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English Learning Strategy and Proficiency Level of the First Year Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify whether English language learning strategies commonly used by the first year students at International College, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University include six direct and indirect strategies. The study served to explore whether there was a difference in these students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between the different levels of their English proficiency. The questionnaire used as a research instrument was comprised of two parts: General information of participants and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The researcher employed descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA (F-test) to analyze the data. The results of the analysis revealed that English learning strategies commonly used by the first year students include six direct and indirect strategies, including differences in strategy use of the students with different levels of English proficiency. Recommendations for future research include the study of language learning strategy use with other research methods focusing on other languages, specific language skills, and/or the relationship of language learning strategy use and other factors in other programs and/or institutions.

1. Introduction

English is considered the most important world language. It is the most required international language of communication. It helps people from different parts of the world to communicate and understand each other. Crystal (2003) pointed out that English is the universal language used in a variety of fields for business, education, communication, and entertainment. As a result, the demand for learning English as a second and foreign language is

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increasing. In addition, the demand for speakers with high proficiency in English is dramatically increasing in every country, including Thailand.

Despite the fact that English is vital and that Thai students learn English for years, only limited success in learning English has been achieved in Thailand. Teachers and educators of second or foreign language have commonly complained about the unsatisfactory language proficiency of second or foreign language learners, which has led second or foreign language researchers to attempt to determine the sources of the problem and potential improvements. Much effort has been devoted to investigating the most appropriate and proficient teaching and learning of English. Many studies of second language acquisition and learning have indicated that the most significant factor in second language acquisition is language learning strategy use (Chamot, 2004, Ellis, 2008, & Garder, 2007). Thus, many educators and researchers have placed more importance on the use of language learning strategies than on teaching strategies. Moreover, these studies have found that the use of language learning strategy involves many factors, including English proficiency level, learning contexts, learners' characteristics, and educational backgrounds, culture, and experiences (Deneme, 2008, Khamkhien, 2010, & Oxford, 2003). Furthermore, a number of studies have concentrated on determining the connections between choice of learning strategy and factors that influence language learning strategy use. Such studies have claimed that the variables of gender, age, motivation, language proficiency, and language learning experience, goals, and style affect learners' selection of language learning strategy. Therefore, a study focusing on both language learning strategy use and the factors contributing to the choice of each strategy is beneficial for students, teachers, and educators, and provides useful insights into improving English language learning and proficiency.

Due to the reasons mentioned above, this study attempted to explore the first year students' language learning strategy use and related factor, English proficiency level. The results lead to the development of teaching and learning English, particularly in the Thai context.

Research questions of this study are

1. Do English learning strategies commonly used by the first year students include six direct and indirect strategies?
2. Is there any difference in the first year students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between each level of English proficiency?

Statement of hypotheses of this study include

1. English learning strategies commonly used by the first year students include six direct and indirect strategies.
2. There is a difference in the first year students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between each level of English proficiency.

H_0: There is no difference in the first year students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between each level of English proficiency.

H_1: There is a difference in the first year students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between each level of English proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Given the evidence that Thai learners' English is far from satisfactory, several attempts have been made to help develop their English competence. Research relevant to language learning strategies has demonstrated that the suitable language learning strategy used by learners affects their responsibility and improvement in their language learning (Griffiths, 2004).

2.1 Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

Oxford's definition of language learning strategies seems to be the clearest. She clarified that language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to enhance learning; to perform specific tasks; to solve specific problems; to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations; and to compensate for a deficit in learning (Oxford, 1990). In other words, she stated that language learning strategies are the procedures the learners use to process and perform a new language and improve their effectiveness in using language. Clearly, Oxford's definition attaches "a behavioral aspect to the meaning of

learning strategies by relating it to concept of the achievement of an objective" (Oxford, 1990). This operational definition is widely accepted in second language acquisition for its comprehensiveness and clarity of meaning.

2.2 Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Oxford's categorization of language learning strategies included two main types, direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies while indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990).

Direct strategies are divided into three categories as follows:

1. Memory strategies relate to how students remember language in order to store and retrieve new information.

    (a) Creating mental linkages (grouping, associating/elaborating, placing new words into a context)

    (b) Applying images and sound (using imagery, semantics mapping, using keywords, representing sounds in memory)

    (c) Reviewing well (structured reviewing)

    (d) Employing action (using physical response or sensation, using mechanical techniques)

2. Cognitive strategies relate to how students think about their learning, and comprehend and perform new language by various methods ranging from repeating to analyzing and summarizing.

    (a) Practicing (repeating, formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas and patterns, recombining, practicing naturalistically)

    (b) Receiving and sending (getting the idea quickly, using resources for receiving and sending messages)

    (c) Analyzing and reasoning (reasoning deductively, analyzing expressions, analyzing contrastively, translating, transferring)

    (d) Creating structure for input and output (taking notes, summarizing, highlighting)

3. Compensation strategies enable students to make up for their limited knowledge and overcome limitations in target language skills.

    (a) Guessing intelligently (using linguistics clues, using other clues)

    (b) Overcoming limitation in speaking and writing (switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication partially or totally, selecting the topic, adjusting or approximating the message, coining words, using a circumlocution or synonym)

Indirect strategies include three categories as follows:

1. Metacognitive strategies involve the ways students manage their learning, establish their cognition, arrange plan and evaluate their progress.

    (a) Centering your learning (overviewing and linking with already known material)

    (b) Arranging and planning your learning (finding out about language learning, organizing, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task, planning for a language task, seeking practice opportunities)

    (c) Evaluating your learning (self-monitoring, self-evaluating)

2. Affective strategies relate to students' feelings, emotional reaction and anxiety.

    (a) Lowering your anxiety (using progressive relaxation, deep breathing , or meditation, using music, using laughter)

    (b) Encouraging yourself (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, rewarding yourself)

    (c) Taking your emotional temperature (listening to your body, using a checklist, writing a language learning diary, discussing your feelings with someone else)

3. Social strategies involve learning interaction with others.

    (a) Asking questions (asking for clarification or verification, asking for correction)

    (b) Cooperating with others (cooperating with peers, cooperating with proficient users)

    (c) Empathizing with others (developing cultural understanding, becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings)

3. Research Methodology

The participants of this study consisted of the first year students at International College, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. According to the preliminary survey, the number of the first year students was approximately 300. However, the researcher distributed 300 questionnaires to the students. A total of 290 questionnaires were completed and returned.

3.1 Instrumentation

The researcher used a questionnaire consisting of two parts: personal and educational information and language learning strategy use. Personal and educational information made up the first part of the questionnaire. The participants were divided into three groups following to the levels of their English proficiency, basic, intermediate and advanced level measured by SSRUIC paper and interview test. These were used to indicate the participants' level of English language proficiency. The final part, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, was used to examine the participants' use of language learning strategies. The researcher received permission to use the SILL respective author, Rebecca Oxford. The SILL contains 50 items of learning strategy statements will be classified into six categories. Students answered each item using a 5-point Likert-scale that ranges from 1 to 5.

3.2 Data Analysis

1. In order to identify whether English learning strategies commonly used by the first year students include six direct and indirect strategies, the data from the returned questionnaire in the part of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) of each student group was analyzed based on the six direct and indirect learning strategy types by using descriptive statistics: means, frequency of score, and standard deviation. The statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS program.

   Arithmetic mean in English Language Learning Strategy use was divided into three levels according to Oxford (1990):

High	Always or almost true of me	4.5 to 5.0
	Usually true of me	3.5 to 4.4
Medium	Somewhat true of me	2.5 to 3.4
Low	Usually not true of me	1.5 to 2.4
	Never or almost never true of me	1.0 to 1.4

2. To determine whether there is a difference in the first year students' use of six direct and indirect English learning strategies between each level of English proficiency, the returned questionnaires of each group of the students were classified into three English proficiency groups: high (advanced), medium (intermediate), and low (basic). The data from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were analyzed based on the six direct and indirect learning strategy types. Then the data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics—means, standard deviations, and frequencies—using the SPSS program. A one-way ANOVA (F-test) was used to investigate and compare the English learning strategies used by the first year students with different levels of English proficiency at the significance level 0.05. If the results have a significance level less than 0.05, this means that the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted.

4. Research Findings

The findings of this study revealed that students used both direct and indirect strategies classified in six categories of language learning strategies at the medium level. More precisely, the analysis showed that the first year students used indirect strategies in learning English more than direct strategies, 3.48 and 3.26 respectively. The most frequently used strategy was Metacognitive strategies (3.3152) which was the only one strategy with a high level of usage, followed by Social strategies (3.4204), Cognitive strategies (3.3365), Affective strategies (3.3152), Compensation strategies (3.2878), and Memory strategies (3.1635). This finding stands in contrast with the finding of the previous studies by Khamkhien (2010) and Anugkakul & Yordchim (2014), who reported that Thai students used direct strategies more than indirect strategies in learning English. The finding further implies that English language teaching has been developed and promoted to serve international needs, particularly preparing for the ASEAN Economies Community (AEC) in 2015. Education planners have placed more emphasis on the English

curriculum in order to suit international needs, and teachers have also adopted communicative language teaching and learning. Therefore, students have focused more on communicative functions.

With respect to English proficiency, the analysis showed a difference of the English learning strategy use of the first year students with different levels of English proficiency at a significance of 0.01. Overall and five English language learning strategies (Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive and Social strategies) had significance level less than 0.01 (< 0.01), Sig = 0.000 and 0.001.

To examine the use of English language learning strategies in each category of students with different levels of English proficiency, researcher compared each group with other groups. Students with low and medium level of English proficiency used overall English language learning strategies and two strategies (Memory and Cognitive strategies) differently from the ones with high level of English proficiency at significant level 0.01. Students with low, medium, and high levels of English proficiency used Compensation and Metacognitive strategies differently at significant level 0.01 and 0.05. Moreover, Students with low level of English proficiency used Social strategies differently from the ones with medium and high level of English proficiency at significant level 0.01.

Students with high English proficiency level used English language learning strategies the most frequently (3.4649), followed by the ones with medium (3.2615), and low English proficiency level (3.1572). Students with high English proficiency level used direct and indirect strategies the most frequently (3.3939 and 3.5360), followed by the ones with medium (3.1254 and 3.3977), and low English proficiency level (3.0618 and 3.2526). Comparing use of each English language learning strategy category, students with every level of English proficiency tended to use Metacognitive, Cognitive and Social strategies more frequently than Memory, Affective and Compensation strategies. Students with every level of English proficiency used Metacognitive strategies the most frequently. Students with high level of English proficiency least frequently used Compensation strategies whereas the ones with low and medium level used Memory strategies the least frequently. Students with low English proficiency level used memory strategies more frequently than the ones with medium English proficiency level.

The results of this study are congruent with a number of the previous SILL studies conducted in many countries, such as the U.S., Europe, and Asia, including Thailand (Anderson, 2005, Huang & Chen, 2009, Kato, 2005, Olah, 2006, & Prakongchati, 2007). More importantly, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of many studies in that the higher English proficiency students employed a greater diversity and more frequency of English learning strategies than did the lower English proficiency students (Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008, Thu, 2009, Wu, 2008, Yang, 2010, & Zhoa, 2009).

5. Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this current study and a number of previous studies, it might be concluded that students with higher English proficiency levels used language learning strategies more frequently, appropriately, and effectively than did those with lower English proficiency level. Similarly, Oxford (2003) and Yang (1999) stated that successful learners have the ability to orchestrate and combine particular types of language learning strategies in effective ways, according to their own learning needs.

Learner success in learning the English language as a second or foreign language might not only rely on teaching strategies. The reason that can answer the question why some classroom tasks or activities are much easier for some students than for others is relevant to learners' use of language learning strategies to assist them to achieve their goals. Therefore, this researcher pointed out that achievement in learning English depends on the use of language learning strategies. The findings of the present study might be used as guidelines for teachers helping less-successful learners to learn language effectively and become better language learners.

According to the findings of these studies, it can be concluded that students with high English proficiency behaved in unique ways in learning a language. Strategies, such as metacognitive, social, and cognitive, are typically used by high-achievement students. Such strategies should be continuously promoted and used as guidelines for enhancing less-successful Thai students to improve the effectiveness of their English learning.

Future research should be conducted in other academic institutions and the participants in different programs of study, including international schools or programs. In addition to English language, the future researcher should analyze students' use of other language teaching for second or foreign languages in Thailand, such as French, German, Japanese, Chinese, or Korean. Furthermore, Thailand, a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been preparing for the ASEAN Economies Community (AEC) in 2015. Therefore, one classroom tends to comprise a variety of students with different nationalities. Future research should be

concentrated on how students of different nationalities use language learning strategies so that curriculum planners and teachers can provide the appropriate and effective teaching and learning circumstances. In addition, teachers should apply the findings of this study to conduct action research in classroom by creating appropriate lesson plans, classroom activities and teaching materials. Also, they should investigate and monitor the effect of their instruction.

Acknowledgements

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