

Thematic Analysis of Language Learning Strategies in Advanced Chinese Proficiency Among International Undergraduate Students

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Abstract— The study aimed to explore language learning strategies international undergraduate students employ at Qinghai Nationalities University in China. Data were collected through interviews with eight international undergraduate students, who were selected using purposive sampling. The thematic analysis results revealed that international undergraduate students demonstrate positive learning attitudes, the ability to manage negative emotions, and proactive engagement in interactions. However, they primarily focus on developing listening and speaking skills over reading and writing. Moreover, international undergraduate students' challenges in vocabulary usage, grammar, and colloquial writing style show their inadequate advanced Chinese language proficiency. The findings offer practical implications for language learning strategy and Chinese instruction, emphasizing the enhancement of advanced Chinese proficiency and the effective use of strategies among international undergraduate students.

Keywords— Advanced Chinese proficiency; Chinese as a Second Language; Chinese instruction; international undergraduate students; language learning strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a branch of Applied Linguistics, is a complex and multifaceted process that involves learning and acquiring a non-native language. It encompasses various interconnected aspects and content areas, such as language and language use, language skills and assessment; and other essential areas including language learning strategies, learning style, motivation, sociolinguistics, and multilingualism [1]. Chamot pointed out that language learning strategies are techniques, approaches, and actions students undertake to assist their learning [2]. Wenden described “learning strategies are the various operations that learners use to make sense of their learning” [3]. Oxford characterized 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” [4]. Based on the understanding of the definitions mentioned above, language learning strategies are methods, techniques, and approaches that learners use to acquire, understand, and communicate more effectively in a foreign or second language. These strategies facilitate

language learning and help second language learners become proficient.

Researchers including Chen, Wang, and Cao have conducted chronological reviews of strategy studies. Chen's review revealed that from 1998 to 2007, there was a limited amount of research on language learning strategies, with few publications in reputable journals [5]. Following this period, Wang's review indicated a significant decrease in the number of review articles on language learning strategies between 2007 and 2012, with research gradually shifting towards the study of strategy usage [6]. More recently, Cao's review highlighted that in the last five years (from 2014 to 2018), the focus of language learning strategy research has shifted primarily to micro-level investigations. These studies have explored specific learning strategies for Chinese listening, speaking, vocabulary, and characters, many of which were master's degree theses [7]. Due to the limited research on language learning strategies in the context of Chinese as a second language, this study investigates the learning strategies employed by international undergraduate students at Qinghai Nationalities University. It aimed to obtain deep insights into how these students utilize learning strategies in their Chinese language acquisition. The research findings have practical implications for teachers, offering valuable insights for improving language learning strategy and Chinese instruction. Furthermore, these findings offer valuable empirical evidence for language learning strategy research, establishing the foundation for future longitudinal and comparative research on Chinese as a second language acquisition for international undergraduate students.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research method [8] and Oxford's language learning strategies theory [9] to explore systematically international undergraduate students' use of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies.

The population for the study was international undergraduate students at Qinghai Nationalities University. At this university, there are, in total, 47 international undergraduate students majoring in Chinese Language and

Literature. The participants were selected through purposive sampling with specific criteria. These criteria included: i) the students have reached an advanced level of Chinese study, ii) they have demonstrated high proficiency in exams administrated by the College of International Education. Based on these criteria, eight participants were purposively selected. These participants include one student from the Class of 2016, three from the Class of 2019, three from the Class of 2020, and one from the Class of 2021.

A semi-structured interview format was utilized, incorporating questions designed within a predefined thematic framework while allowing flexibility to explore participants' responses. The interview questions were adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to align with the study's focus on language learning strategies. The interview outline consists of two sections, comprising 43 questions. The first section includes ten general questions designed to create a relaxed atmosphere and encourage open conversation, such as inquiries about Chinese learning experiences. The second section contains 33 targeted questions focusing on language learning strategies. The supervisor and field experts reviewed the outline to ensure its clarity. A pretest was conducted to confirm the questions' accurate interpretation and ensure their sequence did not influence participants' responses, enhancing the overall effectiveness.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse international undergraduate students' interview. The procedures of thematic analysis include familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of participants' strategy usage and learning experiences.

III. THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Based on Oxford's language learning strategy theory, the study identified three main themes: the strategies for vocabulary learning, the strategies for developing language skills, and the strategies for coordinating the learning. According to the participants' responses, each theme was divided into two subthemes. Figure 1 below illustrates these themes.

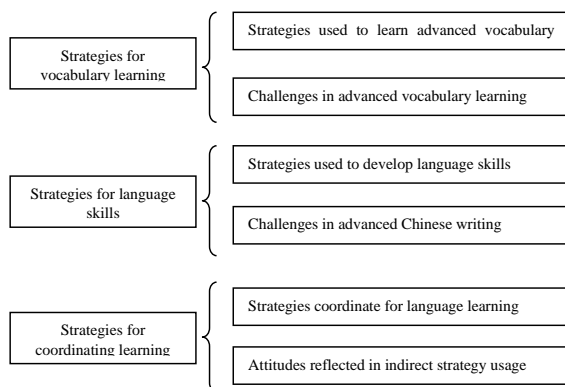


Fig. 1. Diagram of themes of the study.

The themes were defined to address the research questions

directly. The Strategies for Developing Advanced Chinese Vocabulary and Challenges in Vocabulary Learning theme focuses on two aspects. 1) What language learning strategies do international undergraduate students use for advanced vocabulary learning? 2) What challenges do they encounter in learning advanced Chinese vocabulary?

The Strategies for Developing Advanced Chinese Skills and Challenges in Writing theme also focuses on two aspects: 1) What cognitive strategies do international undergraduate students use to develop advanced Chinese skills? 2) What specific difficulties do they encounter in advanced Chinese writing?

The Strategies for Coordinating Language Learning theme also consists of two aspects: 1) What indirect language learning strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social) do international undergraduate students apply? 2) What attitudes are reflected in the use of these indirect strategies?

A. Strategies for Developing Advanced Chinese Vocabulary

Through analysis, it was observed that the strategy of making sentences is most commonly used by international students. Chen Yuping, an international undergraduate student from the Class of 2021, stated, "I often make sentences because if I make sentences, I will easily remember the word" (Chen, Class of 2021). This statement highlights how the sentence-making strategy aids learners in memorizing vocabulary. Another international student, Katie, shared her experience learning Chinese vocabulary, stating that she likes making sentences and sharing them with teachers and friends for correction. She believes that through this method, she can acquire a natural and authentic understanding of the word in a contextual setting (Katie, Class of 2016). Elizabeth, a Norwegian student from the Class of 2020, also acknowledged frequently using the sentence-making strategy, asserting that it helps her comprehend the usage of words (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). The use of sentence-making resonates with the intricacies of the Chinese vocabulary, characterized by diverse parts of speech and complex meanings. Engaging in sentence-making allows learners to grasp the meaning and usage of words and facilitates easy memorization. Therefore, it becomes apparent why this strategy is overwhelmingly favored among international students.

In addition to using sentence-making, most international students learn words through example sentences or texts. Gu Li, a student from Kazakhstan, shared that when faced with challenges in constructing sentences, she compared her sentences to example sentences to identify differences. By doing so, she can pinpoint and quickly correct any issues based on the structure of the provided examples (Gu, Class of 2019). Katie mentioned that, through example sentences, she gains insights into different word meanings within diverse contextual settings (Katie, Class of 2016). Elizabeth also expressed her preference for learning through example sentences. She actively seeks examples to observe how words are used and memorizes these example sentences to enhance her understanding and retain the usage (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Pelina, an international student from Laos, follows a similar approach and uses example sentence structure when

making sentences. She stated that this method allows her to master the correct use of words within the appropriate structural context (Pelina, Class of 2020). Learning words through example sentences facilitates learners, such as Gu Li, Katie, Elizabeth, and Pelina, to comprehend word meanings and usage across varied contexts. This strategy not only aids in correcting sentence errors but also enables learners to master the usage of words within specific structural contexts. The effectiveness and popularity of this strategy are evident among international students.

International students also employ compensation strategies in their vocabulary learning. Among these strategies, guessing and synonyms are frequently used. During interviews, Gu Li stated, “I consciously avoid relying on dictionaries, especially in real-time communication with Chinese. It is not always convenient to look up words. Instead, I prefer guessing the meaning and then seeking clarification” (Gu, Class of 2019). This view was echoed by several other international students who expressed a positive attitude towards the strategy of guessing, considering it a valuable and practical strategy. In addition to guessing, international students also discussed using synonyms as a common practice. When faced with an unfamiliar word, they often replace it with a synonym or a word of similar meaning. Students find this strategy advantageous as it helps alleviate communication barriers and serves as a preventive measure against potential language mistakes.

The analysis reveals that international undergraduate students predominantly utilize memory strategies, such as making sentences and learning through examples or texts. Compensation strategies play a vital role in addressing gaps in vocabulary acquisition, with international students frequently employing guessing and synonyms. These strategies contribute significantly to establishing a solid vocabulary foundation for developing advanced Chinese skills. The above strategies used in advanced Chinese vocabulary learning are based on the strategy of multi-frequency use.

B. Challenges in Advanced Chinese Vocabulary Learning

Four primary challenges international undergraduate students encounter in their advanced vocabulary learning. The first and most common challenge is the complexity of vocabulary and extensive written language. Almost every interviewee struggled with complex vocabulary, particularly in written form. An He highlighted the difficulty in comprehending advanced reading, mainly sourced from HSK levels 5 and 6 (An, Class of 2019). This sentiment was echoed by Pelina, who found it challenging to comprehend advanced vocabulary due to its multifaceted meanings and usages (Pelina, Class of 2020). Gu Li shared a similar perspective, emphasizing the abundance of difficult-to-understand written words in advanced Chinese reading (Gu, Class of 2019). Katie further expounded on the issue, attributing the difficulty to historical and cultural characteristics of the Chinese written language. She noted that without understanding the historical or cultural context, it becomes challenging to comprehend and remember the meanings of these words (Katie, Class of 2016). Several international students, including Da Wei, Elizabeth,

Zuo Wen, An He, and Katie, identified the issue of quickly forgetting learned words as a common challenge, highlighting it as a significant obstacle in advanced vocabulary learning. Moreover, international undergraduate students reported limited use of advanced Chinese vocabulary in oral and written communication. For example, Elizabeth mentioned that she rarely uses advanced words in conversations with friends (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Da Wei expressed a similar view, noting that such vocabulary feels impractical in everyday interactions (Da, Class of 2019). This feedback highlights the formal, complex, and less frequent nature of advanced-level vocabulary.

The challenges international undergraduate students face underscore their inadequacy in understanding and utilizing advanced Chinese vocabulary in various contexts. These difficulties manifest in their efforts to grasp advanced words during listening and reading tasks and their reluctance to integrate advanced vocabulary into their oral and written communication.

C. Strategies for Developing Advanced Chinese Skills

The analysis reveals that international undergraduate students commonly use listening practice and oral communication strategies. To improve their listening skills, students engage in activities such as watching Chinese movies, TV series, and variety shows and listening to Chinese songs daily. Regarding oral practice, students prefer conversing with Chinese people, friends, and classmates. For example, Gu Li mentioned that her proficiency in speaking Chinese is high due to her frequent communication with her Chinese family members (Gu, Class of 2019). Katie expressed a similar view, emphasizing the effectiveness of chatting with Chinese friends as an excellent learning method (Katie, Class of 2016). Elizabeth also affirmed the benefits of conversing in Chinese with friends, attributing it to her rapid improvement in language skills (Elizabeth, Class of 2020).

The frequent use of listening and speaking practice indicates a strong emphasis by international undergraduate students on enhancing their listening and speaking skills. Among listening and speaking skills, international undergraduate students emphasize speaking skills more. Their use of text communication strategy evidences this preference. For instance, Gu Li expressed, “Sending messages is convenient. I chat on WeChat daily, all in Chinese” (Gu, Class of 2019). Similarly, Chen Yuping stated, “I use Chinese when sending messages on WeChat or through SMS. Sometimes when shopping on Pinduoduo or Taobao (Chinese online shopping platforms), I often text in Chinese to customer service” (Chen, Class of 2021). International students engage in text communication through platforms like WeChat, QQ (Chinese messaging software), and SMS to fulfil their learning objectives through interaction, underscoring their preference for developing speaking skills.

In addition, international students incorporate diverse exercises into their learning routines. These exercises include using flashcards, practicing with friends, describing in Chinese, reading and writing. Katie, for instance, expressed her preference for using flashcards to describe content to her

friends for correction and memorization purposes (Katie, Class of 2016). Zuo Wen mentioned her approach to learning Chinese through reading, listening, and writing, highlighting her comprehensive engagement in developing various language skills (Zuo, Class of 2020).

The analysis shows that international undergraduate students employ strategies including listening practice, oral communication, text communication, and diverse exercises, emphasizing the significance of these cognitive strategies for developing language skills. However, their frequent use of listening and speaking practice indicates a prioritization of developing listening and speaking skills. Half of the interviewees incorporate reading practice, and only one student uses writing practice. During interviews, some students expressed their dislike for reading and writing. These findings collectively suggest that international undergraduate students prioritize developing speaking and listening skills over reading and writing skills.

D. Challenges in Advanced Chinese Writing

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills in Chinese as a second language learning and is often used as a key indicator to assess students' language proficiency and their ability to apply linguistic knowledge [10]. The writing challenges international undergraduate students face encompass several aspects. Firstly, almost all international students write primarily to fulfil assigned homework tasks. For example, Gu Li expressed, "For me, the purpose of writing is to finish the homework given by teachers in class. I do not view writing as a hobby, and it is rare for me to write at home" (Gu, Class of 2019). This sentiment was echoed by Pelina, who stated, "When it comes to Chinese writing, if the teacher does not assign any homework, I will not write" (Pelina, Class of 2020). Addressing this issue, Katie also shared her perspective: "There is not much initiative for me to write unless it is assigned homework. Like me, I believe most international students write primarily to meet homework requirements, and fewer are willing to write actively" (Katie, Class of 2016). One international student initially expressed his incentive for writing; however, the endeavor ended in discontinuation. The student believes the failure results from the demanding nature of writing, which requires extensive reading and accumulation and is difficult to sustain (An, Class of 2019). These statements collectively emphasize that international undergraduate students seldom practice reading and writing and have put minimal effort into developing their academic skills.

Secondly, international undergraduate students encounter challenges in written language and grammar. The use of written language has consistently emerged as an obstacle in advanced vocabulary learning, reflecting the broader difficulties they face at the advanced level. In addition to written language, grammar poses another formidable challenge for the students. The complexity escalates with the use of intricate sentence patterns and discourse coherence. For instance, Da Wei highlighted the difficulty in Chinese grammar and vocabulary, citing examples such as the

distinction between “能” (can) and “会” (will), admitting to making numerous errors in writing (Da, Class of 2019). Pelina expressed similar sentiments, emphasizing careful attention to grammar and vocabulary usage when making sentences due to their intricate nature. She also expressed challenges in determining the appropriate placement of advanced words within sentences (Pelina, Class of 2020). These statements highlight the practical issues faced by international undergraduate students, such as vocabulary usage, sentence construction, and writing contents.

An additional prevalent challenge in advanced writing is related to writing style. International undergraduate students' writing often takes on the form of a running account or, in other words, exhibits characteristics of foreign-style Chinese writing. For instance, Katie shared her perspective on her writing, stating, "When I write, I use simple words, one by one; however, the writing ends up like a running account" (Katie, Class of 2016). Similarly, Elizabeth expressed a similar sentiment about her writing, acknowledging, "I believe people can tell from my writing that it was written by a foreigner" (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). These statements indicate that international students struggle with formal writing.

The challenges international undergraduate students face in advanced Chinese writing are closely linked to their use of cognitive strategies. Analysis reveals that these students prioritize developing listening and speaking skills over reading and writing. Interview responses reinforce this finding, where participants expressed a general dislike for reading, and nearly all indicated they were unwilling to write unless required for assignments. These statements highlight the negative attitudes of international undergraduate students toward developing reading and writing skills.

International undergraduate students' limited engagement in reading and writing practice, despite their higher proficiency, underscores a significant gap in their skill development. Even those with advanced Chinese abilities admit to paying little attention to writing practice. This discrepancy between proficiency and practice is a pressing issue that contradicts the syllabus requirements for international undergraduate students. As a result, there is a critical need for focused cognitive strategy training to enhance their reading and writing skills.

E. Strategies for Coordinating the Chinese Learning Process

Metacognitive, affective, and social strategies international undergraduate students use are described in four levels; each level represents the frequent use of specific strategies. In the first level of strategy use, all students monitor progress, set goals, and learn Chinese culture. Numerous students have conveyed positive sentiments regarding monitoring progress. Elizabeth, for instance, shared her experience to compare her proficiency with that of two years ago, assessing for any noticeable improvement. She said monitoring progress increases her confidence and reduces nervousness (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Pelina echoed a similar perspective, emphasizing the value of seeing progress. Through this strategy, she can obtain a sense of accomplishment, even if the progress is small (Pelina, Class of 2020). Katie shared a

similar experience, recalling a moment from Mr. Bai's challenging China Overview course. Despite the course's complexity, she could grasp and engage with the content, which brought her happiness and satisfaction (Katie, Class of 2016). This strategy provides encouragement and accomplishment, showcasing the students' positive learning attitudes. Besides, international undergraduate students shared their learning objectives to illustrate their use of goal-setting strategies. Some are preparing for thesis writing to pass their thesis defense successfully. Others aspire to achieve HSK Level Six, while some have ambitions to pursue Master's studies. Whether these goals are modest or ambitious, each aim plays a crucial role in guiding international undergraduate students on their journey to learn Chinese, highlighting their commitment to purposeful learning. Moreover, international undergraduate students showed positive responses to learning Chinese culture. Chen Yuping, for instance, recounted her experience during the second semester (2022-2023), where cultural courses and activities were incorporated. These activities included learning about Thangkas (Tibetan paintings) and visiting Thangka museums and galleries, which were meaningful to her (Chen, Class of 2021). Gu Li expressed her keen interest in Chinese culture, stating, "I am very interested in Chinese culture. Now instead of watching Turkmen programs and movies, I watch Chinese variety shows, which is for me a modern culture" (Gu, Class of 2019). In contrast, An He expressed his fascination with ancient Chinese culture, wishing to learn ancient classics to comprehend historical perspectives and the valuable knowledge of ancient scholars (An, Class of 2019). Elizabeth emphasized that understanding culture is essential for comprehending people and their behavior, which she believes is crucial (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Pelina noted that experiencing Chinese culture is one of her main objectives in China. Given her major in Chinese Language and Literature, she believes understanding Chinese culture is essential. Besides, she mentioned that her daily life is enriched with cultural elements, which she finds to be an exciting aspect of her learning journey (Pelina, Class of 2020). International undergraduate students' willingness to learn Chinese culture reflects their acceptance and enthusiasm for engaging with Chinese culture.

In the second level of strategy use, seven out of eight international undergraduate students like learning from mistakes, adjusting tension, sharing study-related feelings, self-encouraging, correcting, asking for repetition, and asking for help. Many students declare the importance of learning from mistakes. Dai Wei, for instance, shared his experience, stating, "When I chat with my Chinese friends, I ask them to correct me if I make a mistake. In this way, it is easier for me to identify errors, remember them, and make corrections" (Da, Class of 2019). Elizabeth echoed a similar sentiment, emphasizing the need to learn from mistakes to improve Chinese proficiency (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Pelina highlighted the inevitability of making mistakes, saying that improved Chinese language skills stem from learning from these errors (Pelina, Class of 2020). These statements consistently reflect a positive attitude toward viewing mistakes as a valuable learning opportunity. Besides, international

students employ strategies such as adjusting tension, sharing study-related feelings, and self-encouraging to adjust their low self-esteem and harmful anxiety. Many international students expressed feeling tense, particularly when speaking in public. Gu Li, for example, shared her experience: "I often remind myself to relax and take it easy when speaking in front of others. I think about those who face challenges in learning but still give their best effort, which helps me feel better and motivates me to keep going." (Gu, Class of 2019). This sentiment was echoed by Katie, who mentioned that calming and encouraging is an excellent way to relax when speaking in public (Katie, Class of 2019). Pelina shared one of her presentation experiences, describing how she calmed herself after feeling nervous with a broken tone and voice in front of people (Pelina, Class of 2020). These instances highlight the common tension and stress among international undergraduate students, while their strategies demonstrate their courage in coping with emotional challenges throughout the learning process. Moreover, international undergraduate students show enthusiasm for interacting with others by allowing themselves to be corrected, asking for repetition, and seeking help. Most international students respond positively to being corrected by others. For instance, Pelina, Da Wei, An He, and Elizabeth acknowledged the significance of being corrected by teachers for their professional guidance. Gu Li emphasized not only her willingness to learn from mistakes but also highlighted the importance of being corrected (Gu, Class of 2019). These responses reveal international undergraduate students' positive mindset and proactive approach to learning, demonstrating their positive learning attitudes. Furthermore, international students view asking for repetition and seeking help as valuable strategies for mutual understanding and efficient learning, showing their positive involvement in social interactions and commitment to learning.

Six out of eight international undergraduate students reported adjusting their study arrangements in the third level of strategy use. Their determination to prioritize studies over other activities was evident. For instance, Da Wei explained that he often declines invitations from friends if he has unfinished work, showing his focus on studying (Da, Class of 2019). Gu Li expressed a similar perspective, explaining that she avoids other activities until her homework is finished, demonstrating her determination to complete studies first (Gu, Class of 2019). Katie similarly explained that when study tasks conflict with her schedule, she adjusts her plans to prioritize her studies first (Katie, Class of 2016). Elizabeth reinforced this by emphasizing the importance of study and tests over other commitments (Elizabeth, Class of 2020). Pelina also highlighted that she consistently prioritizes assignments, tests, and homework, as her academic performance and grades are her top concerns (Pelina, Class of 2020). These shared perspectives and behaviors reflect the students' commitment to learning and academic success.

Five of eight international undergraduate students search for effective learning methods in the fourth level of strategy use. For instance, Chen Yuping suggested that to enhance spoken Chinese, one should engage in regular conversations and have a solid grasp of grammar. She highlighted the

significance of extensive reading, dedicated study, and consistent practice. Throughout her learning journey, Chen actively explores new methods to improve her Chinese skills (Chen, Class of 2021). Gu Li expressed a similar viewpoint, stating, "I am always looking for ways to learn. There is a Chinese idiom, '学无止境' (life-long learning), and I believe that the more I know, the better" (Gu, Class of 2019). Katie emphasized the importance of finding suitable learning methods, noting that different stages of learning require different approaches. She shared her experience of gradually incorporating writing into her advanced studies and mentioned that even after graduation, she continues improving her Chinese through watching Chinese shows and programs (Katie, Class of 2016). Pelina expressed her determination to discover more effective learning methods to enhance her Chinese skills (Pelina, Class of 2020). These statements highlight the international undergraduate students' dedication to their studies and a strong desire to become more proficient language learners.

International undergraduate students' use of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies underscores their commitment to Chinese learning. Their proactive engagement in social interactions, purposeful learning, ability to confront negative emotions, and a strong desire to become more proficient language learners are manifestations of their positive learning attitudes.

F. Results of Thematic Analysis

International undergraduate students predominantly use memory and compensation strategies for acquiring advanced Chinese vocabulary, with frequent practices such as making sentences, learning through examples or texts, guessing, and utilizing synonyms. These strategies reflect their active engagement in vocabulary acquisition. However, challenges persist, including difficulties understanding and using advanced vocabulary in speaking and writing contexts. Issues in comprehending written language highlight gaps in teaching and learning advanced vocabulary, while struggles with vocabulary usage in various contexts reveal problems in language output. These issues underscore the need for improved vocabulary skills among these students.

International undergraduate students demonstrate a distinct preference for cognitive strategies focused on listening and speaking practice, prioritizing developing these skills over other areas. However, this emphasis negatively impacts their language output, leading to significant challenges. These challenges appeared in writing, which included vocabulary and grammar difficulties and a tendency toward colloquial writing styles. Such issues highlight a lack of emphasis on academic development and reveal deficiencies in advanced Chinese language proficiency.

Besides, international undergraduate students employ metacognitive, affective, and social strategies to navigate their Chinese language learning, demonstrating strong commitment and a positive attitude toward their studies. Among these strategies, metacognitive approaches are the most frequently utilized, indicating a significant level of self-regulation. Affective strategies help manage negative emotions, while

social strategies focus on proactive engagement and interaction. However, the analysis reveals that the students use these coordination strategies more than memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. This result indicates a less frequent use of strategies for language development among international undergraduate students.

IV. DISCUSSION

Nation (2001) emphasized that knowing a word includes word form, word meaning, and word use, and a word has both a receptive and a productive level [11]. In 2012, Geng and Luo proposed the concepts of receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary in Chinese as a second language learning. Receptive vocabulary refers to vocabulary acquired through learning, while productive vocabulary refers to vocabulary that can be used in contexts [12]. The challenges that international undergraduate students encounter in comprehending written language and their difficulties in employing advanced Chinese vocabulary in both speaking and writing indicate a lack of sufficient vocabulary skills among these students.

Oxford and Burry-Stock observed that students learning a second language in a target language environment tend to employ more strategies due to the necessity of using the target language. Riley and Harsch supported this finding, indicating that the learning environment significantly influences learners' strategies [13]. This observation is further supported by Liao (2020), who found that international students in China utilize more language learning strategies compared to those outside the target language environment [14]. However, at Qinghai Nationalities University, international undergraduate students prioritize developing listening and speaking skills over reading and writing. This preference suggests their language learning strategies are not fully optimized for comprehensive language development. Furthermore, challenges revealed through the interview, such as vocabulary usage, grammar, and colloquial writing style, point to the students' insufficient proficiency in Chinese. These findings are consistent with Griffiths' findings, which show that lower-proficiency learners tend to underutilize reading and writing strategies until their overall language competence improves [15]. These results collectively suggest that international undergraduate students at Qinghai Nationalities University have not attained adequate Chinese proficiency, underscoring the need for a more balanced approach to strategy use and skill development.

Based on the findings, the study strongly recommends the development of Chinese proficiency, with a particular emphasis on vocabulary acquisition that transitions from receptive understanding to productive usage. Teachers should integrate explicit cognitive strategy instruction within Chinese instruction to enhance students' reading and writing skills. To further support language learning, metacognitive strategies such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and social strategies like collaborative learning and peer interactions should be employed to foster active engagement with the language. Given the advantages of the target language environment, immersive activities should be incorporated into the curriculum to reinforce vocabulary and provide practical

skill application. Regular assessments and personalized feedback can help identify areas for improvement and guide students in refining their learning strategies. These recommendations address identified challenges and enhance international undergraduate students' Chinese proficiency and language learning strategies.

V. CONCLUSION

The thematic analysis revealed that international undergraduate students demonstrate positive learning attitudes, the ability to manage negative emotions, and proactive engagement in interactions. However, they primarily focus on developing listening and speaking skills over reading and writing. The challenges international undergraduate students face indicates their inadequate advanced Chinese language proficiency. The recommendations put forth by the study have practical implications for language learning strategy and vocabulary instruction. By incorporating these instructions into Chinese courses and assessments, teachers can guide students in using cognitive strategies and establishing a solid language foundation. This approach can significantly enhance Chinese language proficiency and the use of language learning strategies by international undergraduate students.

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