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Language Learning Strategy Use of English Majors
at a University in Songkhla Province

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บทคัดย่อ

      การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษารูปแบบการใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ในมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในจังหวัดสงขลา เครื่องมือที่ใช้เพื่อการวิจัยคือ Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990) ผลการวิจัยพบว่านิสิตใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษโดยภาพรวมอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้มากที่สุดมาจากกลุ่ม Compensation และกลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้น้อยสุดมาจากกลุ่ม Social จากการเปรียบเทียบการใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษระหว่างนิสิตชั้นปีที่ 1 และชั้นปีที่ 4 ไม่พบความต่างในรูปแบบและความถี่ของการใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียน แสดงว่าหลักสูตรอาจจะยังไม่ได้ให้ความสำคัญกับพัฒนาการในการใช้กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนของนิสิตที่มากพอ ในส่วนของการใช้กลยุทธ์ในกลุ่ม Meta-cognitive ซึ่งเป็นกลุ่มกลยุทธ์ที่เสริมการพัฒนาการเรียนรู้ภาษาด้วยตนเองโดยตรง ก็พบว่าความถี่ในการใช้กลยุทธ์กลุ่มนี้ก็ยังอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง การศึกษานี้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นในการพัฒนาการใช้กลยุทธ์การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

This study investigates the language learning strategy use of a group of English majors at Thai University in the south of Thailand with the main purposes to explore patterns and frequencies of the strategy use and compare the use of language learning strategies (LLS) of the first and fourth year students. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) was employed to identify the strategy use of the students. It was found that compensation strategies were among the popular strategies while some social strategies were among those unpopular ones. The comparison of the use of LLSs among the first and the fourth year students revealed no significant differences in their strategy use as both groups rated themselves as the moderate users of LLSs. This signifies that throughout the learning, the program may not have paid enough attention on the development of LLSs among students. Meta-cognitive strategies, which are considered direct mechanism to enhance learner autonomy, were also found to be used at only medium level by the students. These findings provide solid evidence for program administrators and teachers that in the process of learning, it is vital to put more emphasis on the development of LLSs among students if they are expected to become self- directed in their learning.

Keywords : language learning strategies, self-directed learning,
             learner autonomy

Introduction

Nowadays, English has become an international language due to the closer tie among countries around the globe. The increasing development in many areas, such as science, communication, and technology, doubled with the desire of global societies to understand each other better have

multiplied the significance of English. However, it is important to note that the use of English language in Thailand is rather limited due to the fact that English is just a foreign language in Thai society. It is rather rare to see Thai people communicate in English language in daily life in Thailand. Despite the uneasy social context for English learning, students are somehow compelled to learn the language. Such attempts started from making English language mandatory in the formal classroom learning in both government and private schools. Most students are also encouraged by their teachers or parents to take extra tutoring classes in some subjects whereby English always has its place in the students' extra tutoring.

Despite all the efforts, the outcomes in language learning are still far behind in terms of their English proficiency when compare to those in many other countries in Asia. With the higher education in particular, the Ministry of Education pinpointed the problematic issues related to the education system in two areas: education management and education quality (Ministry of Education, 2008). In finding solution, The Ministry of Education realized the need for the implementation of some sort of systematic mechanism to transform the Thai higher education. Education reform therefore came into play. The atmosphere at that time was to make Thailand more competitive in the international arena in various areas. Stated as one of the main goals of the reform, the education authorities should redirect missions of higher education towards societal participation, student-centered learning or independent learning and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2008). With response to the particular prescribed policy, higher education institutions would have to gear their practice towards promoting the principle of self-directed learning which is central to the education reform, as well as analytical skills, critical thinking and learning motivation. Due to the time constraint and limited scope of the study, this study has just looked into the aspect of self-directed learning of a group of the English majors at a Thai University located in

the southern part of Thailand.

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to investigate the patterns of language learning strategy use employed by a specific group of Thai university students learning English as a foreign language. In particular, the research intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the general pattern of language learning strategy use among a group of Thai English-majors?

2. What are the most frequently used and least frequently used learning strategies among this group of students?

3. Are there any differences between the use of language learning strategies among students with different year levels of study?

Review of Literature

Self-directed learning refers to the aspect of learning where learners are supposed to take major control over their own learning (Rukthong, 2008). Hurd (2005) self-directed learners are those who are aware of alternative choices, both as to learning strategies and to interpretations or value positions being expressed, and making reasoned choices about the route to follow in accordance with personally significant ideas and purposes. It is clearly noticeable that learners who are self-directed in their learning tend to make effective use of language learning strategies (LLSs). This concept has been playing an important role in language education as well as in research.

1. Self-directed Learning (SDL) and Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) Autonomous learning or self-directed learning was originally defined by Holec (1981) and Wenden (2002) as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. This learning concept has received an immense amount of attention in

education circle around the world due to a consequence of the changing views in the field of English language teaching, whereby a great emphasis has been put on the role of learners. Benson (2001) stated that language classroom has gained a new perspective with the development of learner centered approaches in the last three decades. Nunan (1996) discusses the two complementary aims of learner centered classrooms. One of them focuses on language content, the other focuses on learning process. He adds that throughout the achievement of these aims, learners need to decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn. In this phase, it is the teacher's duty to create such conditions in which they educate students in the skills and knowledge they require while making choices about the process and content of their learning (Benson, 2007). To that end, it is vital to note that students' learning success in this new approach of learning very much depends on how well they make use of learning strategies to enhance their learning. When the learner consciously chooses learning strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning (Oxford, 1990). It was therefore particularly important for teachers to have good understanding about the use of language learning strategies among their students in order to make considerable decisions in the process of managing their teaching.

2. Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

Learning strategies are generally seen as very power tools for enhancing autonomous learning. This area has been investigated in many parts of the work with various groups of learners. Learning strategies are defined as specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning (Oxford, 1990). Oxford also classified learning strategies into six groups : cognitive, meta-cognitive, memory, compensatory, affective, and

social. Detailed descriptions the category groups are as follows:

>Direct Strategies
>
>Memory—making associations between new and already known information through use of formula, phrase, verse or the like
>
>Cognitive—making associations between new and already known information
>
>Compensatory—using context to make up for missing information in reading and writing
>
>Indirect Strategies
>
>Metacognitive—controlling own cognition through the co-ordination of the planning organization and evaluation of the learning process
>
>Affective—regulation of emotions, motivation and attitude toward learning
>
>Social—the interaction with other learners to improve language learning and cultural understanding

A number of research findings have concluded that the employment of language learning strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learner in different ways. It is also found that a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and language learning achievement (Griffiths, 2003; Yang, 2007; Ya-Ling, 2008). Learning strategies are oriented towards the main goal of communicative competence, allow learners to get more self- directed, and support learning (Oxford, 1990).

Nacera (2010) explored the use of English language learning strategies of 46 university students in an English department using the SILL and found most students employed both direct and indirect strategies at moderate level.

Meta-cognitive strategies were among the most popular strategies used by the students.

Among the six categories, meta-cognitive strategies are generally perceived as the most effective tools in enhancing self-directed learning. Oxford (1990) claims that meta-cognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition- that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating. Meta-cognitive strategies are seen as higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Kacak (2003) suggested that for more effective use of learning strategies, once learners have selected and begun to implement specific strategies, they need to make use of meta-cognitive mechanism to ask themselves periodically whether or not they are still using those strategies as intended. Finally, at the implementation of the evaluation stage, language learners attempt to evaluate whether what they are doing is effective. Aegpongpaow (2008) and Chumpavan (2000) pointed out that metacognitive strategies are crucial for Thai students' English in their academic reading. They should be applied to enhance their reading comprehension and to resolve difficulties while reading English academic texts.

   3. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

In Oxford's (1990) study, she synthesized prior study results and came up with a language learning strategy system called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The SILL is a self-rated instrument targeting on getting learners to reflect on their learning strategies in general term. Learners are supposed to rate themselves on five-point scale reflecting 50 strategies across 6 strategy categories. This inventory has been employed to investigate learners' strategy use in many learning contexts. With a significant number of

studies conducted using the SILL, it has now become one of the most reliable and valid instruments in identifying strategy use. This study adopted this system as the main research instrument.

Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate the use of language learning strategies of English majors at a Thai university in the south of Thailand. This study took the form of survey research using the SILL system was employed to collect the data. The target samples were 120 English majors pursuing the Bachelor of Education degree. The convenient sampling method based on voluntary basis was employed to recruit the participants to take part in the study. The Strategy Inventory for language Learning (SILL) (developed by Oxford (1990) was used as a main research instrument. The SILL is a self-rated instrument targeting on getting learners to reflect on their learning strategies in general term.

The SILL is considered one of the most important instruments in the field of language learning strategy for assessing the frequency of use of LLSs by students. It is estimated that 40-50 major studies, including dissertations and theses, have employed the SILL in which at least 9,000 language learners have been involved in studies using the instrument since it was developed. Furthermore, Green and Oxford (1995) indicated that the reliability of the SILL, assessed by Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, is ordinarily in the .90s range.

The SILL was administered to 120 students at a university in southern Thailand in the first week of the first semester of academic year 2015. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and means were implemented in order to investigate the demographic data and the use of language learning strategies. The averages for each category group and the overall average are

then calculated and interpreted according to the following criteria:

High	Always or almost always used	4.50-5.00
	Usually used	3.50-4.49
Medium	Sometimes used	2.50-3.49
Low	Generally not used	1.50-2.49
	Never or almost never used	1.00-1.49

(Oxford, 1990)

Results and Discussion

1. Overall patterns of language learning strategy use of English majors
The overall descriptive data from the responses are detailed in the table1 below.

Table 1: Overall patterns of strategy use across 6 strategy categories

Rank	Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Level of use
1	Compensation	3.11	0.51	Medium
2	Meta-cognitive	2.95	0.47	Medium
3	Affective	2.85	0.40	Medium
4	Memory	2.79	0.42	Medium
5	Cognitive	2.78	0.55	Medium
6	Social	2.40	0.32	Low
Overall		**2.82**	**0.44**	**Medium**

The overall results indicate that the students reported using LLSs at medium level, as indicated by the overall mean score of 2.82 out of the possible 5. This indicates the moderate use language learning strategies among the students. Looking at the individual strategy categories, compensation and Meta-cognitive categories were appeared to be mostly used with a mean score of 3.11 and 2.95, respectively, while social strategies

were used at the lowest level with the overall mean score of 2.40 which is fit in the low use according to Oxford's criteria. These results were in line with those from Nacera (2010), in which he also found that most university students employed language learning strategies at moderate level, whereby meta-cognitive strategies were among the most popular strategies used by the students. It can be noticed that, despite the fact that the use of meta-cognitive strategies came second in the ranking, those strategies were only employed at medium level.

Looking at the comparison of mean scores of 2 strategy types as shown in Table 2, it was found that there was no difference in the use of two types of strategies. Students reported the use of both direct and indirect strategies at medium level.

Table 2 : Overall mean scores of 2 strategy types

Direct strategies	Category	Mean	S.D.	Overall mean	Level of use
	Memory	2.79	0.42		
	Cognitive	2.78	0.55	2.89	medium
	Compensation	3.11	0.51		
Indirect strategies	Meta-cognitive	2.95	0.47		
	Affective	2.85	0.40	2.73	medium
	Social	2.40	0.32		

2. Most and least used strategies

With regard to the research question number 2 focusing on the least and most used strategies among the students, the details are showed in Table 2.

Table 3 : The most and least used strategies

The most used strategies	The least used strategies
1. Item 25: When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures. (3.75 - Comp)	1. Item 43: I write down feelings in a language learning diary. (1.60 - Affect)
2. Item 37: I have clear goals for improving my English skills.(3.65 - Meta)	2. Item 19: I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English. (1.97 - Mem)
3. Item 11: I try to talk with native English speakers. (3.53 - Cog)	3. Item 46: I ask English speaker to correct me when I talk. (2.09 - Social)
4. I practice the sounds of English. (3.43 – Cog)	4. Item 49: I ask questions in English. (2.12 - Social)
5. Item 32: I pay attention when someone is speaking in English. (3.42 - Meta)	5. Item 17: I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English. (2.21 - Cog)
6. Item 33: I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. (3.31 - Meta)	6. Item 7: I physically act out new English words. (2.26 – Mem)
7. Item 26: I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.(3.24 – Comp)	7. Item 48: I ask for help from English speakers. (2.29 – So)
8. Item 39: I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.(3.19 –Aff)	8. Item 34: I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English. (2.41 – Meta)
9. Item 25: If I cannot think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.(3.14 – Comp)	9. Item 23: I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English. (2.43 – Cog)
10. Item 42: I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.(3.13 – Aff)	10. Item 47: I practice English with other students. (2.46 – Cog)

It can be noticed that the most used strategy was item 25: When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures, which is from compensation category. This might partly due to the fact that students may still have had certain level of limitation in using the language. They therefore needed some sort of compensatory devices to get the conversation going. Some strategies on the top five ranking are from Meta-cognitive category. This suggests the level of motivation in learning

the language. These students are English majors and they appeared to have had clear goal of why they wanted to learn the language. However, most of them were still rated at medium level. On the other hand, the least used strategy was item 43: I write down feelings in a language learning diary. Students may have found it difficult to express their feelings in learning the language through written mode. Item 19: I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English. (1.97 - Mem) which was also rated very low may have been due to the fact that Thai and English systems are somehow not very much related. Some training on how to use this particular strategy could be beneficial as keeping diary on how one learns the language assists him or her a great deal in learning a second or foreign language.

Looking at the strategy use across 50 individual strategy items, it is clear that most of strategies were used at medium level. Some strategies were used at low level and these deserve some attention when consider introducing some training. Those are item 7: I physically act out new English words., item 17: I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English., item 19: I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English., item 43: I write down my feelings in a language learning diary., item 46: I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk., item 48: I ask for help from English speakers., and item 49: I ask questions in English. It is also worth noting that most strategies with low level of use are from social category. This can be implied that the program may need to provide more opportunities for students to interact with native speakers of English or even among themselves in English in order to enhance the use of social skills, which in turn resulting in improving the use of social strategies.

3. The strategy use of students with different year levels
This section highlights the differences between the use of language learning

strategies among students of different year levels particularly those from the first and fourth years.

Table 4 : Means and level of use of 50 strategy items among the first and fourth year students

Strategy category	Overall mean				level	
	4th year		1st year		4th year	1st year
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Memory	3.07	0.55	2.79	0.58	medium	medium
Cognitive	3.13	0.60	2.78	0.49	medium	medium
Compensation	3.21	0.57	3.11	0.39	medium	medium
Meta-cognitive	3.14	0.62	3.02	0.44	medium	medium
Affective	3.01	0.72	2.85	0.59	medium	medium
Social	3.10	0.55	2.47	0.61	medium	low
Overall	3.11	0.60	2.83	0.51	medium	medium

The comparison of the use of LLSs among the first and the fourth year students revealed no significant differences in their strategy use in almost all categories as both groups rated themselves as the moderate users of LLSs. The only difference was found in the use of Social strategies where the fourth year students reported using them at medium level while the first year counterparts rated themselves using such strategies at low level. Meta-cognitive strategies, which are considered direct mechanism to enhance learner autonomy and supposed to develop over the long process of learning, were also found to still be used at only medium level by the fourth year students. This signifies that throughout the learning, the program may not have paid enough attention on the development of LLSs among students. These findings provide some sort of evidence for program administrators and teachers that in the process of learning it is vital to put more emphasis on

the development of LLSs among students if they are expected to become self- directed in their learning. However, as this was not a longitudinal study conducted with a group of students across long period of time of their study, this result could only be taken as a suggestive trend of minimal development of LLS over time.

Conclusion

The study of the use of LLSs of a group of English majors found that

1) this group of students were moderate users of LLSs with an overall mean score of 2.82 as measured by the SILL,

2) the most used strategy was item 25: When I cannot think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures, which is from compensation category. This high level of use might partly due to the fact that students may still have had certain level of limitation in using the language. They therefore needed some sort of compensatory devices to get the conversation going,

3) three of the most used strategies were from Meta-cognitive category (item32, 33, 27). This suggests the level of motivation in learning the language. These students are English majors and they appeared to have had clear goal of why they wanted to learn the language. Despite being in the top group, students reported using them only at medium level. This result implies students' limited capability in planning, monitoring, and assessing their own learning,

4) two of the least used strategies (item 46 and 49) belong to Social category signifying the lack of social contacts in English environment in the process of learning,

5) there were no differences between the use of LLSs among the first and the fourth year students. This partially signifies the lack of emphasis on LLSs on the part of program administrators and/or teachers.

This research provides better understanding about the use of LLSs among

English majors at Thaksin University. It is vital for program administrators and teachers to seriously incorporate the training of LLSs in the process of teaching and learning to make students more in control of their learning. The following practical recommendations should be considered.

1. The students should be provided more opportunities to develop and use a wider range of LLSs in the process of learning. Teachers should be made aware of the significance of LLSs and trained to incorporate more self-controlled tasks in class.

2. While using such strategy is useful in getting the message across. Overuse of a certain strategy, especially the use of gestures as reported using at high level in this study, may cause some irritation on the part of interlocutors. Proper training regarding the use of compensation strategies might be needed.

3. Social strategies may need particular attention in the process of learning. Special attempt should be made to put students in more English environment.

4. Strategy training could be done as part of normal English classes or separately from regular classes. For some higher level strategies like those cognitive ones which appear to be harder to develop, separate training could be more effective.

5. Assessment system for English subjects should be made in line with the training of strategy.

6. Meta-cognitive strategies which are generally perceived as the most effective tools in enhancing self-directed learning should be more reinforced in English classes to make sure students would be more equipped with capacity to direct their own learning.

The findings of the current study have provided a greater understanding of strategy use among English majors at a Thai University. It is clear that the use of language learning strategies is a complex process and needed

more studies. Further steps need to be taken in order to make sure that students suitably use LLSs at a wider range and at higher level.

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