Language Learning Strategies Used by First Year Students at Thaksin University, Songkhla Campus, Thailand

Orawee Pannak 1, Thanyapa Chiramanee 2

1. M.A. in Teaching English as an International Language, Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University.
2. Assoc. Prof. Thanyapa Chiramanee Ph.D, Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University

Abstract
The study aims to investigate language learning strategies used by 71 first year English major students at Thaksin University, Songkhla Campus, Thailand. Two research instruments were used. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire was used to investigate learning strategies used. Grades of English I was used to establish the subjects’ English proficiency and to see a relationship with their use of learning strategies. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of SILL was .94. The data collected were computed and analyzed via descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA. The study has found that there was a significant difference in the frequency of overall strategies used ($p<.01$) and all six strategy categories ($p<.01$) among students with different proficiency levels. The higher proficiency students use all six types of language learning strategies more often than the lower proficiency ones.

Key words: Language Learning Strategies, SILL
Background

It is clear that the English language has become more dominant around the world. English is the international lingua franca, or ‘common language’ for billions of people around the world (Pakir, 2000). It is the primary language that has been widely used in international business, economics, science, aviation, technology, and tourism (Kitao, 1996; Al-Issa, 2006). Moreover, its world status can be seen through the increasing number of people using English; 329 million people use English as the first language (e.g. in USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia), 422 million people use it as a second language (e.g. in Singapore, Philippine, India and Malaysia) (Crystal, 2003), and another 100 million people use it as a foreign language in countries such as Thailand, China and Japan (Crystal, 1997). Because of its important role, the number of children using English as a second language is increasing; over 50 million children learn it at primary level while over 80 million students learn it at secondary level (Crystal, 1997).

However, each learner has certain characteristics which contribute to successful language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). For example, it has been believed that the successful learners will find many opportunities to practice language skills. In addition to characteristics, other factors such as attitude, motivation and learning strategies also influence the success of language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Ellis, 1994).

There has been a considerable number of research on the role of attitudes and motivation in language learning. The overall findings reveal that students’ attitudes and motivation are positively correlated with English proficiency (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Liu, 2007).

Another important factor affecting language learning is language learning strategies. Research on language learning strategies began in 1960s (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Hismanoglu, 2000; Shmais, 2003). Early research focused on identifying language learning strategies used by successful language learners (Rubin, 1987; Nunan, 1989; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Hismanoglu, 2000; Shmais, 2003; Lai, 2009). Researchers such as Oxford (1990), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), and O’Mallay and Chamot (1990) show that effective learners use a variety of different strategies in order to solve problems that they face while acquiring or producing the language. In brief, research has indicated that good language learners tend to use more effective strategies than poorer ones. They use strategies such as taking advantages of practice opportunities, seeing and developing language as a system, monitoring language production, willingly and accurately guessing, and handling emotional

Some studies investigate factors that affect the use of learning strategies such as language proficiency. A considerable empirical research has provided evidence that there is a positive relationship between language proficiency and strategies used (Green & Oxford, 1995; Goh & Foong, 1997; Griffiths, 2006; Lai, 2009). The results of those studies propose that high proficiency language learners use learning strategies more frequently than low proficiency ones (Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003; Chamot & O’ Malley, 1994).

In Thailand, where English is a foreign language, students have learned English for at least 12 years; however, they differ significantly in their English language learning achievements—some are successful while others are not. One important factor contributing to successful language learning is language learning strategies. A number of studies in Thailand have focused on identifying language learning strategies employed by language learners (Prakongchati, 2007). Other studies have investigated the use of language learning strategies by students with different language proficiency levels (Dhanarattiganon, 1990; Janphaosaeng, 2006; Intaraprasert, 2007; Prakongchati, 2007). One of the findings is that higher proficient learners use learning strategies more often than less proficient ones (Dhanarattiganon, 1990; Janphaosaeng, 2006; Intaraprasert, 2007; Prakongchati, 2007).

Although there are a number of studies on language learning strategies, those studies have investigated language learning strategies employed by general students of various nationalities and levels of education. There are very few studies focusing on first year English major students. Accordingly, it is interesting to investigate language learning strategies employed by first year English major students to see the relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency.

Research Question

1. What are language learning strategies used by first year English major students with different proficiency levels?

Technical Terms

Language learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p.8).
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is a questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990). The study uses the 50-item version 7.0 of the inventory for assessing the frequency of language learning strategy use by language learners.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies

Over the last twenty years, there has been a shift from the emphasis of teachers’ teaching to learners’ learning (Wenden, 1987; Lessard-Clouston, 1997; Hismanoglu, 2000). This change has been reflected in increasing numbers of studies on learners’ language learning strategies (Hismanoglu, 2000).

Language learning strategies have been defined in various ways. For example, Oxford (1990) defines them 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).

Ellis (1994) defines language learning strategies as “strategies consisting of mental and behavioral activities related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use” (p.529).

According to Rubin (1987), language learning strategies are “strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly” (p.23).

Furthermore, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) define language learning strategies as “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (p.1).

In addition, Cohen (1998) defines language learning strategies as “learning process consciously selected by learners and may support students to enhance their learning” (p.4).

The classification of learning strategy also varies. Perhaps the most comprehensive classification of language learning strategies to date is developed by Oxford (Ellis, 1994). Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is divided into direct and indirect classes.

Direct strategies involve the strategies used directly in dealing with a new language. The direct strategies are further subdivided into three groups: memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are those learners use to store and retrieve information e.g. creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action. Cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new
language. The four sets in this group are: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and summarizing, and creating structure for input and output. Compensation strategies help students to overcome knowledge gap to continue the communication such as guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (Oxford, 1990).

Indirect strategies are used for general management of learning. Indirect strategies are further subdivided into three groups: metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies help learners to control their own mental processes for instance centering their learning, evaluating and planning their learning and evaluating their learning. Affective strategies help to control emotions, motivations and attitudes such as lowering their anxiety, encouraging themselves and taking their emotional temperature. Social strategies involve learning by interaction with others e.g. asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others (Oxford, 1990).

**Research on Language Learning Strategies**

Earlier studies on language learning strategy have been about identifying learning strategies employed by successful second or foreign language learners (Rubin, 1987; Nunan, 1989; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Hismanoglu, 2000; Shmais, 2003; Lai, 2009). It is believed that strategies used by successful learners can be applied by less successful learners in order to learn a language more effectively (Rubin, 1987; Chamot, 2005).

There are five major aspects of successful language learning proposed by many studies about good language learners (Reiss, 1983; Huang and Van-Naersson, 1985; Reiss, 1985; Gillette, 1987; Lennon, 1989; cited in Ellis, 1994). One of this five is that good language learners have “an ability to use strategies flexibly” (Ellis, 1994, p.546).

**Proficiency and the Use of Language Learning Strategies**

There are a number of studies investigating the relationship between proficiency levels and strategy use. Most findings indicate that the use of language learning strategies is related to language proficiency—higher proficiency level students employ learning strategies more frequently than lower ones. For example, Lai’s study (2009) on a group of 418 EFL learners in Taiwan reported significant positive relationship between strategy use and language proficiency. Moreover, the findings revealed that the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies was significantly higher for successful language learners.

Wu’s study (2008) of 137 students at the National Chin-Yi University of Technology in Taiwan reported that higher proficiency students used learning strategies, especially cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies more often than lower proficiency students.
Most of the previous studies on language learning strategy in Thailand have concluded that more proficient learners generally reported employing learning strategies significantly more frequently than did less proficient learners (Intaraprasert, 2007).

An investigation of 145 good and poor first year students at Silapakorn University by Dhanarattiganon (1990) showed that the successful learners use learning strategies in the classroom, in individual study and outside classroom more frequently than the unsuccessful ones. For example, they preferred to say the correct form to themselves when others have made an error, to say words out loud to themselves and to ask for help when they do not know how to express ideas.

Prakongchati (2007) investigated the relationship between language proficiency and four main learning strategy categories: classroom preparation, lesson comprehension, skill improvement and general knowledge expansion. The participants in the study were 1134 Thai Public University freshmen; the results showed that higher proficiency students reported improving their language skills with media utilization more frequently than other learning strategy categories. The three individual strategies highly reported were watching English-speaking films, watching television program in English and imitating a native speaker from media.

Framework of the Study

The current study investigates language learning strategies employed by 71 first year English major students, Thaksin University, 2010 academic year. Moreover, the study investigates the relationship between the use of language learning strategy and English language proficiency.

Research Methodology

Subjects

The subjects in the study were 71 first year English major students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thaksin University, Songkhla Campus, Thailand in academic year 2010. The subjects consisted of 56 females and 15 males whose ages ranged from 17 to 19 with an average of 18. They took the English I course in the first semester of academic year 2010.

The subjects were classified and placed into four proficiency groups according to their English grades on English I.
Table 2: Distribution of subjects by proficiency level based on grades on the English I course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Proficiency level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B+, B</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>C+, C</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>D+, D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instruments**

1. **Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire**

   The research instrument used for collecting data on the use of language learning strategies by the subjects participating in the study is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) developed by Oxford (1990). A Thai version of SILL was used. It was piloted to 30 first year students in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of Thai version of the SILL questionnaire was 0.94. After the pilot, the researcher worked with the advisor to revise and improve the piloted questionnaire.

   The questionnaire was divided into three parts:

   **Part one**: general information about the subjects: students number, gender, age

   **Part two**: fifty items with 5-point Likert scale questionnaire including two main classes: direct class (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies) and indirect class (metacognitive, affective and social strategies)

   **Part three**: an open-ended question to elicit more information on students’ strategy use and others

2. **Grades of English I**

   The English I course is required for all of the first year students at Thaksin University in the first semester. It is an integrated skills course designed to develop the students’ skills in grammar, writing, reading, speaking and listening. The subjects’ grades on the course were used as an indicator of their English proficiency. Information of the subjects’ language proficiency was used to establish a relationship with their use of learning strategies.

**Data Collection Procedure**
1. In the final week of the first semester, 2010 academic year, the researcher informed the subjects the purpose of the study, and introduced the SILL questionnaire on strategy use. Then the questionnaires were distributed to the subjects to complete at home and 71 questionnaires were returned.

2. Information about their strategies from the questionnaire were analyzed and established. A relationship between learning strategy use and the subjects’ grades on the English I course were computed.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for Microsoft Windows 11.5 was used to complete the analysis of the data.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to find a significant variation in the use of language learning strategy between each proficiency level groups.

Findings

Research Question 1: What are language learning strategies used by first year English major students with different proficiency levels?

The ANOVA was administered to examine significant variation in mean strategy use in overall strategy use and the six categories of the SILL in relation to proficiency level. Mean scores of the overall strategy use and the six subcategories of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were calculated for each proficiency group. Analysis of strategy use was based on Oxford (1990) as follows:

1.0 - 2.4 = low strategy use
2.5 - 3.4 = medium strategy use
3.5 - 5.0 = high strategy use
Table 1: Language learning strategies used by learners with different English proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Categories</th>
<th>Grades of English I</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Sig of F-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1 (A)</td>
<td>Group 2 (B+, B)</td>
<td>Group 3 (C+, C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance: **p<.01

As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant difference in the frequency of overall strategies used (p<.01) as well as all six strategy categories (p<.01) among students with different proficiency levels. The subjects with different language proficiency levels are significantly different in their frequency of strategies used. The higher level students reported using all six categories of learning strategies significantly more frequently than the lower level students did (p<.01). The mean scores of the overall strategies used for the two higher proficiency groups were 3.13 and 2.76 respectively, a range defined as medium use, while the mean scores of the other two lower groups were 2.44 and 2.16 respectively, a range defined as low use. It can therefore be concluded that the higher the proficiency level of the subjects, the more often strategies they employed.

Discussion

The study finds a significant relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the subjects’ English proficiency level. The results of the study reveal that higher-proficiency students reported employing all six categories of language learning strategies significantly more often than lower-proficiency ones. This study produced similar results to previously studies (e.g. Green and Oxford, 1995; Intaraprasert, 2003; Janphaosaeng, 2006) in that the frequency of the use of learning strategies is directly related to success in language learning. Those studies have concluded that more proficient students used learning strategies more frequently than less proficient ones.
When comparing the results in use of the six subcategories of learning strategies with other SILL studies that used similar statistical analysis (e.g. Goh & Foong, 1997; Green & Oxford, 1995; Wu, 2008), this study is the only one that found a significant relationship between language learning strategies used and all six strategies categories.

**Recommendations**

More research should be conducted to better understand language learning strategy use and the connection between learning strategy use and language proficiency. Such studies need to be done with different groups of language learners, with an emphasis on analyzing learners’ use of individual learning strategies. Moreover, it is suggested that further studies should use multiple data collection procedures by combining the use of SILL questionnaires with the use of other research techniques, for example interviews and classroom observation, which will be a useful way of gaining more insights into the strategy use.

**References**


