 seniors majoring in Education in University G, who have taken at least five EMI courses were involved in this study.

To understand the existing difficulties and use of learning strategies among the participants, it would be helpful to have a brief introduction of the curriculum set in their faculty.

The participants are required to take courses in both English and Education. Most courses in Education are set as EMI courses, including Philosophy of Education, Educational Psychology, Educational Sociology, Theory of Moral Education, Principle of Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, and Research Method of Education, etc. The learning material and examinations of these courses are in English, and teachers use English as the medium language when giving lectures, and they are allowed to use a few Chinese when necessary. To attain the standard of credits for graduation, every student must have taken at least 5 EMI courses.

Besides courses in Education, the participants have also taken English courses, such as English Pronunciation, English Listening, English Reading and Academic Writing, etc. The number of English courses might have made it possible for them to have developed their knowledge of language learning strategies.

##### *B. Instruments*

First, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire with a 1-4 Likert scale on their difficulties in EMI courses, which consisted of difficulties related to "speaking", "listening", "reading" and "vocabulary". The score of "1" is for "never", "2" for "sometimes", "3" for "often", and "4" for "always". Then an open question served to investigate other difficulties students have faced in learning EMI courses. The questionnaire also

included a 1-5 Likert scale on the frequency of using strategies based on the Oxford (1990) categories of language learning strategies. The data of the questionnaire were analyzed by SPSS 22.0 to find out the average frequency of each difficulty and the students' level of using strategies. Based on the results of the questionnaire, qualitative interviews of 8 participants with a relatively high level of strategy use served to investigate what strategies can help resolve the difficulties EMI learners have met. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, three fourth-year students were asked to complete and comment on the questionnaire as the pilot test. According to their comments, several items were considered to be inappropriate for current learning situations such as "I write diaries in English." And some expressions that were redundant or might cause ambiguity were revised.

### *C. Data Collection and Analysis*

In total, 100 questionnaires were handed out, and 83 of them were returned, all of which were valid. The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed by using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics were conducted to reveal the major difficulties existing in the participants' experiences of learning EMI courses, and to analyze the means of each category to show the strategy use patterns of the participants.

The interview data were collected after the students completed the questionnaires. The interviewees were those who ranked the highest 10% in the evaluation of the level of strategy use. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and later transcribed into English by the researchers. Each interview lasted at least 30 minutes.

## **V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *A. Major Difficulties of the Participants*

To answer the first question about major difficulties learners have faced in EMI courses, the descriptive results were presented in Table 1. According to the average score of each difficulty, items 1-9, falling into the range of 2 and 3, represent a level of frequency between "sometimes" and "often". Items 10-12 score lower than 2, representing a level between "never" and "sometimes".

Table 1. Difficulties of the EMI Learners.

<b>Difficulties</b>	<b>Average scores</b>
1. Feeling anxious when making presentations in class.	2.23
2. Answering teachers' questions well in English.	2.18
3. Interacting with other students well in English.	2.16
4. Understanding some terms given by teachers.	2.16
5. Feeling shy when speaking English in class.	2.13
6. Understanding the reading material in English well.	2.12
7. Figuring out the structure of the reading material.	2.09
8. Understanding the vocabulary used in class.	2.07
9. Finishing reading in the given time.	2.04
10. Following some teachers for they speak too fast.	1.85

Difficulties	Average scores
11. Understanding the accent of some teachers.	1.82
12. Understanding most of English teachers speak in class.	1.78

Among the 12 difficulties, “Feeling anxious when making presentations in class” ranks highest with 2.23 points. Four of the highest five difficulties: “Feeling anxious when making presentations in class”, “Answering teachers’ questions well in English”, “Interacting with other students well in English” and “Feeling shy when speaking English in class” are all difficulties related to “speaking”. Difficulties related to “vocabulary”, including “Understanding some terms given by teachers” and “Understanding the vocabulary used in class”, rank fourth and eighth. Difficulties related to “reading”, which consist of “Understanding the reading material in English well”, “Figuring out the structure of the reading material” and “Finishing reading in the given time”, rank sixth, seventh, and ninth respectively. Difficulties related to “listening”, such as teachers’ speaking speed and accent, rank lowest among all difficulties.

Besides the difficulties related to “speaking”, “reading” and “listening”, difficulties in English writing is another major problem for them, according to the answers given by the participants in the open-ended question about other difficulties they have met in learning EMI courses. And the descriptive results were demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Difficulties Related to Writing.

Difficulties	Number
1. Finding appropriate words when writing	5
2. Using the same words repeatedly	4

The findings indicate that these EMI learners seemed to face difficulties in speaking most, especially in making presentations and answering teachers’ questions. Besides speaking, difficulties related to reading and vocabulary also occurred at a high frequency. This is consistent with earlier research that the major problem for EMI students was their limited facility with English, particularly in speaking and reading (Hu, Li & Lei, 2012).

### *B. Features of the Participants’ Strategy Use*

To answer the second research question about the EMI learners’ level of using strategies, the descriptive results were presented as the features of overall and specific strategy use of learners. According to Oxford (1990), the mean of each category indicates the general level of strategy use of a learner: Participants are considered to demonstrate a low level of using strategies if the mean values of each category are between 1.0 and 2.4, a medium level between 2.5 and 3.4, and a high level between 3.5 and 5.0.

Table 3 shows the results of the EMI learners’ strategy use at the overall and specific levels. The mean of the overall level is 3.446, which indicates that all these EMI learners had a medium-high level in strategy use. When examining the means for each category, there is one category surpassing the 3.5 cutting-off level, and no one is below the 2.5 edge line.

This finding suggests that the participants had a medium level in their strategy use at the six specific levels. The EMI learners show the following features of language learning strategies use (descending order):

compensation, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, affective and social. Among the six categories of learning strategies, the mean for compensation strategies reaches 3.723, falling into the range of 3.5 and 5.

The finding also suggests that the participants had a high level in their use of compensation strategies. The means for meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies are 3.456 and 3.451, close to 3.5, demonstrating that the learners had a medium-high level in their use of these two categories. The means for the remaining three categories, memory, affective and social strategies are all between 2.5 to 3.4. This indicates that the participants had a medium level in their use of these three categories of strategies.

The overall pattern shows that the participants generally adopted compensation strategies the most, and the affective and social strategies the least.

Table 3. Level of Strategy use of the EMI Learners.

Category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Compensation	3.723	.908
Metacognitive	3.456	.963
Cognitive	3.451	.940
Memory	3.393	.983
Affective	3.345	.971
Social	3.341	.928
Overall	3.446	.955

The findings correlate the results given in earlier research (e.g., Li, 2007) that Chinese learners used meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies in high frequency when learning in EMI contexts. However, there exists an obvious difference between the findings of the level of using compensation strategies and that of earlier research. According to the results reported in the earlier research, EMI learners used compensation strategies less frequently than meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies (Gao, 2004), whereas the statistics here show that the participants adopted compensation strategies most frequently.

### *C. Participants' Perceptions of the Strategies*

#### *a. Strategies to Solve the Difficulties in Speaking*

The results of the questionnaire suggest that the difficulties of speaking occur to the participants most frequently, and the interview data show that the participants have adopted various strategies.

When asked how to alleviate their anxiety in making presentations, almost all interviewees admitted that memory played a significant role as they would feel eased a lot if they had well memorized the content they were going to present; therefore, they tried memory strategies to retain more information. This finding is consistent with what was reported by Christina (2011) that the better students were able to retain large amounts of information, the stronger speeches they could deliver.

To remember the content more effectively, some interviewees adopted a kind of memory strategy named mind mapping. They memorized the content by lining out its structure and remembering the keywords or the main content of each part:

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*Excerpt 1: I just wrote down the keywords of each part instead of the whole; when I practiced, I would try my best to recall the content of each section. I think it is useful because sometimes it could deepen my understanding of the content I prepared as it could inspire me to think much more about the topic. Moreover, the time I save can be used to practice my pronunciation and intonation.*

This finding lends support to the results given by Christina (2011) that students who used mind mapping as a speech preparation method generally depended less on their draft, provided delivery more fluently, by which they could build more confidence in speaking English.

However, even though these participants thought mind mapping was of high efficiency, they admitted that they couldn't use it until they had achieved a certain level of English presentations. An interviewee named Shirley who adopted this strategy said, "I tried this strategy when I was a sophomore, after making a lot of presentations for which I had recited the whole draft. I think the use of mind mapping must be built on enough experience of making presentations and a high level of strategy use."

Besides using memory strategies, two interviewees adopted affective strategies to release their anxiety in making presentations. One of them calmed herself down by taking a deep breath. And the other would write down a draft and recite every word on it before her presentation. When she felt anxious in delivering her presentation, she would comfort herself that she had already remembered everything on her draft:

*Excerpt 2: To be frank, no matter how well I had prepared for my presentation, I would feel nervous when I was actually making it in front of my teacher and classmates. And I found it effective to calm myself down by taking a deep breath and encouraging myself that I can do it.*

*Excerpt 3: I would try my best to remember the whole of my draft. When I felt anxious about making presentations, I'd tell myself: "You have remembered everything, so there is nothing to fear."*

When it comes to the difficulties in answering teachers' questions in class, most interviewees agreed that it was not that they didn't know the answer of the question, but that they couldn't express their thoughts well in English. Just as Lisa, one of our interviewees, said, "For many times, I think I knew the answer, but when I spoke, what I said wasn't what I meant to say." They also admitted that the limited vocabulary and the low accuracy of grammar were the main causes of their difficulties. This is consistent with the findings reported by Chou (2018) that the EMI learners found it difficult to express opinions with their limited vocabulary and poor grammatical structures. Therefore, to handle these difficulties, learners need to pay attention to the vocabulary and grammar used in their speaking. The strategy they used most was a kind of meta-cognitive strategy that they would reflect their performance after giving the delivery:

*Excerpt 4: What I did was making a reflection on the language I used, for example, whether the tense was correct or not. After finding out the weak points, I would try to make up for it to get a better performance next time.*

While some participants declared it didn't work sometimes, because they would still make the same mistakes in grammar and vocabulary for they were too nervous to recall their reflection when asked by their teachers. As Nancy said, "I always made a reflection on my strength and weak points after answering my teachers' questions, and had figured out how to improve my performance. But the next time I answered my teacher's question, it would be totally forgotten for I only concentrated on the content of my answer." This also provides support to

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the results reported by Chou (2018), that nervousness was a great impediment for EMI learners to recall content and words that they had intended to use during their speaking.

Besides using meta-cognitive strategies after speaking, to make themselves understood by others during speaking, more than half of the participants had adopted compensation strategies, such as using gestures or other words they know, and giving examples.

*Excerpt 5: I would use other words if I didn't know the exact one. But more often, I would use gestures, and I think it is pretty effective because others could instantly know what I mean.*

*Excerpt 6: When answering some abstract questions, such as explaining an academic concept, I couldn't express my thoughts in English well. Then I would give an example to make myself understood by others.*

These findings showed the high frequency of the use of compensation strategies in speaking among the interviewees and the effectiveness. Chou (2018) found that the students would use synonyms to better express themselves in conversation. Hiroki (2016) noted that, apart from verbal communicative elements, learners also used nonverbal resources, such as gestures, to contribute to successful communication. It seemed that the compensation strategies were welcome among the participants, while interview data showed that even though these participants admitted that the compensation strategies were of efficiency, they felt uncomfortable when using them. "It would show others my low efficiency of English," Shirley said, "and they could sense my embarrassment."

Apart from grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation and expression were two significant elements in making successful presentations and communication. Interview data showed the participants had numerous strategies to improve their pronunciation and expression, among which cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were frequently used.

Two participants chose to seek mobile phone applications (apps) on which they could practice their pronunciation. For example, Fun Dubbing, an app where users can dub English movies and get scores and feedback on their performance. Joanna, who recommended this application, said, "It could give me feedback immediately and provide opportunities to practice the part I didn't do well." Besides practicing their pronunciation through different apps, another kind of meta-cognitive strategy was used, too. One interviewee named Nina had her performance recorded and then made a reflection on the videotape:

*Excerpt 7: I asked my classmates to record a video of my presentation, so I could watch it after class and find out my weak points on pronunciation. Actually, it not only helped me correct my mistakes, but also gave me more confidence in speaking English, because sometimes I could find my work wasn't as terrible as I had imagined. It could tell me what progress I have made clearly.*

In addition to pronunciation which plays an important role in spoken English, the way of expressing matters, too. In order to make their English expressions more idiomatic, some participants adopted a cognitive strategy that they learned the native expressions by watching British or American dramas and TV series:

*Excerpt 8: I often watched American dramas and paid attention to the language they used. If I found some good expressions, I would write them down and tried to use them when I speak English.*

Among all strategies used by the participants, the most highly appreciated ones to improve speaking ability w

-ere communication strategies. Among them, communicating with English native speakers was regarded as the most effective one:

*Excerpt 9: During the summer vacation, I joined a summer camp as a volunteer, together with many English native speakers. I found it very efficient to improve my spoken English by talking with them because I could learn the idiomatic expressions they used and they were often willing to teach me how to speak English like a native speaker.*

*Excerpt 10: Some of my friends get great spoken English for they have many chances of talking with foreigners who speak English. I think it's just like a virtuous circle: the more English you speak, the less nervous you will be, and then you will have more confidence in speaking more English.*

However, the opportunities to talk with foreigners were too few for the participants. As Bella said, “We just have one course taught by a foreign teacher in the second semester in Grade 1. I think it is not enough for us.” Due to the lack of opportunities to communicate with foreigners, some interviewees turned to their English teachers for help:

*Excerpt 11: To prepare for TOEFL, I bought a course of spoken English. So I could have a lot of opportunities to talk with an English teacher and get the feedback. My spoken English has been improved a lot during that time. I think it is necessary to practice speaking English under the guidance of an English teacher.*

The two ways above of practicing English speaking were not so available for most of the participants. What was more accessible for them was to practice English with their classmates. Rachel, one of the participants, recounted her experience of correcting her mistakes in pronunciation with the help of her group members. “I hadn’t been aware of my problem that I often added a “/s/” or “/t/” at the end of the words until my group members pointed it out.” She said, “When we were working together on a project, they told me that I should pay more attention to this problem, and they were willing to help me correct my mistakes when I was speaking English.”

Even though these participants had access to practicing English with classmates or group members, the interview data indicated that they used this strategy with a low frequency and failed to persist in it.

*Excerpt 12: I wouldn't ask others to talk with me in English especially those who excel in spoken English, because I am afraid of being refused.*

*Excerpt 13: My roommates and I have once set up an “English Day” every week. On that day, we could speak only English with each other. But we didn't stick to it after several weeks, because it's too strange for a group of Chinese to talk in English.*

*Excerpt 14: When we were doing group work, we made comments mostly on the content of others' presentations and only some obvious mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. Nobody would directly indicate others' deficiencies in English speaking, such as bad intonation. On the one hand, we think it will hurt others' faces; on the other hand, we ourselves are not experts in English.*

These findings showed even though communication strategies were seen as effective ones, the use of them was limited. It correlates the results given by Chou (2018) that although EMI context seemed to provide more opportunities for students to speak English, students did not have sufficient chances of speaking English in class

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and, as English is a foreign language in China, they did not speak it often outside of class either.

In conclusion, to reduce anxiety in making presentations, most participants adopted memory strategies to retain more information, such as using mind mapping. If they still felt anxious when delivering the presentation, some participants would use affective strategies to calm themselves down, such as taking a deep breath or saying something encouraging. To solve their difficulties in answering teachers' questions and communicating with their classmates, most participants adopted meta-cognitive strategies that they made reflections on the grammar and vocabulary they used in speaking. While these strategies sometimes failed to work because the nervousness at the moment of speaking would impede them from recalling their reflections. Also, compensation strategies, for instance, using gestures or other words, were used most frequently and regarded effective to achieve successful communications, while some participants would feel embarrassed by using them because their low efficiency of English would be exposed. Moreover, meta-cognitive strategies were frequently used to strengthen the participants' spoken English. For instance, to improve their pronunciation, some participants practiced it by using mobile phone applications, and some reflected their performance by taking videos; to make their expressions more idiomatic, some students learned English by watching British or American dramas. While the most highly praised strategies, such as speaking English with foreigners, group members and asking for teachers' help, were used less frequently than other strategies. One cause for it might be the learning environment where opportunities to communicate with native English speakers were limited. Another one might be students' shyness or their reluctance of using English in their daily life.

#### *b. Strategies to Solve the Difficulties in Reading*

According to the results of the questionnaire, the participants also had great difficulty in reading, including "understanding the reading material in English well" and "figuring out the structure of the reading material" and "finishing reading in the given time". Moreover, the item "couldn't understand some terms given by teachers", which was categorized into difficulties related to vocabulary before are regarded as the difficulty in reading now because most interviewees admitted they couldn't understand the terms for the concepts were too academic to be understood during a short time in class. They admitted it would have been much easier for them to make sense of the terms if they had previewed the learning content before class. However, most of them failed to preview the learning content for they couldn't finish reading on time. Therefore, according to interview data, this item is a kind of reading difficulty.

Reported by the participants, one of the factors that caused this problem was their limited vocabulary. This correlates the findings given by Chou (2013) that vocabulary was regarded as a major obstacle for students in English reading. The readers would find it too hard to understand the reading material if there were a great number of unfamiliar words. In order to expand their vocabulary in reading, two of the interviewees adopted memory strategies that they recited words that frequently appear in reading material by just memorizing their spelling and meaning, regardless of their pronunciation and usage.

*Excerpt 15: The words I have memorized this way might not be used in writing or speaking, and what I need to ensure is recognizing them when I read English material. And I think it not only has improved my reading efficiency, but also saved my time because I needn't remember everything of a word.*

Apart from the reading difficulties caused by limited vocabulary, the interview data also indicated that some i

-interviewees had difficulty in working out the main idea of the reading material. As Bella said, “I always finished reading in a short time, and I did know every word in it. But after reading, I still couldn’t make sense of what it was talking about.” According to the interview data, to find out the main idea, many interviewees used cognitive strategies to figure out the structure of the reading material first. Some participants recommended that the connective words were of great help, while some regarded it was useful to make a summary of each or several paragraphs they had read:

*Excerpt 16: I think the structure of English is easier to be found than that of Chinese because the connective words can’t be omitted. So every time when I read an English text, I would find out the connective words such as “because”, “so” and “but”, etc. It could help me to recognize the author’s opinion.*

*Excerpt 17: I often wrote a summary of each part I have read in a text. If the essay was pretty difficult, I would summarize each paragraph I’ve read, If it was not so difficult, I would make a summary of the part I’ve read when I felt the author tended to talk about another thing. After finishing the whole text, I would draw a final summary based on those I’ve made out. I think it’s very useful especially when the text is long.*

Making a summary is a strategy that is taught and often required by teachers and frequently used by students in L1 learning in China. This finding is consistent with what Saeed (2016) reported that English L2 readers mostly tended to rely on the strategies they valued in their L1 learning. However, some interviewees told us that even though these strategies could help to some degree, they still found the reading material was too much for them to finish. Therefore, they tried meta-cognitive strategies that they just found out and made sense of the keywords and key concepts (terms and concepts are usually boldfaced) without recognizing every word and detail in the reading material. They admitted by using this strategy they could in some ways understand the main content in the reading material that might be discussed in the lecture.

*Excerpt 18: When I previewed the learning content, I often lined out the keywords I guessed my teacher would talk about in class, such as terms or some content words that seemed new and important, and then I would focus on them. It could help me better understand what my teacher taught in class.*

*Excerpt 19: I would find out the concepts I thought important first, and then read the explanations and draw a mind map of them, without reading the examples or the authors’ comments, etc. I think it’s pretty useful when I didn’t have enough time to read the whole text because it could help me understand the concepts and the relationship among them in a relatively short time.*

However, the interviewees who have adopted these strategies also admitted that it didn’t work when there were no academic terms or concepts in the reading material or the content taught in the lecture was beyond their presumption. As Rachel said, “It was unlikely for me to make sense of every detail in the reading material. So I must presume what was likely to be discussed in class, and focused on that only. But sometimes what my teacher taught was out of my presumption. Then I might get lost in the lecture.” Therefore, she hoped that teachers could give them some guiding questions or tasks before their preview, with which they could better use the meta-cognitive strategies to monitor whether they have understood the content that would be taught in the lecture.

*Excerpt 20: Some teachers would give us several questions before we preview the reading text. These questions could always guide us to find out the structure and the main point of the text. I think it could help me*

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*better comprehend the reading material. I know some teachers didn't give questions to us in case we just think about the questions and ignore the rest of the content. But I do think my teachers' expectation was far beyond my present ability.*

Students would try to focus on specific parts to help them find the meaning of the passage (Chou, 2013). Therefore, if teachers could give some guiding questions, students might better recognize where they could attain information that could help them understand the content.

To conclude, one factor that caused difficulties in reading was the EMI learners' limited vocabulary in reading; the other one was they couldn't find out the main idea of the passage. To expand their vocabulary, some participants tried memory strategies that they recited words by just remembering their spelling and meaning so they could recognize them in reading. In order to handle difficulties in finding out the main idea of the reading material, some participants adopted cognitive strategies that they worked out the structure of the passage first by finding out the connective words or making a summary of each part to make it easier to summarize the main idea of the author.

Even though these strategies could increase their efficiency of reading, sometimes there was still no sufficient time for some learners to finish the whole text. Therefore some participants would adopt compensation strategies by just focusing on the terms and concepts to ensure at least they wouldn't get totally lost in class. However, there were not always terms or concepts in reading material and sometimes the teacher would talk about something that they had not presumed before. Therefore, some participants recommended that teachers give some guiding questions before class because it could help them better preview the learning content.

### *c. Strategies to Solve the Difficulties in Listening*

The results of the questionnaire indicated that many students had difficulty in listening, including "following some teachers because they speak too fast", "understanding the accent of some teachers", and "understanding most of English teachers speak in class". Moreover, as the interview data showed, the difficulty in "understanding the vocabulary used in class" was attributed by the interviewees to their failure to match the words with their pronunciation. Therefore, this difficulty was related to their listening ability, instead of their vocabulary accumulation. So this item was categorized into difficulties related to listening. According to the interview data, almost all interviewees said it was the one that had hurt their confidence most among all difficulties in learning the EMI courses. As Rachel said, "I used to feel so hurt if I couldn't follow my teacher. I would be drawn in this feeling and missed the following content." When it comes to the reason for these difficulties, five interviewees attributed them to their low proficiency of English; only one owed them to the teachers' incompetence. This finding correlates what Viriri (2013) reported in their research that many EMI learners were very aware of their own language 'inadequacies', and would blame themselves for their unsatisfactory performance.

As for those who attributed the difficulty to their incapability of English listening, the most common strategies they adopted were cognitive strategies. For instance, most interviewees practiced listening by doing listening exercises or watching American or British film and TV works.

*Excerpt 21: I think my problem was I couldn't recognize some words when I heard them. To better match the words with their pronunciation, I took half an hour every day to do listening comprehension or listen to English*

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news reported by VOA.

*Excerpt 22: I improved my listening ability by watching American drama series. I think Friends is a pretty good one. I always watched each episode many times until I could recognize every word they said without seeing the subtitles.*

However, it would usually take a long time to improve English listening ability, during which interviewees chose to adopt affective strategies to reduce their anxiety and frustration when they failed to follow their teacher:

*Excerpt 23: When I couldn't follow my teacher and felt upset, I would tell myself it didn't matter because I could ask for the teacher's help or review it by myself through PPT or textbook after class. I was not taking an exam, and I could make up for it. After thinking of these, I wouldn't feel so frustrated and could concentrate on the lecture again.*

One interviewee deemed that she failed to follow some teachers because they couldn't give lectures logically when they used English. And she has not found any effective strategies to solve this problem:

*Excerpt 24: I think some teachers couldn't teach in a very fluent and logical way when they used English, let alone made us understand them. But I dare not tell them this directly, what I could do was to review the content after class.*

This finding echoes the results reported by Tong and Shi (2012) that the EMI teachers who lacked adequate command of English-medium instruction would greatly influence the EMI students' learning experiences and responses.

In conclusion, most participants attributed difficulties they faced in listening to their low English efficiency, and some of them tried cognitive strategies to improve their listening ability, such as doing listening exercises and watching American or British film and television works. When they have not attained a high level of English listening ability, some participants would adopt affective strategies to release their anxiety and frustration when they couldn't follow their teachers. For participants who owed the problem to their teacher, they wouldn't talk about the problem with their teacher directly, and they would make compensation by themselves after class.

#### d. *Strategies to Solve the Difficulties in Writing*

Difficulties in writing were another major problem for these EMI students, and the data indicated that most interviewees had difficulty in diction. Indicated by the interviewees, one factor that caused this problem was they didn't master the usage of words well. Memory strategies were frequently used to handle this problem, as an interviewee said, she would remember the illustrative sentences of the words she recited so she could know how to use them:

*Excerpt 25: I used to find it so hard to choose an appropriate word when writing in English because there were too many words that I was not so sure about how to use them. So I began to memorize the example sentences given by the vocabulary-reciting app or make sentences with the words on my own. I think it's quite helpful to remember the part of the words and their collocation.*

Another interviewee said it was of help to memorize words by reading English books. She said learning wor-

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-ds in the context helped her better use these words in writing.

*Excerpt 26: I think remembering words by reading English books is pretty useful because I could know how to use it. And it made me feel much more relaxed in reciting words if the book was interesting.*

The words in English books are provided with a concrete context, which could help students acquire their usage. It lends support to the earlier research conducted by Min (2012) that reading could develop and enrich the words that have been learned before and could help learners better recognize the new words. It could also help learners develop some receptive and productive knowledge, such as using the words in writing.

Apart from lacking knowledge of how to use the words, low diversity in diction was another common problem for these interviewees because many students' had been accustomed to using their familiar words. To solve this problem, meta-cognitive strategies were used that the interviewees would monitor what they were writing and replace the repeated words by their synonyms:

*Excerpt 27: I always used a word many times in one writing. For example, I could always use the word "different" to show there is a difference because it was too familiar to me. To solve this problem, I would check what I have written and looked up the dictionary for the synonyms to replace the words which appeared the second time.*

Interview data showed that diction was a major obstacle for EMI learners when they were writing. One factor that caused this problem was that the students lack knowledge of the usage of many words; the other one was the students were prone to use their familiar words repeatedly. The students tried to acquire the usage of the words by using memory strategies that they would recite the illustrative sentences and make sentences of the words or learning words by reading English books. To solve the latter problem, the learners tried to use the meta-cognitive strategies that they monitored the process of writing and replaced repeated words with their synonyms.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

This study has investigated the difficulties and the strategy use among 100 EMI students majoring in Education. The difficulties the participants met and their use of learning strategies were elicited through a semi-closed questionnaire survey. Students' perceptions of using strategies were shown by a semi-structured interview. Findings reveal that the EMI learners had difficulty in speaking and reading the most. As for strategy use, the participants demonstrated a medium-high level in their overall use of learning strategies, among which compensation strategies were used most frequently, and affective and social strategies the least. For students' perceptions of the strategies they have used to overcome difficulties, the interview data indicated that communication strategies were regarded as the most effective ones to resolve difficulties related to speaking, while the use of them was limited by the environment and students' personality. When dealing with the difficulties in reading, memory and cognitive strategies were frequently used to help the students recognize the words and find out the main idea of the passage. To resolve the difficulties in listening, cognitive strategies were adopted to improve their listening ability, and affective strategies were used to reduce their anxiety in listening. Moreover, meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies were used frequently in solving the problems of diction in writing.

This research has the following three strengths. First, most previous studies about EMI learners were conduct-

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-ed in English-speaking countries or regions where English is set as the official language, such as in Hong Kong. This research fills this gap by focusing on EMI learners in a non-English-speaking region, Mainland China. The second strength is that the participants involved in this study have studied in both English and Education, their experiences of learning English have improved their ability to choose and use language learning strategies, which validate the efficiency and usefulness of the strategies they used. The third strength of this study is that it bridges the gap between the difficulties and strategy use of EMI learners. As mentioned above, most previous studies about the difficulties and strategy use of the EMI learners didn't indicate the relation between them. While this research demonstrates what strategies the EMI learners use to resolve certain difficulties and their evaluation of the strategies.

This study has provided at least four significant implications for English-medium instruction courses learning and teaching in higher education in Mainland China. For students who learn EMI courses, firstly, communication strategies could be of help to improve their English speaking ability. Even though the opportunities to use them are not usually available and it might be embarrassing to speak English with others, it is worthy of trying. Secondly, students who couldn't finish reading tasks on time could try memory strategies to expand their vocabulary which is the foundation of successful reading, and cognitive strategies can be used to ascertain the structure of reading material and the author's view. Thirdly, for students who couldn't follow their teachers in lectures, listening exercises are necessary to improve their listening ability, such as doing listening comprehension or watching American and British film and television works. Fourthly, students who have difficulty in English writing can adopt meta-cognitive strategies to acquire more knowledge of usage and synonyms of the words they have learned to achieve a higher level of diction.

Furthermore, there are some bits of suggestions for teachers who teach EMI courses. First, the findings that the learners have limited opportunities to use communication strategies in and out of class indicate that the EMI teachers are expected to create more chances of speaking English for EMI learners in class and take effective measures to encourage them to practice speaking after class. An authentic English learning environment is important for EMI learners to improve their language proficiency and build their confidence in learning EMI courses. Second, the teachers are encouraged to provide clear and more guidance to students on how to prepare for the lecture, which may reduce students' pressure in previewing and listening to the lecture. Third, to make the lecture easy to understand and follow, teachers are supposed to ensure it will go on fluently and logically. Last but not least, strategy-embedded instruction is needed to improve EMI learners' level of using strategies to help them resolve difficulties more efficiently.

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