**An Investigation of Language Learning Strategy Use and its impact of Language Proficiency in University Students**

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**Abstract:** Language Learning Strategies are a key factor in language and it is the specific action to make the students better in studying a second language. The major purposes of this study were two folds; to explore which kinds of learning strategies are used by university student in the International College, and to determine how language proficiency level relate to the use of language learning strategy. The Strategies Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) Version 7 was used. The Tests of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores were used to measure students’ English proficiency. The tests were conducted in a sample consisting of 120 students. The data were analyzed by using t-test. The findings of this study led to some suggestions to enhance students’ use of learning strategies that can enable them to elaborate, transform and improve their English learning.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, English proficiency

**Introduction**

Much research and argument has emerged focusing on languagelearning strategy (LLS) in the last 20 years, because strategies are especially important for languagelearning as tools for active,self-directed involvement,which is essential for developingcommunicative competence (Oxford, 1990) . Good language learners are capable of taking charge of their language learning, and they can employ strategies effectively to learn the language in different tasks (Liao, 2009; Balehizadeh&Rahimi, 2011). From a teaching perspective,“learningstrategies are readily teachable (Oxford & Nyikos,1989 ,p.291) ,and appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence” (Oxford,1990 ,p.1) .Therefore,the research exploring the effect of the learning strategieshas the practical advantage for English as a second language(ESL)or English as a foreignlanguage(EFL) . To assess languagelearning strategies in this article,the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning(SILL)was used.SILL is approved as,“ the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date”(Ellis, 1994 , p.539) , and it is the most-often-usedstrategy scale around the world at this time. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) What are the primarylanguage learning strategies used by university students at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University?; and (b)Is there a relationship between proficiency and the use of language learning strategy?

In spite of English being the second language of Thailand and in most of the educational institutions, communicating in proper English has been a big challenge for most of the Thai students hailing from the rural areas. This eventually affects their dreams of securing a good job in the ever growing competitive ladder. Thus, there is a need for research on ways to enhance the language skills for such struggling students.

**Purpose of Study**

The major purposes of this study were:(a)to explore which kinds of learning strategiesare used by university students at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University?; and (b)Is there a relationship between proficiency and the use of language learning strategy?

**Research Questions**

 This study addresses the research questions:(a)What are the primary languagelearning strategies used by university students at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University?; and (b)Is there a relationship between proficiency and the use of language learning strategy?

**Review of the Literature**

 In 1975, Rubin and Stern published research on the use of language learning strategies (LLS) .Following that,much research and argument emerged focusing on language learning strategy in ESL/EFL.The earlier studies focused on attempting to identify what mightbe good language learning strategies,and tried to establish a relationship between themand successful language learning.Rubin (1975)identified seven strategies in which goodlanguage learners were actively engaged. Stern (1975)also attempted to examine thebehaviors of good language learners and identified10contributing behaviors.In the1980s, more attempts were made to classify the contributing strategies into general categories. Rubin(1981),by using data from the previous literature and her own research,inventeda new classification system.In this system,strategies are divided into two broad categories: strategies directly related to language learning and those indirectly related tolanguage learning. Wenden (1983)examined Rubin’ s work and asserted that a specificmetacognitive element should be included in the system. Carver (1984)introduced hisclassification system, “ strategies for organizing learning” , which include strategies forarranging learning and for manipulating learning opportunities.Accordingly,in the late ’ 80 s,research in cognitive psychology had begun to influence the classification systems of LLS in secondlanguage and foreignlanguage acquisition(SFLA) .O’ Malley,Chamot,andWalker (1987) introduced a system that has three broad categories: metacognitive, cognitive,and social/affective categories.Finally,Oxford(1989)established a comprehensive strategy classification system.This system,obviously influenced by Dansereau(1978) in cognitive psychology and Rubin(1981)in SFLA study,tried to cover all the strategiesmentioned in the previous literature.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989)discussed variables affecting choice of learning strategiesused by 1 , 200 foreignlanguage students in a conventional academic setting using theStrategy Inventory for Language Learning(SILL) ,which consists of121items.They foundfive main factors:Factor1 ,Formal rule related practice strategies; Factor2 ,Functional practice strategies;Factor 3 ,Resourceful, independent strategies;Factor 4 ,General studystrategies;and Factor5 ,Conversational input elicitation strategies.They also examined the influence of self-perceptions of motivation and proficiency and the effects of course status (required vs.elective) ,years of study,sex,and major.The results indicated that: The degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on thechoice of language learning strategies. The difference between this system and those in earlier studies is the strategies mentionedin this system tend to look more like underlying mental processes and can be discussed inthe framework of a learning theory in cognitive psychology.

A lot of research has been done on the pattern of strategy use as well as the other factors affecting it. In the researches done, it was seen that there was a significant correlation between proficiency level and the use of strategies. The learners with higher proficiency levels were found to use strategies more frequently. Studies conducted in the EFL context, on the Iranian students reported that the students were high to medium level strategy users. In both the cases the most used strategy was meta-cognitive and the least used were memory and affective strategies.Bremner (1998) investigated levels of strategy use among a group of Hong Konglearners, and examined levels of association between strategy use and language proficiency.He found that,“ there was significant variation in proficiency in relation to elevenout of possible fifty strategies. Of these nine were in the cognitive category,one in thecompensation category,and one in the social category”(p.490) .He found that,“ the HongKong students used compensation strategies more than any other strategy,and this wasfollowed by metacognitive strategies”(p.501) .He also reported,“ significant differencesby proficiency level were found in the use of three of the broad strategy categories.Twoof these,cognitive and compensation,showed positive variation,indicating higher use ofthese strategies among higher proficiency levels”(p.502) .

As previous studies on LLS show a deficit of research in the ESL contexts, and other cultural background of the learners, it is necessary to extend the area of research to ESL contexts too, to obtain a comprehensiveunderstanding of the use of LLS. The following are the objectives of this study, (a)to explore which kinds of learning strategiesare used by university students at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University; and (b)Is there a relationship between proficiency and the use of language learning strategy?

**Methodology**

**Design of the study**

This research was carried out at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University, in Thailand in the first semester of the academic year 2017(from August 2017 to December 2017).

**Population**

 The population of the study is Thai university students who have studied English for 6years prior to entering a university and learning English there.

**Sample**

 A total of 120 university students from at International College, SuanSunandhaRajabhat University, in Thailand in the first semester of the academic year 2017(from August 2017 to December 2017) were 3rd-year students from the Airline Business department, The participants were selected on the basis of convenience and availability.The sample was voluntarily asked to answer thequestionnaire during the classes and took the TOEIC.

**Survey Instruments**

 Two types of instruments were used in this study: (a) TheStrategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)(See Appendix A) , was used to measure students’frequency of use of languagelearning strategies;and (b)TOEIC scores were used in order to measure their Englishproficiency.

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) The instrument used for collecting data on strategy use was Oxford’ s (1989)StrategyInventory for Language Learning (50items Version 7.0for ESL/EFL).TheSILL is a self-scoring paper-and-pencil survey and consists of 50items, which Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995)divided into six categories: (1) Memory strategies,such as grouping,imagery,rhyming,and structured reviewing (nine items) . (2)Cognitive strategies,such as reasoning,analyzing,summarizing (all reflective ofdeep processing)as well as general practicing (fourteen items) . (3)Compensation strategies (to compensate for limited knowledge) ,such as guessingmeanings for the context in reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures toconvey meaning when the precise expression is not known ( six items) . (4) Metacognitive strategies,such as paying attention,consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one’ s progress, andmonitoring error(nine items) . (5)Affective(emotional,motivation-re lated)strategies,such as anxiety reduction,selfencouragement,andself reward ( six items). (6)Social strategies,such as asking questions,cooperating with native speakers of thelanguage,and becoming culturally aware(six items)(p.5) . Each item in the survey is a statement starting with, I do . . . (e.g. , I review Englishlessons often.) ,and students respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(Never oralmost never true of me)to 5(always or almost always true of me) .

TOEIC as a Proficiency Measure

 The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)was administered tomeasure the participants’English proficiency. The TOEIC measures the ability of nonnative English-speaking people to use English in everyday work situations. The testconsists of200questions to be completed within2hours and is divided into two sections. Section I,the listening component,contains100questions to be completed in 45minutes. Section II,the reading component,contains100questions to be completed in 75minutes. There are no breaks during the test.The proficiency of the examinee is expressed as a numerical score between5and495for both the listening and reading parts,giving a totalscore between 10and 990 .

All of the data collected through the questionnaires was input into the Statistical

 Package for the Social Sciences(SPSS12.0 J for Windows) .There were no missing data

in this study.The data were analyzed in two phases.First,a factor analysis was employed

to summarize the underlying characteristics of learning strategy of this population.The

factor extraction was processed with the maximumlikelihood method with Promax

rotation. Second, once the factors were identified, the relationship between strategy

variables and proficiency variables was investigated by correlation analyses.The collected

data were subjected to qualitative analysis with statistical measures using correlation and

exploratory factor analysis.A factor analysis was employed to summarize the underlying

characteristics of learning strategy use among this population.The factor extraction was

processed with the maximumlikelihood method with Promaxrotation.The relationship

between strategy variables and proficiency variables was investigated using correlation

analysis.

**The Findings**

Research Question 1

 To answer research question1―What is the primary language learning strategies used

by university students?―a factor analysis for50items in the questionnaire was

conducted to derive the underling factors in this sample.Table1shows the results of the

factor analysis for50items in the questionnaire. The factors from the questionnaire,determined by the scree plot,yielded five factors. Eigenvalue and Scree Plot determined the number of the factors. Factor 1 , the largest component of language learning motivation for this sample,20.1％ of all items’ variance, has a heavy loading from 14statements(14 ,18 ,33 ,34 ,35 ,36 ,37 ,38 ,39 ,42 ,43 ,44 ,47 ,and 50)such as“ I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English,”“ I look for people I can speak to in English,”and “ I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.”Items 33 , 34 , 35 , 36 , 37 , and 38 refer to such strategies as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, and selfevaluating;items39 ,42 ,43 ,and44refer to underling psychological conditions for learning

Table 1 The Results of Fac tor Analy sis for the50Items in the Questionnaire(N＝194) Items Factor 1 2 3 4 5 34To plan my schedule to study .93 35To look for people to talk with in English .66 33To try to be a better learner of English .62 36To look for opportunities to read in English .60 37To have clear goals .52 47To practice English with other students .48 38To think about my progress .46 39To try to relax .44 43To write down my feelings in a diary .44 44To talk to someone else about how I feel about English learning .41 50To try to learn about the culture of English speakers .40 42To notice if I am tense or nervous when I’ m learning English .38 14To start conversations in English .34 18To skim an English passage,and read carefully .26 2To use new English words in a sentence .62 22To try not to translate word for word .58 28To guess what the other person will say next .49 9To remember words by remembering their location on the page etc. .46 1To think of relationships between what