A Study of the Language Learning Strategies Used by Business Students at Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the use of learning strategies by freshman Thai Business students in their study of English at Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand. The two specific objectives were to determine whether Thai students used learning strategies in their language learning and to determine whether successful language learners use more strategies than less successful learners. The sample of the study involved 26 Thai Business students. The sample completed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which consisted of thirty-three questions divided into six sub-strategies. The results obtained indicate that (a) the majority of the students were conscious of their use of strategies, (b) meta-cognitive strategies were commonly used, (c) strategies were used extensively by more successful language learners, and (d) appropriate use of strategies facilitated learners' learning language.

Key words: Thai students; learning strategies, language learning strategies

Introduction

Research in language learning has suggested that using learning strategies gives a positive impact to students' own learning. The positive impact may be a growth in independence or an improvement in academic achievement (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996; Park, 1997; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Language teachers, aside from making pedagogical decisions to address language objectives in their language classes need to also impart learning skills such as strategies for future use (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). When taught about strategies, students may use them effectively and even personalize these strategies to fit their culturally-driven learning schemata (Nisbett, Tindall, Arroyo, 2005; Wong, 2004). It increases motivation by instilling confidence in their own learning ability and provide them with specific type of method that can lead to successful learning. It also helps learners to select appropriate strategies for a particular task, and allows them to become more self-independent learners (Hong-Nam & Leavelle, 2006).

The study of language learning strategies is not a new venture. Table 1 illustrates the definitions of language learning strategies over time.

Table 1. Definitions of language learning strategies.

Study	Definition of Language Learning Strategy
Weinstein and Mayer (1997)	Behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning which are intended to influence the learner's encoding process
Cohen (1998)	They are conscious thoughts and behaviors which include cognitive, meta cognitive, affective, and social strategies used by learners as they target to improve their knowledge and understanding of the language
Wenden and Rubin (2007)	Any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information

Types of Language Learning Strategies

The strategy types developed by Oxford (1986) is still used prevalently in studies on language learning strategies through the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Park, 1997; Hong-Nam & Leavell 2006; Wharton, 2000; Chamot, 2004). The types and definitions of language learning strategies are provided in

Table 2. Types and definitions of language learning strategies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995, p. 5)

Type of Language Learning Strategy	Definition of Language Learning Strategy
Memory strategies	Grouping, imagery, rhyming, structured reviewing
Cognitive strategies	Reasoning, analyzing, summarizing (all reflective of deep processing), as well as general practicing
Compensation strategies	Guessing meanings from context in reading and listening and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning when the precise expression is not known
Metacognitive strategies	Paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluating one's progress, and monitoring error
Affective strategies	Anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, self-reward
Social strategies	Asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, becoming culturally aware

Studies in Language Learning Strategies

As established earlier, the study of language learning strategies has been ongoing. Though most of these studies are descriptive in that they give insights into the types of strategies employed, the process of implementing strategies, as well as the effects of using language learning strategies, studies have also been comparative, wherein factors such as gender, age, and culture are used as variables to discern any differences. Since this study is concerned with a specific group of sample, namely Asian students, discussions relevant to this criterion will be presented in the ensuing sections.

Till today, there is an apparent dichotomy that divides Asian students from other non-Asian students. This can be illustrated in Kember's (2000) study, where he highlighted several conceptualization of Asian students that he was made known of upon commencing work in Hong Kong, which included "passive, resistant to teaching innovations, extrinsically motivated, high-achievers, willing to invest in education." These stereotypical notions of Asian students are mostly misinformed, as exemplified in studies such as those by Cheng (2000) and Gan (2009). What this entails is the formulaic assumption of how Asian students would behave in a language classroom. Nonetheless, there have been studies which refuted these claims. For instance, the notion that Asian students are very passive. Kember (2000) discussed this in light of the cultural context of Asian students. For Asian nations built on a Confucian foundation, strategies such as memorization is a typical route taken to seek understanding. For example, in Purdie, Hattie, and Douglas's (1996) study, Japanese students were found less likely to rely on rote learning techniques. Nonetheless, when they were approached to disclose how they learned, the Japanese sample admitted that they used memorization techniques. Though this approach may be viewed as uncritical, the Confucian perspective of memorization is that it leads to understanding, instead of just remembering (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). Another belief is that Asian students are not intrinsically motivated, which stems from the emphasis on extrinsic achievement. Kember (2000) points out that though Asian students may appear extrinsically motivated, there is an ardent interest in learning materials due to the belief and trust that they may afford students ample preparation for their future.

One of such is Hong-Nam and Leavelle's (2006) study, which found that their sample, who were enrolled in an intensive ESL-type class, preferred to use metacognitive and social strategies, perhaps because these students were driven by a strong instrumental motivation. In other words, due to the intensive nature of the course, and their objective of advancing their academic and professional lives, efficient planning and self-monitoring were essential. Furthermore, the sample involved, which was mostly Asian students, cooperated with each other to enhance learning. A study conducted by Gan (2009) also demonstrated that the sample, which consisted of Chinese and Hong Kong students, had a positive disposition towards independent learning. They also showed an inclination to engage in their own learning, which contrasts the notions that Asian students are teacher-dependent (Gan, 2009).

What these studies have shown is that contrary to popular belief, Asian students do apply strategies which some may perceive as contextually a typical. In Asia, classrooms are typically teacher-centered, knowledge is learned through rote. In non-Asian contexts, Asian students were found to be unfamiliar with the teaching and learning norms of western-based education (Campbell & Li, 2007). Nonetheless, Asian students who were taught other types of language learning strategies were able to see the relevance of student-centered classrooms, as well as participative approaches to learning. Alternative strategies may be learned, if they recognize them as being useful for their learning objectives (Wong, 2004). Hence, teachers should not pre-empt how their students would learn (Kember, 2000). After all, Asian students were found to be willing to adapt to learning strategies common to the western learning contexts (Wong, 2004).

When considering all these studies, research into language learning strategies should be aware that taking a cultural stance to understand learning processes may be limiting, as it trivializes the complexities of students' learning abilities (Wong, 2004). Furthermore, language learning strategies across contexts may yield different results as there may be external factors such as institutional and social environments which may affect the strategies used (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Gan, 2009)

Language Learning Strategies: A Thai Perspective

In other Asian contexts that allowed for a more participative approach to learning, it was found that types of strategies that are positively correlated with language proficiency differ. Again, this echoes what was mentioned previously, that is, strategies may have different effects on students who may come from a seemingly similar cultural region (Park, 2000). For example, in studies among Korean students, it was found that cognitive and social strategies were significantly correlated with language proficiency (Park, 1997). Nisbet, Tindall and Arroyo (2005), on the other hand, reported that their sample of Chinese students showed that metacognitive and affective strategies were more significantly correlated with language proficiency, thus being better predictors for language assessment. Again, these discrepancies in strategy-use may be due to factors such as learners' use of different strategies, learners' misapplication of strategies, or other confounding variables that may have affected the research process (Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005).

In Thailand, studies on English language classrooms have reported a very teacher-centric approach to teaching. Reasons for this approach may be due to the heavy focus on high-stakes examination and an emphasis on structural knowledge of the English language. Furthermore, teachers have cited lack of training in both language and pedagogical areas (Foley, 2005; de Segovia & Hardison, 2009). With these instances as a background, it is easy to assume that English language learners are not given much opportunity to practice independent learning.

With the assumption that strategy-use among seemingly similar students may not be actually similar (Nisbett, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005; Wong, 2004), this study aims to understand the nature of strategy-use in a Thai classroom, and to determine if there is a difference in terms of strategy-use between proficient and less-proficient English users.

The Sample

The sample involved in this study was beginner students. Some of the observed language issues faced by these students are their lack of vocabulary knowledge, their resistance to self-monitor, and their hesitance in taking risks.

One of the major problems faced by participants of this research was their limited target language vocabulary. Because of their limited vocabulary, it was difficult for them to convey their intended messages. Another issue is that the participants do not like to monitor or self-evaluate their progress. The reason could be they do not want to know where they stand in terms of their language proficiency. On top of that, the

researcher observed that students avoid taking risks, probably due to the cultural filter of 'face'. They are afraid of being ridiculed at their mistakes. This is one reason that some learners do better in writing than in speaking. For example, some of the participants' speech is riddled with mistakes, but do better in writing. Furthermore, whenever there is an oral assessment, they would get very nervous and tensed.

The Study

As mentioned, it has been suggested that using learning strategies could improve students' learning of the target language. With this in mind, the researcher introduced various language learning strategies to business students enrolled in an English class with the assumption that language learning would improve. This study took a quantitative approach by using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to collect data. The instrument consisted of 33 items with an answer ranging from a "strongly disagree or disagree" to "strongly agree or agree." The 33 items in the questionnaire examines the students' use of strategies. The questions were divided into two divisions, direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies were subdivided further into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies and indirect strategies were subdivided into metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

Data was examined descriptively and at times, verified qualitatively when the participants were involved. The participants of this study were 26 Thai-speaking freshmen business major students, taking Basic English as part of their General Education courses. In this study, proficient language users are students who received a score of 60% in any language assessment, while less proficient users were those who received less than 60%. There were twelve males and fourteen females. Their age ranged from 20 to 25. They were freshman students and were considered to be at the basic level in terms of their overall English competence. Therefore, the questions in the questionnaire were translated from English into Thai to obtain accuracy for the purpose of this study. The questions were given to a native Thai and fluent English speaker, for translation. The translated questions were then printed out on a transparency and projected on the overhead projector for students to refer to while answering the questionnaire. There were no questions raised by any students as they had no problem understanding the questions. Since the questions were a form of self-report, based on their personal experiences, no pilot sessions were organized.

The questionnaire was administered during a regular class period in the classroom, which took about twenty minutes to complete. Before the questionnaire was given out, the class teacher got permission from the participants. Any students not willing to participate was given a chance to do so. Furthermore, the researcher assured the participants that their grades will not be affected and that their names will be anonymous.

Results

Students' use of Language Learning Strategies

The average score for each item in the questionnaire was analyzed and used as an indication of whether the learners use language strategy or not. Then using the final grade of the students obtained from the class teacher, the researcher compared whether proficient learners used more strategies than the less proficient ones.

Table 3. Memory strategy items.

Items	Strongly disagree	disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	1	8	6	9	2.95
I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	1	4	10	9	3.12
I use to rhymes to remember new English word.	1	4	10	9	3.12
I use flashcards to remember new English word.	2	5	8	9	3.0

I physically act out new English.	2	8	4	10	2.91
I review English lessons often.	2	7	6	9	2.91
					3.00

The most used sub-strategies by the learners are "I connect sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word" and "I use rhymes to remember new English work" at 3.12 each. In the researcher's opinion, since participants of this study are very basic English learners, learning with pictures and sound enhance and motivate their learning as they hear and see the image at the same time. In language teaching, one method that is used is learning target language through the use of rhymes and songs. This method enhance memorization of the vocabulary thereby making the learning better and faster.

On the other hand, a small number of the participants indicated that they strongly disagree on the use of any of the memory strategies as indicated in Table 3. It is possible that these students are not aware of the learning strategies they are using or that they are using other learning strategy in a more obvious way.

Table 4. Cognitive Strategy items.

Items	Strongly disagree	disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
I say or write new English words several times	3	3	5	13	3.16
I try to talk like native English speakers.	1	0	10	13	3.45
I practice the sounds of English.	0	5	8	11	3.25
I start conversations in English.	1	8	7	8	2.91
I use the English words I know in different ways.	2	5	9	8	2.95
I read for pleasure in English.	3	10	6	5	2.54
					3.04

Cognitive strategy includes six sub-strategies as shown in Table 4. The results suggest that a majority of the students are aware of their use of cognitive strategy. Sub-strategies such as trying to talk like native English speakers, practicing sounds of English, and saying or writing new English words several times received 3.45, 3.25, and 3.16 respectively. It is also interesting to note that the participants did not use English words in different ways, or start conversations, with items scoring only 2.95 and 2.91 respectively, and neither read for pleasure in English, which had a 2.54. This alludes that the learners never read English for pleasure nor used the target language with their friends or speak outside the classroom. English is probably only used in situations where the other speaker does not speak their first language. Overall, the data showed the average use of cognitive strategy is 3.04.

Table 5. Compensation strategy items.

Items	Strongly disagree	disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	4	6	5	9	2.79
I read English without looking up every new word.	1	11	4	8	2.79
When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	1	3	5	14	3.39

I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	1	6	7	9	3.04
I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	1	5	9	9	3.08
					3.01

The compensation strategy includes five sub-strategies as shown in Table 5. Table 5 shows that the use of compensation strategies by the learners is not as high as the memory strategy. The results indicate that a majority of the learners agree using gestures when they cannot think of any word in English to get the message across. Gesture is another form of non-verbal communication used to get the meaning across in times of vocabulary shortage. So, when learners are short of words while communicating to other foreign speakers, gesture is one way to get the message across. Furthermore, the overall average use of compensation strategy as shown in Table 5 is 3.01. This draws the assumption that students are aware to the use of strategies in their language learning.

Table 6. Meta-cognitive strategy items.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	0	3	10	11	3.33
I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	0	5	6	13	3.33
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	0	4	11	8	3.17
I have clear goals for improving my English learning skills.	0	2	6	16	3.58
I think about my progress in learning English.	1	3	9	10	3.22
					3.72

The meta-cognitive strategies include five sub-strategies as shown in Table 6. The results show that a majority of the sample are aware of their use of this strategy. The sub-strategy such as "I have clear goals for improving my English learning skill" obtained the highest score of 3.58, followed by, "I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English" and "I pay attention when someone is speaking English" at 3.33 respectively. Then, it is followed by "I think about my progress in learning English" at 3.22 and "I try to find out how to be a better learner of English" at 3.17, which is the lowest.

What can be gathered from the results is that learners are motivated to learn the target language because they have clear goals for improving their English skills. However, they do not try to find ways to be better English learners but rather depend solely on their teachers. It could be that students view teachers as a complete source of knowledge, which is probably expected, given the findings from Foley's (2005) and de Segovia and Hardison's (2009) studies, where teachers are reported to assume an authoritative figure in the language classroom. When compared with the rest of the strategies, the use of meta-cognitive strategies have the highest score, at 3.72, among all the learning strategies. This result parallels Hong-Nam and Leavelle's (2006) study.

Table 7. Affective strategy items.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	2	4	6	12	3.17

I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid on making error.	0	6	10	8	3.08
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	1	8	2	13	3.13
I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	0	4	8	11	3.30
I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	2	6	7	9	2.96
					3.12

The affective strategies include five sub-strategies as shown in Table 7. It illustrates that the highest rating sub- strategy is "I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English" at 3.30, followed by "I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English" at 3.17, and "I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English" at 3.1. "I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid on making error" at 3. 8 and "I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English" has the lowest at 2.96. Perhaps the reason why the use of affective strategies scored a lower mean score is due to cultural expectations in learning. Students may feel uncomfortable with communicative aspects of language, and thus become afraid of making mistakes and making a fool of themselves in front of their friends and teachers. It is quite possible that students find it difficult to use the target language because of their familiarity of the English language classroom. As mentioned earlier, Thai English classrooms are typically teacher-centered (Foley, 2005); hence, when students are expected to participate, they may perceive this novel experience anxiously (Wong, 2004).

Table 8. Social strategies items.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Rating Average
I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	0	4	8	12	3.33
I practice English with other students.	2	2	7	13	3.29
I ask for help from English speakers.	0	3	11	10	3.29
I ask questions in English.	2	7	3	12	3.04
I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	1	5	10	8	3.04
					3.19

The social strategies include five sub-strategies as shown in Table 8. Based on the given table, majority of the students commonly used strategies such as "I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk" at 3.33, followed by "I practice English with other students" and "I ask for help from English speakers" at 3.29 respectively. In addition, social sub strategies such as "I ask questions in English" and "I try to learn about the culture of English speakers" has the lowest percentage at 3.04 respectively. From the results, we could assume that students are indeed motivated. Nonetheless, they doubt their capabilities to interact with speakers of English. Furthermore, they have no interest in learning about the culture of English language speakers. This may be due to students' instrumental motivation towards the English language. The culture of the English speakers may also be irrelevant to the learning needs of the students (Ding & Teo, 2014).

Type of Students and Language Leaning Strategies

The second objective of this study is to determine whether more proficient students used more language learning strategies when compared to less proficient ones. The sample's proficiency was determined based on scores from course work, midterm, and final exams. The scores were then compared to individual student's completed questionnaire responses. The findings are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Students' use of strategies by academic status.

Academic Status	Memory Strategy		Cognitive Strategy		Compensation Strategy		Meta-cognitive Strategy		Affective Strategy		Social Strategy	
A	5 (83%)	6	5 (83%)	6	5 (83%)	6	4 (67%)	6	2 (33%)	6	4 (67%)	6
B	7 (58%)	12	2 (40%)	5	4 (80%)	5	3 (60%)	5	1 (20%)	5	2 (40%)	5
C			3 (43%)	7	6 (86%)	7	3 (43%)	7	4 (57%)	7	4 (57%)	7
D	-	-	2 (50%)	4	-	4	-	4	-	4	-	4
F	-	-	1 (25%)	4	-	4	2 (50%)	4	2 (50%)	4	2 (50%)	4

Table 10 provides the raw frequency and percentage of students using different types of language learning strategies based on their self-report through the completed SILL questionnaire. As observed, a majority of the students who were in the 'A' range academic status used a range of different strategies. This observation may parallel that of Purdie, Harrie, and Douglas' (1996) study where high-achieving students were found to view learning as a complex cognitive process, in that learning can be facilitated through different learning strategies. Learning, from this point of view, is also not considered a process of simply gathering and storing information.

What is interesting to note is that less of the A-achieving students rely on affective strategies, while about half to more than half of the 'D' and 'F' range students use them. In Nisbet, Tindall and Arroyo's (2005) study on Chinese students, it was found that affective strategies are positively correlated with higher language proficiency. Though Table 8 indicated a positive disposition towards the use of affective strategies. Nonetheless, results contradictory when compared with the academic status of each student, as there is a low percentage of use by the sample.

Conclusion

Since this study was conducted on a specific sample in mind, the results may not be generalizable despite a quantitative approach being used. Furthermore, the results corroborate other studies that indicate that Asian students do not rely solely on memory-type strategies (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). What the results allow is an opportunity for the teacher-researcher to formulate an intervention plan. When teachers take into consideration students' academic welfare, they are actually honing their teaching competencies. Hayes (2010) talks about the relevance and necessity for teachers to have a 'teaching competency', which is contextual knowledge about the learning environment. No longer are teachers and students bound to essentialist notions of language learning since current approaches have deemed learners as having the capabilities for learning processes which may not necessarily be common to their cultural or educational background. This notion has been evidenced in studies on language learning strategies as well. For instance, the Australian sample in Purdie, Hattie, and Douglas' (1996) study were found to view learning as performance of academic tasks through memory and storing of information, which contrasted their Japanese counterpart who viewed learning as personal fulfillment. Hence, though language learning strategies may possibly be unfamiliar grounds to Asian students, as explained by Campbell and Li (2007), students' unfamiliarity should not be taken as an obstacle to the integration of language learning strategies in the learning context.

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