

Language Learning Strategies of EFL Education Students: A Case Study of Thai Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This research study was aimed to investigate the overall language learning strategies employed by Thai Education students at tertiary level in Thailand, which purposively grouped regarding language proficiency, gender and field of study. The participants of the study were 165 second- year students including 42 Thai language students, 41 Social studies students, 43 Mathematics students and 39 Science students. The language learning strategy questionnaire, which adapted from Oxford (1990) was used as the main instrument. Simple descriptive statistic, Pos Hoc test and ANOVA were used in the data analysis. The findings found that Compensation strategies was the most frequently used, while Social strategies was the least frequently used. Moreover, the overall language learning strategies in relation to language proficiency, gender and field of study of Thai Education students were different but not a meaningful significance level of .05.

Keywords: Language learning strategy; Gender; Language proficiency; Field of study

Introduction

Nowadays, In Thai education system where learners study English as foreign language, the role of English can be seen as a compulsory subject for Thai students from primary school to secondary school (Office of the National Education Commission, 2001; Foley, 2005). Similar to higher level students who have entranced at tertiary level, they need to learn English as a fundamental course as well. For Rajabhat University, local educational institution in Thailand, one of the main goals of it is to produce good teachers in different disciplines of education field to serve the need of society with academic standing that it has been created since there were Teachers' Colleges (Siriwan, 2007). Furthermore, Education students who have skills in teaching methods must achieve the Diploma of Teaching Profession with nine teaching competencies when they graduated (Teachers' Council of Thailand, 2003). At the present time, it can be said that language competency is the most occurred problem comparing to other competencies in Teaching Profession. (Thongsukkaew and Rampai, 2013). In other words, Thai university students still have problems in language learning that they failed to achieve effective English. (Silapasatham, 1999). Thus, it is necessary to discover techniques or methods which are suitable for solving problems in English language learning.

Due to the paradigm shift of learner-centered approach, it has become a new perspective in second language learning and teaching field over two decades, and it has been considered as an effective method for developing learners to become independent and autonomous learners in language learning. In addition, Language learning strategies are essential method widely accepted among many practitioners which used for facilitate learning process because this trend can support learners when they have faced with some problems (Ellis, 1997). Furthermore, it can also help them to understand learning goals, acquire knowledge, and retain new information in language learning as well (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Therefore, it remains numerous empirical research works around the world highlighted to be paid attention in this area, particularly the issues of strategies employed

by successful and unsuccessful learners and many factors influencing the choice of language learning strategies as well.

As mentioned above, although learning strategy investigation has been carried out by many previous scholars in the oversea context, very few studies in this issue has been conducted in Thailand especially for undergraduate level (Intaraprasert, 2000; Prakongchati, 2007, 2012). As the researcher documented the previous related literature reviews, it is found that most of Thai researchers have studied focusing on the students who majored in Science and Social Science whereas Education students have not been interested in research study much or it could be said that there is no research which designed to identify language learning strategies used by Thai Education students especially those who study at tertiary level. To fill this gap, the present study aims to identify language learning strategies employed by Thai Education students who believed to have a pedagogical ability. The study also investigate the differences between the use of language learning strategies employed by Thai Education students and their three related factors including gender, language proficiency and field of study.

Methodology

Research participant

The subjects were 165 second year students who purposively chosen from four majors in Education field divided into 42 students majored in Thai Language, 41 students majored in Social Studies, 43 students majored in Mathematics and 39 students majored in Science. All of them are studying in the first semester of the academic year 2014 at the Faculty of Education at Buriram Rajabhat University (BRU) in Buriram province, Thailand. In addition, all subjects already passed English for Communication subject as Basic English course provided by the university when they were freshmen. In this study, language proficiency levels were evaluated based on the students' received grade in English for Communication subject which classified into high and low proficiency level. There were 80 students who received grade A to B which can be

grouped into high language proficiency level whereas 85 students who received grade C+ to D were categorized into low language proficiency level.

Instrumentation

In this study, two data collection instruments were applied to investigate the language learning strategies employed by Education students at Buriram Rajabhat University shown as follows.

1. Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire

The language learning strategy questionnaire was used as the main instrument for data gathering which consists of two parts. The preliminary questionnaire is the first part which was used to inform about biographical data from participants such as gender, age, field of study and English grade from previous semester. To determine language proficiency, the participants' proficiency levels were categorized by their grades directly. For second part, synthesized questionnaire was applied which consists of 77 items including 50 items from Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0, developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990). The aim is to assess the frequency of language learning strategies use. While other 27 items adopted from Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire by Nisakorn Prakongchati (2007) considered as appropriate and beneficial tool for this study because it was derived from the data collection from Thai undergraduate students which has the same context as the present study. Hence, the additional 27 items by Prakongchati (2007) were classified into six strategies' taxonomy proposed by Oxford (1990) namely; Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, Compensation strategies, Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies and Social strategies. Each of questionnaire items is rated on 4-points of Likert scales valued from 1 (never) to 4 (always) used for assessing the language learning strategies employed by the subjects.

2. Semi structured Interview

The semi structured interview was also the instrument applied for this study. Focus-group interview was done by face-to-face interview

with the target-study subjects when they completed questionnaires. The aim of this method is to find out more in-depth information about the subjects' language learning strategies use which could not be examined only by the questionnaires. Moreover, it also checked if the subjects understand the questionnaires that they did not misinterpret the questionnaires' items which may lead to inaccurate answers.

Data Collection

In the present study, the process of data collection consisted of three important phases as follows:

Phase 1: Pilot study

After constructing language learning strategy questionnaire, it was translated into Thai language version in order to avoid subjects' questions misunderstanding, and it was scrutinized and proofread by three experts. To ensure questionnaire reliability, it was piloted with 16 Education students from the Faculty of Education, Buriram Rajabhat University who were not in the same group as the sample of this study. The researcher analyzed the returned questionnaires to find the results and discover the level of reliability through Cronbach's Alpha. From the result, it is found that the reliability of the piloted questionnaire was .93, and the questionnaires were also revised for some items before they became the final completed instrument for the main study.

Phase 2: Target study

For the actual data gathering, the revised questionnaires were distributed to the subjects who study in Education field at Buriram Rajabhat University. In this phase, the researcher explained the subjects how to answer the questionnaires. In addition, the subjects were also informed that their answers had no effect with their grades that the questionnaires were used only for research study.

Phase 3: Focus-group Interview

After filling out the questionnaires, there were 8 Education students including 4 high proficiency level students and 4 low proficiency level students from each major randomly selected to participate in the

final data collection, and they were also requested to join in the focus-group interviews. Based on the semi-structured interviews, some questions used for focus-group interview were generated to gain more information about participants' attitudes or ideas toward language learning strategies. Furthermore, it is important that the questions which will be used in the interviews were not applied with the sample like in the questionnaires because the researcher aimed to obtain in-depth data which did not appear in the questionnaires. Consequently, the semi-structured interview is a supplementary part of data collection that it is not the main technique responded to research objectives.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from all returned questionnaires in the last process of data collection were statistically analyzed through descriptive statistics. All data analysis was calculated by the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) program which included with frequency, means and standard deviation (S.D). Additionally, ANOVA and the Scheffe pos - hoc test were performed to examine the overall of language learning strategies use and examine whether there was significant difference among the frequency of strategic use and the three variables; gender, field of study and language proficiency.

Result and Discussion

The data obtained from the use of language learning strategies questionnaires from Education students was analyzed and examined relating to language proficiency, gender and field of study. The next sections will describe the results and discussions of data analysis as follows.

1. Language learning strategies Employed by High and the Low- proficiency level students

Table 1: Variation Use of Language Learning Strategies Categorized by High and the Low-Proficiency Level Students

Language learning strategy Categories	High proficiency		Low proficiency	
	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D
Memory strategies	3.21	.43	3.18	.49
Cognitive strategies	3.38	.38	3.30	.57
Compensation strategies	3.32	.48	3.33	.47
Metacognitive strategies	3.29	.42	3.26	.51
Affective strategies	3.25	.43	3.22	.50
Social strategies	3.19	.39	3.16	.47

According to Table 1, the highest language learning strategy used by high proficiency level students is cognitive strategies followed by compensation, metacognitive, affective, memory and social strategies respectively. While the strategies used by the low proficiency level students is slightly different from high proficiency level students that compensation strategies is the highest used followed by cognitive, metacognitive, affective, memory and social strategies respectively. This result is consistent with Kayad's (1999) study about the correlation between proficiency and learning strategies use among Malaysian undergraduate students that compensation strategies are considered to be the most popular employed by the high achieving learners for listening, reading and writing. Whereas compensation strategies are often found in the low achieving learners because they were not proficient learners and not required much linguistic knowledge for helping in their learning. Moreover, the results of above statistics show that high proficiency level students employed overall learning strategies more than proficiency level students. This is corresponded with Naiman et al. (1975), O'Malley et al (1985), and Bremner's (1999) which revealed that the high proficient learners reported more frequently use of overall strategies than the less proficient learners. Similar to the findings of Dhanarattigannon (1990) and Lappayawichit (1998) studies in Thai context, it reflected that high achievement students apply learning strategies more often than low

achievement learners.

Table 2: Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use between the High and the Low Proficiency Level Students

Language learning strategy categories	Proficiency level	
	F	Significance
Memory strategies	.121	.728
Cognitive strategies	.174	.677
Compensation strategies	.545	.461
Metacognitive strategies	206	.651
Affective strategies	.111	.740
Social strategies	.192	.662

Regarding strategy use differences between high and low proficiency level students from table 2, it illustrated that there are no significant differences appeared in overall use of strategies between high and low proficiency level students.

2. Language learning strategies Employed by male and female students

Table 3: Variation Use of Language Learning Strategy Categories Grouped by Gender (Male and Female Students)

Language learning strategy Categories	Male		Female	
	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D
Memory strategies	3.14	.51	3.19	.42
Cognitive strategies	3.11	.52	3.27	.45
Compensation strategies	3.22	.47	3.41	.40
Metacognitive strategies	3.18	.52	3.31	.44
Affective strategies	3.20	.59	3.35	.50
Social strategies	3.07	.51	3.22	.44

According to Table 3, it pointed out that the compensation

strategies were the most frequently used by male students followed by affective, metacognitive, memory, cognitive and social strategies respectively. Meanwhile, the most often used strategies among female students are compensation strategies followed by affective, metacognitive, cognitive, social and memory strategies respectively. In summary, it indicated that female students applied learning strategies more than male students. This finding correlated with Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Green and Oxford (1995) and Chang (2003) study which found that both ESL and EFL female students used overall strategies frequently more than male students. Moreover, this research result is contrast with the research of Tran (1988) which investigated about the use of language learning strategies in Vietnamese immigrants living in the United States of America. From Tran’s research result, it was found that male Vietnamese immigrants tend to have better using of language learning strategies to enhance language skills more than females.

According to the research result, it can be seen that female students use language learning strategies more than male students. From this difference between male and female, Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Oxford and Nyikos (1989) assumed that it may cause from the dominant feature of female in sociability, using of spoken language and language rules abundance.

Table 4: Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use between Male and Female Students

Language learning strategy categories	Gender	
	F	Significance
Memory strategies	.425	.516
Cognitive strategies	.454	.119
Compensation strategies	.403	.012
Metacognitive strategies	.647	.106
Affective strategies	.704	.102
Social strategies	.341	.249

Focusing on strategy use differences between male and female students, the above descriptive statistics conducted to examine whether there is significant difference between male and female students. The result demonstrated that there is no statistically meaningful difference in learning strategy use between male and female students or in terms of gender.

3. Language learning strategies Employed by the students in the major of Thai language, Social studies, Mathematics and Science in Education Faculty.

Table 5: Variation of Language Learning Strategies Used by the Students in the Major of Thai Language, Social Studies, Mathematics and Science in Education Faculty

Language learning strategy Categories	Thai language		Social studies		Mathematics		Science	
	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D	\bar{x}	S.D
Memory	3.20	.39	3.04	.58	3.24	.41	3.25	.42
Cognitive	3.26	.43	3.10	.58	3.28	.43	3.27	.44
Compensation	3.39	.38	3.24	.56	3.36	.48	3.33	.42
Metacognitive	3.31	.41	3.15	.59	3.39	.38	3.41	.34
Affective	3.35	.47	3.17	.65	3.32	.41	3.36	.48
Social	3.23	.41	3.07	.57	3.22	.40	3.20	.39

According to Table 5, six language learning strategy groups employed by the students of four majors in the field of Education are shown as means and standard deviation (S.D.). Considering the strategies used by the Thai language students, the compensation strategy is the most frequently used, followed by affective, metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies respectively. Whereas memory strategies are the least often used. Similarly, Social Studies students applied compensation strategies as the most frequently used strategies as can be seen in Thai Language

students, followed by affective, metacognitive, cognitive, social and memory strategies respectively. These results corresponded with Bedell and Oxford's (1996) study of secondary and tertiary students studying English in China that compensation strategies were the highest frequently used while memory strategies were the least used by the students. On the contrary, the metacognitive strategies are the most frequently employed by the students majored in Mathematics followed by compensation, affective, cognitive and memory strategies respectively whereas social strategies are the least used by them. Likewise, metacognitive strategies tend to be the most frequently applied by the students majored in Science as same as resulted in Mathematics students followed by affective, compensation, cognitive and memory strategies respectively while the strategies in social group appeared in the lowest frequently used. These results contradict the strategies used by bilingual undergraduate students researched by Wharton's (2000) that social strategies were considered as the most frequently used. Nevertheless, these findings of strategies used by the Science students are related to the results obtained from other studies such as Green (1991) in Puerto Rican, Park (1997) in Korean and Shamis (2003) in Palestine which confirmed that metacognitive strategies are considered to be the often used strategies by many language learners.

From the findings of this study, it can be said that the learning strategies employed by the students from four majors of Education are different because of several characteristics of their majors. The students majored in Thai language and Social studies tend to use same learning strategies whereas the students majored in Mathematics and Science applied learning strategies in same trend. This is because Thai language and Social studies students have common skills relating verbal and linguistic intelligence which focused on capacity to apply and learn languages or even to express oneself rhetorically or poetically as means to remember information.

On the other hand, the Mathematics and Science students tend to have logical and mathematic intelligence that they were able to

analyze problems logically calculate based on mathematics process, study and demonstrate facts by scientific methods. Based on different strategies used among the students of four majors in Education field, these outcomes related with Kotarputh's (2011) study on learning strategies used among Thai business students majored in different fields in the same faculty that the strategies used by the Accounting and Marketing students were similarly used in each groups, but the Management students used strategies in different way.

Table 6: Differences in Language Learning Strategy Use among Four Major Students

Language learning strategy categories	Field of study	
	F	Significance
Memory strategies	.379	.251
Cognitive strategies	.296	.278
Compensation strategies	.349	.260
Metacognitive strategies	.409	.242
Affective strategies	.269	.287
Social strategies	.471	.224

According to the difference of employed strategies, the significance level of each strategic groups are higher than 0.05 which shows that there is no statistically meaningful difference in language learning strategies used among the students from four majors in the Education field.

4. Overall Language learning strategies applied by Thai Education students

Table 7: Variation of Overall Language Learning Strategies Used by Education Students

Language learning strategy categories	Overall strategy use	
	\bar{x}	S.D
Memory strategies	3.20	.46
Cognitive strategies	3.23	.47
Compensation strategies	3.36	.43
Metacognitive strategies	3.30	.46
Affective strategies	3.28	.53
Social strategies	3.17	.44

As illustrated in Figure 7, six language learning strategies which employed by the Education students are shown by means and standard deviation (S.D.). From the table, it is discovered that the highest used strategy among the students is compensation strategies (3.36) followed by metacognitive (3.30), affective (3.28), cognitive (3.23) and memory (3.20) respectively. Whereas the lowest strategy used by the students is social strategies (3.17).

In conclusion, the students employ compensation strategies as the most frequently used language learning strategies. This could be affirmed from many previous empirical studies which reported that EFL learners use compensation strategies as the most frequent strategies for language learning. (Chang, 1991; Merrified, 1996; Bremner, 1999; Peacock and Ho, 2003) Moreover, it is also found out that social strategies are the least frequent strategies used by the students. The results related with the research finding by Noguchi (1991) who found that social strategies turned out to be the lowest used among Japanese students. Similarly, Kotarputh (2011) mentioned that Thai Business students employed social strategies as the least frequent strategies not only in the classroom but also outside classroom settings as well.

5. Result from semi- structured interview

The outcome from semi- structured interviews shows that

most of Thai Education students use compensation strategies regarding “consulting dictionary for learning” as the most frequent strategies. This could be assumed that they were not familiar with language learning emphasized on various vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary sizes. Hence, they might automatically use many versions of dictionary to translate and interpret unknown words or idioms when they read in order to get the definition and understand main idea, topic, supporting details and content overview of reading material. From these reasons, it should be recommended that dictionary using still plays an important role as supplementary tool for second language learning of EFL learners who are not English natives.

Besides, the “asking for help from English speaker” strategy which categorized in social strategies was found to be the least frequently used by Thai Education students. This could be assumed that most participants in this study were non-native speakers and non- English major students. Interestingly, this might be possible that the students are not familiar with the cultural background of English native speakers. For this reason, they may not know how to interact or cooperate with other English native speakers in actual situation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate language learning strategies employed by Thai students from Faculty of Education in terms of language proficiency, gender and field of study. The results revealed that compensation strategies were found as the most often used strategies whereas social strategies were the least used strategies among the students. Moreover, the findings also demonstrated that there is no significant difference among language proficiency, gender and field of study in the overall language learning strategy categories. Therefore, the influence of difference regarding language proficiency, gender and field of study is not the factor which affected the use of language learning strategies in the same way as found in universal phenomenon.

From the overall picture of this research concluded above, it

illustrated that the students with high proficiency would employ language learning strategies more than the students with low proficiency. However, the relationship between learners' performance level and the use of learning strategies is still complicated as Intaraprasert (2003) suggested that the language practitioners must be careful in order to conclude that the use of learning is the result from learners' language performance level because the students with high ability may apply more learning strategies as well as gender factor that this research discovered that female students applied more learning strategies than male students. The difference depends on each learner and sample context. In reality, male and female learners both have distinctive characters in their use of learning strategies. Thus, the study of the use of language learning strategies and related factors in each research context is different depended on sample context such as cultural background, background knowledge, etc.

Recommendation for Further Study

Based on the outcomes raised from this study, it is recommended that compensation strategies especially "consulting dictionary for learning" are considered to be useful instrument for students to comprehend reading and memorize words. This should be emphasized for supporting language learning, but it should not be direct method involved in actual learning. In order to be good at getting words' meaning, students should be confident to select the correct definition because many vocabularies have more than one meaning. Thus, learners could apply the context in which the word appears to help them when they choose the right meaning from the dictionary. According to Nation (1990) and Gu (2003), their study supported that guessing word's meaning through context is a productively technique for dealing with unknown words. Besides, this investigation also indicated that social strategies concerning "asking for help by English speaker" were found to be the least often used by Thai Education students. Furthermore, in order to motivate students' strategy practicing, social skills are offered to be one of techniques used to develop the students to become more interactive learners. Moreover, there are also many tricks

based on social skills such as group or pair discussion, verbal and nonverbal communication, using eyes contacts, reacting appropriately to situation, cultural exchanging, outclass learning involved with language camping, and seminar workshop.

The findings in this study could be useful for language teachers to stimulate students to aware of the importance of various strategies in both direct and indirect learning situations. They can also developed as good guidelines for many scholars who would like to provide strategy using for further study in the field of second language teaching and learning. The further survey research by applying various learning strategy taxonomies from other previous researchers could be used in order to construct learning strategies questionnaire which considered as appropriate for samples context. This may also investigated with other samples in other education level such as high school level, tertiary level or graduate students not majored in English such as science or business field, etc in order to provide more diversity knowledge and different research studies.

For longitudinal study, the further studies should discover how Thai EFL learners use language learning strategies in various situations. This would be beneficial for providing strategic training course to enhance all groups of language learning strategies in order to facilitate learning process in long-term duration. Focusing on action research, an instructional model should be integrated into four language skills together with other teaching methods, and applied as one method to help students improve their language learning proficiency. For example, language practitioners should include learning strategies through cooperative learning methods in order to develop students' writing proficiency. In this stage, they may adapt some appropriate strategies into five writing processes involved with pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

In order to teach by applying language learning strategy instruction, the instructors can use various strategy types in order to plan teaching activities for developing students' language proficiency because the most effective learning strategy is not determined. It depends on the instructors to decide to select learning strategies for their class. The

language learning strategy instruction should not only various types, but it should be techniques that most students actual faced with. Furthermore, instructors should observe for students ‘learning styles and needs before teaching. That is to say, the instructors should know about the students’ basic language learning styles and previous experience before the class begun. For this reason, all students with different learning style should be asked about their background knowledge and language problems. In addition, instructors should apply various Triangulation methods such as interview, classroom observation, portfolio in order to get insight information which related with the problem of the students.

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