

The Use of Language Learning Strategies in English Learning Contexts

การใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษาในบริบทการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ

Nisakorn Prakongchati¹

บทคัดย่อ

บทความปริทัศน์นี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะนำเสนอความสำคัญของการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษาในบริบทการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งได้รับความสำคัญจากนักการศึกษาในสาขาการเรียนการสอนภาษามาเป็นเวลาเกือบสองทศวรรษแล้ว สืบเนื่องจากความสนใจที่มีมากขึ้นต่อการจัดการเรียนการสอนที่มีผู้เรียนเป็นศูนย์กลาง (Learner-Centered Approach) บทความนี้ได้ครอบคลุมทฤษฎีการเรียนรู้ภาษา ความสำคัญของการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษา รวมทั้งงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษา

สาระสำคัญในบทความนี้จะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อผู้เรียนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาในการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษา ซึ่งจะช่วยเพิ่มประสิทธิภาพในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษและในทางเดียวกัน จะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษอีกด้วย เพราะหากครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษมีความเข้าใจในการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษามากขึ้น ก็จะมีส่วนช่วยให้นักเรียนสามารถเรียนรู้ภาษาได้ประสบความสำเร็จยิ่งขึ้น และยังช่วยให้นักเรียนสามารถพัฒนาการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง

คำสำคัญ การใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษา บริบทการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง ความแตกต่างระหว่างผู้เรียนแต่ละคน

¹ Nisakorn Prakongchati, PhD. Business English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kamphaeng Phet Rajabhat University, Thailand.

Email: nprakongchati@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article aims to present a great emphasis on the use of language learning strategies in English learning contexts for more than two decades due to increased interest in a learner-centered approach amongst language educators. It reviews the literature and the importance of language learning strategy use, as well as the theory of and research into language learning strategy use.

This review will provide information about the use of language learning strategies, which will enhance English learning for non-native learners. Further, the better understanding of language learning strategies for English teachers can help students to learn more successfully and develop their learning autonomy.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, English language learning contexts, Learning autonomy, Individual learner differences

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. In parallel to this new shift of interest, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember information has been the primary concern of researchers dealing with the area of foreign language learning (EFL). Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s. In most of the research on language learning strategies, the primary concern has been on “identifying what good language learners report they do to learn a second or foreign language, or, in some cases, are observed doing while learning a second

or foreign language” (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p.19). The strategies employed by those learners were proposed and then were suggested for unsuccessful language learners to apply in order to make them successful in learning their target languages.

Good Language Learners and Language Learning Strategies

The notion of good language learners’ learning strategies in the history of language learning strategy studies emerged from the ‘post-methods’ era (Brown, 2002, p. 5), when attention shifted from teaching and learning processes and the contributions of the individual teacher to language learning and teaching pedagogy.

The factors which have led to this shift are:

1. a general shift of perspective among methodologists and researchers from focusing on teachers and instruction towards learners and learning processes (Lassard-Clouston, 1997);
2. a broadening of theories of language learning to incorporate insights not only from applied linguistics, but also from cognitive psychology (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990); and
3. a broadening of the overall goals of language learning to include a contextual dimension of the study of language learning strategies (Coleman, 1991; Holliday, 1994; Stern, 1983).

As in the early studies, researchers tended to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all “good L2 learners.” Rubin (1975) suggests, for example, that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers, have strong drives to communicate, are often uninhibited, dare to make mistakes, focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing, take advantage of all practice opportunities, monitor their speech as well as that of others, and pay attention to meaning. Naiman,

Fröehlich, Stern, and Todesco (1975) also made a list of strategies used by successful L2 learners, adding that they learn to think in the language and address the affective aspects of language acquisition, that is, successful language learners are likely to select strategies that work together in an effective way, tailored to the requirements of the language tasks.

The types of strategies used by different learners in different contexts, i.e. learning English as a foreign language (EFL), or learning English as a second language (ESL), vary due to different factors, such as stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, gender, nationality/ethnicity, general learning styles, personality traits, motivation level, and purpose for learning the language (Oxford, 1990). Of all the learner factors, the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and success in mastering a second or foreign language has been the focus of considerable research over the past two decades (Oxford, 1989; Rubin, 1987).

A Shift to an Emphasis on Learners and Learning Processes

The view of “learners as individuals” with regard to language learning strategies has been emphasized in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). The trend of changes in TESOL methods is the result of this greater learner-centered emphasis on second language teaching and learning. Innovation in the language teaching field in the late 1980s and 1990s, therefore, was stimulated by a particular concern for the individual's language learning processes (Larson-Freeman, 2000). Over the years, the methods and approaches to the teaching and learning of L2 have continuously changed (for instance the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, the communicative approach). These changes provided a methodology based on activities which sought to stimulate and

replicate the authentic use of language, now advocating a learner - rather than a teacher - based view of learning. For example, in the Communicative Approach, learners are implicitly encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own learning (Oxford, Crookall, & Lavine, 1989). This differs from the emphasis in previous methods and approaches (viz., the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method), which has typically been on how teachers teach, with relatively little attention paid to how learners learn. This illustrates how attention has shifted from teachers to learners.

This change in ideas about language teaching and learning over the two decades originally focused on 'affect' - the emotional aspects of learning, which influenced learning processes, the so-called 'humanistic approaches' (Stevick, 1990) - seeing language learning as a process of self-fulfilment rather than the behaviourist approaches (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) - which saw language learning and development as derived from the result of the formation of habits on a stimulus/response/reinforcement basis. In the humanistic approaches (post-audiolingualism), learners and social interaction began to be considered. The techniques of these approaches emphasize the need to engage with learners' emotions and feelings along with linguistic knowledge and behavioural skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Rubin (1987), "...there was a growing interest in defining how learners can take charge of their own learning and clarifying how teachers can help students become more autonomous" (p.15). This requires the teacher to focus on such aspects as learning to learn, studying skills, and generally to guide learners towards attaining a greater degree of autonomy.

In line with the significant shift to a greater learner-centered emphasis in second language teaching and learning, learners are recognized as individuals that are active, not passive recipients of knowledge,

in the learning process. This view of language learning, which allowed for the possibility of learners to take deliberate actions to control their own learning, and achieve autonomy through the use of learning strategies, was researched and promoted by early educators in the field of applied linguistics, such as Naiman et al. (1975), Rubin (1975), and Stern, (1975). They aimed at discovering how learners employ language learning strategies to actively promote their own learning. Their research work shows a focus on what good language learners do in the process of learning a target language. These works were known as “Good Language Learner” (GLL) studies, which initiated an interest in many language researchers to continuously work at studying the achievement of successful language learners (e.g. Bremner, 1999; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Halbach, 2000; Lengkanawati, 2004; Su, 2005; Wharton, 2000) in terms of language learning strategies.

Responding to an awareness that language learning strategies are, for example, “an extremely powerful learning tool” (O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper & Russo, 1985a, p. 43), or special ways to process information that enhance comprehension, learning, or the retention of information (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990), a study on “good language learners” has investigated how strategies affect language learning in the formal learning setting. The attempts to describe the ‘good language learners’ aim to serve the ultimate objective of better language teaching and learning, and the main concern must be learning outcomes or so-called L2 competence, sometimes known as L2 proficiency (Naiman et al., 1975).

Language Learning Strategies in the View of Cognitive Psychology

As noted by Griffiths and Parr (2001), language learning strategy research was initiated with two main theoretical assumptions: 1) some students learn language more successfully than others; and 2) the rate of successful learning is referable to the various strategies employed by different learners to do the task. From these assumptions, which views that students are able to consciously influence their own learning and enhance the effectiveness of their own learning, the learning of language becomes a cognitive process, similar to any other kind of learning in many ways (McLaughlin, 1978). This is likely to be opposed to the Behaviourist view of Skinner (1957), who believed that language development is the result of a set of habits. Behaviourism Knowledge is the product of interaction with the environment through stimulus-response conditioning. Learners, in this view, are all able to readily transfer the habits they had mastered in the classroom to communicate outside it (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Language learning strategy, however, operates as a theory alongside another theory of language learning acquisition, i.e. cognitive theory.

Cognitive theory began in the early 1970s due to the perceived limitations of the Behaviourist view (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In cognitive theory, learning is an active and constructive process in which learners themselves select and organize informational input step by step with relation to the input of their prior knowledge, then retain what is important, and finally reflect on the outcome of their learning efforts through experience and practice (Chamot, Dale, O' Malley, & Spanos, 1993). This emphasis on human cognition led to the establishment of the Cognitive Approach (Celce-Murcia, 1991 in Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Given the complexities and intricacies of mental processes involved in language learning, second language learning is considered as a complex cognitive skill (Rausch, 1998).

In keeping with this perception, past researchers (e.g. Rubin, 1975; Wenden, 1985) believed that these cognitive processes can be identified through the specific strategy uses of good language learners. The strategies employed by those learners are identified and then are suggested for unsuccessful language learners to apply in order to make them successful in learning languages. Most of language teachers' time, therefore, might be profitably spent in learning strategy training in order to improve their learners' learning effectiveness (Wenden, 1985).

Summing up with an application of cognitive theory in the field of second language acquisition, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) propose a view that language learning is a complex and conscious process. Additionally, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) note that, in the cognitive theory individuals are said to "process" information, and the thoughts involved in this cognitive activity are referred to as "mental process." Language learning strategies, therefore, are special ways to process information that enhance the comprehension, learning, or retention of the information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Similar to O'Malley and Chamot, Wenden (1987) highlights the fact that the theory and research on the nature of mind in the field of cognitive science have provided theoretical input for examining how learners learn target languages.

Language Learning Strategies with More Emphasis on a Contextual Dimension

Despite the interesting insights provided by the literature dealing with strategies, most of the language learning strategy studies which emerged in the 1970s were carried out to recognize the importance of language learning strategy use (e.g. Oxford 1989, 1990; Rubin, 1975; Stern 1975). Their focal points and methodological approaches have shed

little light on how contextual factors relate to learners' use (or non-use) of the known strategies. The focus on effects of the relationship between learner and contextual factors on language learning strategies has been turned to elaborate more on learners' interaction with their environment, as stated in Coleman (1996), Holliday (1994), and Stern (1983). This is because 'language is not isolated from society' (Stern, 1983, p. 241).

According to these three scholars, the influence of social context on second language acquisition/learning is strongly emphasized. They explain the social context as social forces within both the institution and the wider community outside the classroom, which in turn influence the way in which people deal with each other in the classroom, i.e. social interaction between teacher and learners. To promote the concept of teacher-learner partnership, it is truly crucial to seek clear understanding on what really happens in the classroom and between teacher and students. Thus, the social context in which teaching and learning take place is considered an important source of explanation for classroom phenomena.

Based on Holliday (1994), the classroom is described as a micro social context in the sense that what happens within the classroom reflects, affects, and is affected by the complex of influences and interests of the macro social context, i.e. the host educational environment (consisting of the host country's ministry of education, aid agencies, and other involved government institutions). Investigating the micro context to discover what happens between teacher and students implies additionally looking at the macro context, that is, the wider social relationships between classroom participants and influences from outside the classroom.

As aforementioned, it can be said that language learning strategy research regarding 'good language learners' partially responded to the main trend of changes in second language teaching and learning.

The studies of language learning strategies employed by good/successful language learners are linked to cognitive psychology in the theory of second language acquisition/learning, as well as to the dimension of language learning context in which the learners as the actively participating individuals in the process of learning use their own thinking processes, or cognition to discover the roles of the language they acquire and of the language learning strategy choices they make. Language learning strategy studies, in this sense, seem to capture more the emphasis on particular references to learners' language learning success that will vary according to the extent that they truly take part in their L2 learning program.

Language Learning Strategies and Their Related Factors

A review of related studies provides the research empirical evidence in the field of language learning strategies to remain that there is a dearth of knowledge about the relationships between learners' use of language learning strategies and any factors that determine those strategies, as stated in Stern (1983), Cohen (1998). To clarify the relationships between factors (e.g., learners' individual characteristics, the educational context, motivation, and attitudes, among many others) and language learners' language learning strategy use, the models of L2 acquisition of Stern (1983) and Ellis (1994) can be used to help explain such relationships.

Stern (1983) proposes a model in which five sets of variables include: (1) social context, (2) learner characteristics, (3) learning conditions, (4) learning process, and (5) learning outcomes. In this model, social context together with learner characteristics and learning conditions determine learning process. These then influence two aspects of learning outcomes: the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of achievement.

The first external linguistic environment factor of second language learning in Stern's (1983) model is social context variables. They cover all activities influencing language learning behavior within that society. Views of social context variables involve sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and socioeconomic factors. Firstly, sociolinguistic factors include the characteristics of the new language to be learnt in comparison with the language of origin. Sociolinguistics provides concepts, mechanisms, and systematic information for a study of language in a social, cultural, and interpersonal matrix. Next, sociocultural factors that bear upon motivation, such as relative social status of the first language and the second language, the instrumental value of the second language, the cultural values of the second language, as well as political factors, should be considered together with the social opportunities to make contact in the second language and the opportunities for learning the language offered in the school. Finally, an explanation of socioeconomic factors indicates how the home affects learners' motivation and their language achievement as well as the influence of parental status and support on the students' learning processes in the educational system.

Another external linguistic environment factor is learner characteristics. The influence of learner characteristics as identified by Stern (1983) has a key role to play in interpreting the concept of language learners. To cover the examination of the learner characteristic variables, crucial learner factors involve: 1) age, 2) cognitive characteristics - general learning abilities, language learning aptitude, previous language learning experience, cognitive learning styles, 3) affective characteristics: attitudes and motivation, and 4) personality characteristics: the qualities of personality favoring or hindering progress in a second language. The awareness of learner characteristics and individual differences among

language learners can sensitize teachers to possible variations in learner reactions to teaching and to differences in language learning strategies. An analysis of cognitive, affective, and personality characteristics can thus indicate how individuals are likely respond to emotional, motivational, and interpersonal demands of language learning (Stern, 1983).

Side by side with the interest in discovering the above two external linguistic environment factors, an attempt has been made to understand learning conditions described as an 'internal linguistic environment factor'. In Stern's (1983) model, learning conditions are presented with a basic distinction of how the second language is learnt through exposure to the target language in a supportive language environment in which the second language is used and is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language). This distinction emerged from the concept of investigating the target language learning environment covering formal and informal learning; that is, language learning under 'natural' conditions, 'uncontaminated' by formal teaching and 'informal', 'free', 'undirected', or 'naturalistic' language learning (Stern, 1983, p. 391).

The learning process is another internal linguistic environment factor. According to Stern (1983), the learning process is looked upon as consisting overtly of strategies and techniques employed by learners, and covertly, of conscious and unconscious mental operations. The main focus regarding the learning process is given to how best to understand: 1) the actual language learning behavior, i.e., what learners do to learn a language in the classroom or in a free learning situation, 2) the process of how learners themselves inquire into their objectives, strategies, and techniques, together with their thoughts and feelings about language learning as well as steps and stages perceived by them as necessary to master the language, and 3) cognitive processes involving language

learning, such as attending, discriminating, initiating, memorizing, rehearsing, probing, matching, guessing, comparing, and so on.

The last set of variables in Stern's (1983) model for examination of second language learning is learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are another internal linguistic environment factor. L2 competence/proficiency are considered to be the learning outcomes in this model in which teachers, parents, and, especially, learners themselves are all equally interested. Stern (1983) summarizes that knowing a language, competence, or proficiency in the first or second language has been viewed as:

1. the intuitive mastery of the forms of the language;
2. the intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings, expressed by the language forms;
3. the capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form, and
4. the creativity of language use. (p.346)

Expanding Stern's (1983) idea, Ellis (1994) further offers another model comprising four sets of variables: 1) individual learner differences, 2) situational and social factors, 3) learner strategies, and 4) language learning outcomes. Ellis's first set of variables consists of beliefs about language learning, affective states, and general factors. All of these four subsets of individual learner difference factors are taken into consideration in order to explain learners' different beliefs about how an L2 is best learnt, as well as to understand why and how their anxiety, arising out poor performance, communication apprehension, tests, and fear of negative evaluation, is likely to have a significant impact on learners' ability to learn L2. General factors relating to learners' ability and desire to learn and the way they choose to go about learning in this first set of variables also include age, language aptitude, learning styles, motivation, and

personality. The second set of variables is composed of four factors: the target language being learnt, the setting in which learning takes place, the tasks performed by learners, and learners' genders. Learning strategies are the third set of variables, which are determined by those individual learner difference factors; i.e., beliefs, affective states, general factors, and previous learning experiences, together with various situational factors (the target language being studied, whether the setting is formal or informal, the nature of the instruction, the specific tasks learners are asked to perform), and a social nature (gender) also shown to influence language learning strategy use. The studies of learning strategies hold considerable promise, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in L2 learning. Consequently, the first three sets of variables, comprising individual learner differences, situational and social factors, and learner strategies, then have an influence on the last factor, namely, language learning outcomes, in terms of two aspects of learning: the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of achievement. Likewise, the success that learners experience and their level of L2 proficiency have can affect choice of learning strategies.

In detail, both Stern (1983) and Ellis' (1994) two models are similar as they include more or less the same variables in their models, and their sets are labeled almost indistinguishably. However, there is a noticeable difference regarding the relations between language learning process/strategies and learning outcomes; i.e. a single directional relation of learner characteristic, learning process, and learning outcomes is shown in Stern' s (1983) model, but a bi-directional relation of individual learner differences, learner strategies, and language learning outcomes is presented in Ellis's (1994) model.

In the concept of language learning as explained by Stern (1983) and Ellis (1994), an analysis of language learning strategies and related factors can help not only clarify what general factors relate to learners' ability and desire to learn and the way they choose to go about learning, but also indicate how individuals are likely to respond to the emotional, motivational, and interpersonal demands of language learning. With regards to learning outcomes (levels of language achievement and proficiency), the relationship between learners' language learning strategy use and this set of variables could be a single influence or a bi-directional influence between language learning strategies and language learning outcomes or learning performance. Perhaps the proficiency/strategy use connection is that the typical finding on an association between the two is not proof of cause and effect (see e.g. Skehan, 1989, p. 97). As supported in Bialystok (1981), more active use of strategies may be employed for raising language proficiency levels, but it may also be that higher proficiency allows greater or more effective use of strategies, or that both strategy use and proficiency are influenced by some other underlying factors.

Studies on Language Learning Strategies

As noted above, over the past two decades, language learning strategy research was mostly conducted to describe "good language learners." Naiman et al. (1975), Rubin (1975), and Stern (1975) are the pioneering researchers who carried out their work to identify what 'good' or 'successful' language learners actually do when they learn their target languages, e.g. English, French, German. The three studies by Naiman et al. (1975), Rubin (1975), and Stern (1975) initiated an interest in many language researchers to continuously work at promoting the achievement of successful language learners (see Bialystok, 1981; O'Malley et al.,

1985a; Politzer, 1983). Concerning the lack of attention given to how learner differences influence language learning strategy use and language achievement, there has been an increasing emphasis on how language learners' characteristics relate to their language performance. Accordingly, much research was later carried out, e.g. Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1978; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Magogwe and Oliver, 2007; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Tercanlioglu, 2004; Van and Abraham, 1990; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 1999; and Yilmaz, 2010.

In the Thai context, at first, language learning strategy research was conducted with Thai EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners documented language learning strategies in striving for academic success (e.g. Kaotsombut, 2003; Intaraprasert, 2002; Lappayawichit, 1998; Ounwattana, 2000; Ratchadawisitikul, 1986; Sarawit, 1986). It is evident that a certain series of variables heavily focused on language learning strategies used by successful and unsuccessful students. However, there are a number of studies giving more attention to some of other learner-related factors, such as gender, types of academic program, learning styles, learners' perceptions of the usefulness of strategies, English learning experiences, and field of study that can contribute to learners' language learning strategy use in relation to EFL proficiency (Intaraprasert, 2004, 2007; Prakongchati, 2007; Ratanaphon, 1998; Torut, 1994).

Language Learning Strategies and Their Implications

Understanding language learning strategy use in English learning contexts would invariably provide insights to facilitate pedagogical implications for instruction and curriculum development. First, learners

of English as a foreign language should learn to recognize the strategies they are using and be advised to select more appropriate techniques for the instructional environment. Successful language learners may serve as informants for students experiencing less success in language learning regarding strategies, techniques, and study skills. Through monitoring each other, students can take an active part in not only learning but also teaching. Second, teachers should become more aware of the learner strategies that their students are (and are not) using so that they can develop their teaching styles and strategies to serve their students' ways of learning. Third, teachers can help students identify their current learning strategies by means of a variety of data collection methods, such as surveys, one-on-one and group interviews, diaries, think-aloud data, or other means. Fourth, language curricula, materials, and instructional approaches should incorporate diversified activities to accommodate the various characteristics of the individual learners found in the foreign language classroom. In addition, use of appropriate learning strategies can enable students to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction (Dickinson, 1987). These factors are important because learners need to keep on learning when they are no longer in a formal classroom setting (Oxford & Crookall 1989). Finally, unlike other learner-related factors, such as aptitude, motivation, personality, and general cognitive styles, learning strategies are teachable (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Küpper, 1985b; Oxford, 1990). Accordingly, in the teaching and learning process teachers can help their students learn quicker, easier, and more effectively by weaving learning strategy training into their regular classroom teaching.

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