

AN INVESTIGATION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY MATTAYOM THREE STUDENTS : THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

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Abstract

This study explored the use of language learning strategies among Mattayom three students at Srisuksa school, Roi-Et province. The sample of this study consisted of sixty students in the Regular Program and sixty students in the English Program selected by purposive sampling. Questionnaires, think aloud protocols, and in-depth interviews were used as research tools. The validity was field tested. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability of the SILL questionnaires was .95. Two high proficiency students and two low proficiency students in each program were asked to participate in the think aloud protocol and the in-depth interview. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (including frequency distribution, percentage distribution, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation), and t – test; whereas data for the qualitative tools were analyzed by categorization and content analysis. The results indicate that there are no significant differences between strategies used by RP students and EP students at a confidence level of $p < .05$.

1. Introduction

It would be truly beneficial if there could be possible ways to enhance English language learning of those who live in countries where English is not commonly used. English is taught as a foreign language in countries where there are few opportunities to use the target language (Oxford, 1990). In Thailand, there have been attempts to establish schools that provide instruction in English (Ministry of Education, 2005). Nevertheless, those English-medium schools are not yet operational throughout the country (Ministry of Education, 2005). Yet there might be alternative opportunities for children who live in EFL countries to find other possible ways of reaching successful levels of language proficiency. Oxford (1990) states that students who employ appropriate kinds of language learning strategies could achieve language competence. Moreover, some research has indicated positive correlation between frequent use of language learning strategies and language proficiency (Foong & Goh, 1997; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000; Bruen, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Land & Oxford, 2003).

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2. Literature Review

This section reviews theoretical and empirical research in the field of language learning strategies. The concept of learner-centered education should not be viewed as static since it has been changed over time.

2.1. Student-Centered Approach

Students should be encouraged to develop themselves as life-long learners in order to keep learning throughout their lives. Students construct knowledge by themselves (Richardson, 1997). Students learn from what is meaningful to them, based on active participation in the teaching and learning processes (Nunan, 1988). Additionally, applying this concept to foreign language learning by providing students with more options of language learning strategy choices would expand students' capacities for learning (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Furthermore, to enable students to be life-long learners, students need to be supported in learning how to learn, as an old proverb says "Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish, and he eats for a life-time" (Wenden, 1985).

2.2. New Programs of Learning and Teaching in Thailand

The Ministry of Education (2005) allows Thai school to provide the English program for young Thais who want to experience and gain subject knowledge by means of English instruction. This is called the "English Program (EP)". This program is different from the Regular Program (RP), which offers English only as a subject being studied. The tuition fee for the EP is much higher than for the traditional one. However, parents who send their children to the EP hope that they will become proficient and efficient in both content and

English. These two programs are somewhat different as the following description illustrates.

Regular Program: The core curriculum for English language learning is required for all levels of instruction. The aims of teaching English are to provide the ability to use English for communication, to understand foreign cultures, to use language for studying other subjects, and to possess the skills to encounter different situations within and outside educational institutions, communities and societies. (Basic education curriculum B.E. 2544, Ministry of Education).

English Program: According to the Ministry of Education, teaching and learning in English is an optional form of education. Schools and institutes can manage and provide teaching and English in some subjects. The ultimate goal is to improve the English proficiency of Thai students. The English Program at the secondary level is defined as using English in all subjects, except for Thai language and social studies, which related to Thai traditions, culture, and law (Ministry of Education, 2005).

2.3. Language Learning Strategies

According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the students to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. There are six main types of strategies. Oxford's (1990) classification is regarded as "perhaps the most comprehensive classification to date" (Ellis, 1994). The direct strategies are subdivided into three groups: Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, and Compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are also subdivided into three groups: Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies, and Social strategies.

Memory Strategies: As foreign language students have problems remembering large amount of information, this group of strategies involves making associations or creating mental linkage.

Cognitive strategies: This group of strategies is involved with the manipulation and transformation of information. It requires students to analyze, summarize, reason, recognize, use formulas, and practice naturally.

Compensation strategies: This group of strategies will aid students in overcoming limitations in using a language despite having limited knowledge in the target language. It involves making educated guesses, using synonyms, giving non-linguistic clues, coining words, asking for help, and switching to the mother tongue.

Metacognitive strategy: Employing these strategies, students will know how to set goals and plan for their own learning. Then students will be able to employ actions in order to reach a targeted goal. Besides, students will learn to monitor and

evaluate their progress during their learning process.

Affective strategies: Negative feelings can impede success. These strategies involve emotions, motivation, and attitudes. These strategies would help students raise their self-esteem by encouraging themselves, trying to relax when they are anxious, and trying to take risks in producing language.

Social strategies: It is important for language students to use their language. Using the target language with more proficient language users and peers will help students practice the language. It will provide the chance for students to ask for more clarification and verification. Besides, being aware of other's thoughts and feelings could make students become more empathic. This would include trying to develop cultural understanding as well.

The entire language learning strategies system categorized by Oxford (1990), including the six main strategy groups and nineteen strategies sets, is presented in the diagram below.

Diagram 1: Language Learning Strategies of Oxford (1990)

Language Learning Strategies			
Direct Strategies		Indirect Strategies	
Memory Strategies	A) Creating mental linkages B) Applying mental images and sounds C) Reviewing well D) Employing action	Metacognitive Strategies	A) Centering your learning B) Arranging and planning your learning C) Evaluating your learning
Cognitive Strategies	A) Practicing B) Receiving and sending message C) Analyzing and reasoning D) Creating structures for input and output	Affective Strategies	A) Lowering your anxiety B) Encouraging yourself C) Taking your emotional temperature
Compensation Strategies	B) Overcoming limitations A) Guessing intelligently	Social Strategies	A) Asking questions B) Cooperating with others C) Empathizing with others

2.4. Previous Research

The early concept of language learning viewed learning as an active,

mental, learner-constructed process, or emphasized it as cognitive abilities (Rausch, 2000). Moreover, early research in LLS were mostly concerned with what good

learners could do to make themselves successful (Rubin, 1975). Later searchers have focused on the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Bialystok, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Green & Oxford, 1995). A later concept of strategies has also focused on learners as individuals who can take charge of their own learning and becoming autonomous by using learning strategies (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Bialystok, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Green & Oxford, 1995). Moreover, strategy use is affected by some factors (Vann & Abraham, 1990). Psychological type, such as personality (Ehrnan & Oxford, 1989), motivation (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), and cognitive styles (Littlemore, 2001) have a strong influence affecting strategy use.

Finally, several researchers (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kupper, 1985; O'Malley, 1987; Tang & Moore, 1992) have investigated the effects of strategy training on learners. For instance, Tang and Moore (1992) discovered that Metacognitive strategy training enhanced comprehension ability. However, no research has been done to

compare the use of language learning strategies between RP and EP students.

3. Research Questions

To provide knowledge in this field, two research questions were formed.

- 3.1. What are the language learning strategies employed by Mattayom three students at Strisuksa school?
- 3.2. Are there any differences between language learning strategies used by Mattayom three RP students and EP students at Strisuksa school?

4. Conceptual Framework of the Study

To answer these research questions, Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies was adopted and three research tools were used: questionnaires, think aloud, and in-depth interviews were used for collecting data from selected students in the RP and the EP. Then language learning strategies of both groups were compared. (See Diagram 2.)

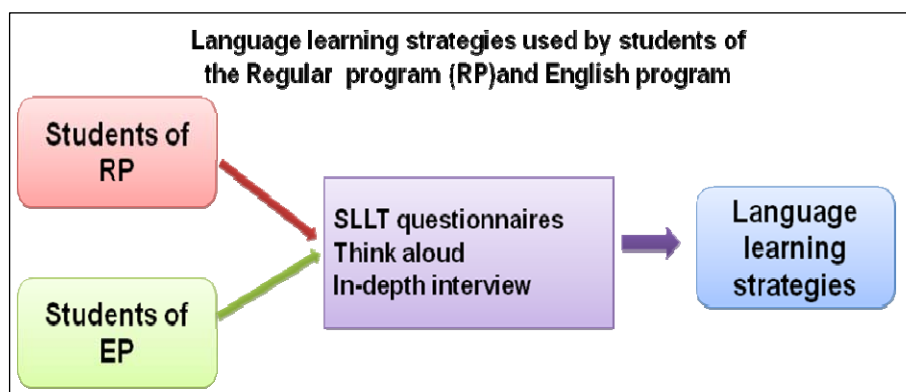


Diagram 2: Conceptual Framework of the study

5. Limitations of the Study

This study focused on only two groups of students in one context and participants were selected by simple random sampling. Therefore, the results from this study can only be generalized carefully with students who have the same level of education and similar backgrounds.

6. Research Method

6.1. Population and Sample

There were 697 students in Mattayom three at Strisuksa school. The

subjects consisted of 637 RP students and 60 EP students. Sixty of the RP students were selected by simple random sampling while all sixty of the EP were included in the sample for this study. Then both groups were divided into two groups: high and low English ability, based on Strisukasa school's mid-term and mid-year English examination scores (2007). All 120 students were asked to answer the SILL questionnaires. Two each of the high and low English ability groups in each program were asked to participate in the think aloud and in-depth interviews. All students in the RP were girls, while two of the EP were girls and two were boys. (See Table 1).

Table 1: High and Low English Ability Student Groups

	RP		EP	
Students	QT	TA & I	QT	TA & I
High	30	2	30	2 (one boy & one girl)
Low	30	2	30	2 (one boy & one girl)
Total	60		60	

Notes: QT= Questionnaires, TA = Think aloud, I = In-depth interview

Strisuksa school was formerly known as a girls' public high school in Roi-Et province. Both the RP and the EP are secondary education programs. There are 260 male students and 3,322 female students, totaling 3,582 students. Students usually study eight periods a day; there are 50 minutes in each period. In addition, EP students have to attend Saturday classes which Thai instruction is used as a means of communication. The Saturday classes offer four subjects. There are seven Western teachers and one Cambodian teacher. Three teachers teach one subject, and four teachers teach two subjects.

6.2. Instruments

Three research instruments were employed in this research in order to obtain comprehensive data. They were

questionnaires, think aloud, and in-depth interviews. Both think aloud and in-depth interviews were employed in order to gain more detailed information which could not be obtained directly from the questionnaire.

6.2.1. Questionnaire-Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL): SILL version 7.0 was developed by Oxford (1990). Oxford and Burry-stock (1995) claim one of the most appropriate ways to assess the use of language learning strategies is to use a summative rating scale, also known as a questionnaire. The SILL has two versions, version 5.0 is for native speakers of English learning foreign languages and version 7.0 is for ESL/EFL students. Moreover, the SILL was translated into more than 20 languages and is used widely

in research around the world. The reliability and validity of SILL is high (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Its Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients range from 0.86-0.96. MacMillian and Shumacher (2001) state that strong

measurement increases confidence in a finding. The Thai version which was field tested (Kaotsombut, 2003), was used in this study. SILL uses a five-point Likert Scale and the range of frequency is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: SILL Range of Frequency

Frequency	Level	Average score
Always or almost always used	High	4.5-5.0
Usually used		3.5-4.4
Sometimes used	Medium	2.5-3.4
Generally used		1.5-2.4
Never or almost never used	Low	1.0-1.4

The researcher explained the objectives and the research questions to the participants. If the participants agreed to take part in the research, then think aloud and in-depth interviews were scheduled. They did think aloud and were interviewed in-depth individually in a classroom after school.

6.2.2. Think aloud: Oxford (1990) stated that students can report their use of language leaning strategies while performing a task. Students were asked to tell what happened in their head while they were doing English language tasks involving each language skill. Materials used in these tasks were selected based on students' grade level, and their teachers helped to select some materials. (See Appendix A).

6.2.3. In-depth interviews: When participants engaged in think aloud tasks, in-depth interviews were conducted. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions to allow respondents to fully explain their strategies used. For instance, they were asked "What is the main idea of this paragraph?" "How do you know the meaning of this word/sentence?", "What clues help you to understand?" Brief notes

were made about language leaning strategies used during this process. Questions were asked later if the issues were not clarified immediately. Furthermore, students were free to speak either Thai or English, as they desired. The EP students used English in the think aloud and in-depth interviews. The RP students used Thai during their interviews.

Both think aloud and in-depth interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately and were later analyzed on the same day.

7. Data Analysis

Data from the SILL questionnaires were analyzed by descriptive statistics (including mean and standard deviation) and t-test. (See Table 3 and 4). The collected data were transcribed and analyzed simultaneously for both think aloud and in-depth interviews. Then they were grouped according to the categories classified by Oxford (1990).

8. Results and Discussions

This section is divided into three parts: summary of language learning strategies used by all students (both RP and

EP), the differences in using those language learning strategies, and examples of the language learning strategies used.

8.1. Language Learning Strategies Used by All Students (both RP and EP)

The present study found a high reliability ($\alpha = 0.95$) in the SILL. Of the

120 questionnaires distributed, 116 questionnaires were returned. Only 107 sets of returned questionnaires were analyzed. It showed that Mattayom three students in both the RP and the EP at Strisuksa school employed overall strategy use at a medium level. That is, they sometimes used six learning strategy groups. (See table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of Language Learning Strategies Used by All Mattayom Three Students at Strisuksa school ($N = 107$)

Rank Order	Language Learning Strategies	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's Alpha	Level
1	Metacognitive strategies	3.34	0.74	0.95	Medium
2	Compensation strategies	3.16	0.70	0.95	Medium
3	Social strategies	3.07	0.73	0.95	Medium
4	Affective strategies	3.06	0.62	0.95	Medium
5	Cognitive strategies	2.97	0.67	0.95	Medium
6	Memory strategies	2.95	0.60	0.95	Medium
Overall average		3.09	0.67	0.95	Medium

By ranking, they most often used Metacognitive strategies and followed by Compensation strategies, Social strategies, Affective strategies, Cognitive strategies, and Memory strategies.

The present findings are inconsistent with Oxford (1990) who found that Social strategies were the least used strategy. In addition, they are incongruent with Politzer and McGroarty's (1985) study which discovered that Asian students preferred Memory strategies to Social strategies. According to the findings, English teachers should train their students to use these strategies appropriately and as frequently as possible. This is because Oxford (1990) indicates that students should be trained to use many strategies to learn English in order to improve their English proficiency so that they can learn more effectively. For this reason, teachers should know what strategies are preferred by their students

and design strategy instruction suitable for them.

8.2. The Difference in Using those Language Learning Strategies by All Students (both RP and EP)

Table 4 shows that the mean scores of overall strategies used by EP students is higher than that of RP students. These findings indicate that RP and EP students sometimes used language learning strategies; however, there was no significant difference between the two study programs at a confidence level of $p < 0.5$. In comparing the preferred strategy groups, RP students and EP students most often used *Metacognitive strategies*. Moreover, RP least often used Cognitive strategies, while EP students least often used Memory strategies.

Table 4: Comparing the Implementation of the Six Strategy Groups between Regular Program Students and English Program Students ($N = 107$)

Strategy Groups	Regular Program				English Program				t	df	p
	M	SD	RO	α	M	SD	RO				
1. Metacognitive	3.23	0.72	1	.95	3.46	0.75	1	1.64	113	0.98	
2. Compensation	2.95	0.62	4	.95	3.41	0.70	2	3.73	110	0.26	
3 Social	2.99	0.68	3	.95	3.17	0.78	3	1.31	111	0.23	
4. Affective	3.01	0.58	2	.95	3.13	0.67	4	1.05	113	0.16	
5. Cognitive	2.84	0.63	6	.95	3.12	0.70	5	2.17	110	0.52	
6. Memory	2.88	0.57	5	.95	3.05	0.62	6	1.42	111	0.35	

Notes: RO = Rank order and α = Cronbach's Alpha

8.3. Some Examples of the Language Learning Strategies Used by All Students (both

RP and EP)

According to the results of the finding 2, there was no significant difference in strategy use between the two study programs, so all strategies explicitly used by both groups were categorized under the six sub-categories. Two main categories emerged from the data. They were direct strategies and indirect strategies. The results reveal that all three sub-categories of direct strategies (*Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, and Compensation strategies*) were employed by students, as well as all three sub-categories of indirect strategies (*Metacognitive strategies, Affective strategies, and Social strategies*). These categories and their sub-categories were representative of the main English language learning strategies used by RP and EP students.

The participants areas follows; (1) a high achieving student in the Regular Program (HR) and (2) EP (HE), (3) a low achieving student in the RP (LR), and (4) EP (LE) expressed their opinion that language learning strategies helped them understand English. The RP group could not communicate in English, so they used Thai. Their quotes have been translated into English. On the other hand, the EP group could communicate in English, so they used English. Their comments are provided verbatim from the transcripts.

8.3.1 Memory strategies:

Participants retrieved information more easily by creating mental images for words or acting out in order to remember those words. Moreover, Memory strategies helped participants link one concept to another. (See below).

HR2: *Google is a website that can be used to search for information?*

P: *What is Google?*

HR2: *a web engine.*

P: *How did you know?*

HR2: *I've used it before.*

P: *Can you explain a sentence for me please?*

HR2: *Something about how to use Google?*

According to the qualitative results above, a high achieving student from the EP could make a relationship between

what he already knew and new things in an English listening task.

P: Why have you divided your writing in your paragraph?

HE1: Because it easy to read.

P: Why do you think it easy to read?

HE1: It's not mix when you want know about my father you look another paragraph when you want another you can find it easy.

P: Where did you get this technique from?

HP1: From Thai subject.

Furthermore, a high achieving student in the EP was able to use a strategy

that he learned from another subject to apply to his English writing.

P: What about "reverence"?

HE1: I don't know. It should mean "Kor-ka-ma"

P: So, what technique did you use to understand this paragraph?

HE1: I related it to my old background knowledge. Moreover, the word river goddess indicates that we should do something to show respect to her.

8.3.2 Cognitive strategies: Participants employed direct manipulation of the language through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, and reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas, practice in

naturalistic settings, and practice structures and sounds formally. When they were asked to explain the reasons, they used reasoning and analysis. (See below).

P: What is a meaning of visitor?

HR2: Someone who come to visit.

P: Why?

HR2: Generally, words that end with -or or -er are usually a person.

The finding above shows that a high achieving RP student was able to find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts. Then she was able to guess that

words ending with -or or -er indicate a person.

A high achieving EP student was able to find the meaning of an English word as well.

HE1: The hardest word is increasingly.

P: And how could you know what does it mean in the sentence?

HE1: Increase means more. So, I think is more.

P: Have you heard of the word increasingly before?

HE1: I heard only increase in Mathematics.

P: How do you know that they have the same meaning?

HE1: Add -ly to the last and it will means "adjective" not verb.

The descriptive data for Cognitive strategies employed by both high ability groups show that he could succeed in finding the meaning of unfamiliar words.

8.3.3 Compensation strategies: Participants used compensation strategies

P: Why did you choose B for the forth item?

HR1: A bus can't be in a room.

P: What about "cultivation"?

HR1: Farming, because it's after cultivation.

P: Could you tell me what the passage was about?

LE2: It's about the concert of Academy fantasia then the player has to fight for her dream.

P: How can you make sure that they have equal meaning?

HE1: I think in other word mean "elated" and "happy time" have the same meaning, for sure.

The descriptive details above show that high achieving students of the RP and EP could make intelligent guesses when having limited knowledge in the language. Besides, a low achieving student in the EP could use compensation strategies to help facilitate his communication.

to make up for inadequate knowledge, so these strategies enable them to communicate. This group of strategies involves guessing from the context in listening and reading, using synonyms, and using gestures. (See below).

8.3.4 Metacognitive strategies: Participants found opportunities to use the language, found a way to improve the language use such as setting short-term and long-term goals, paid attention when someone spoke the language, and tried to improve the language use through learning from their mistakes.

P: Do you find opportunities to use the English language?

HE2 (female): I chat with foreigners. Besides, I learn English from a website.

P: How do you try to improve your English?

HE2: I watch sound-track movies.

P: Do you find opportunities to practice it?

HE2: Yes, I read comic books in English?

P: Do you find opportunities to practice English?

HR1: Sometimes.

P: How?

HR1: Sing a song.

P: How do you plan to study English?

LR1: I try to review my English lesson at least once a week.

P: How do you plan to improve your English?

LR1: I want to have a better score on the school exam.

Students planned to have good scores and tried to have opportunities to use language by themselves. Watching movies and singing English songs are examples. These lead to appreciation of English.

8.3.5 *Affective strategies:*

Participants felt English was fun and they sang English songs so they gained positive emotions, motivation, and attitudes towards English.

P: Why do you like English?

HE2: Because it's fun and I can use English to communicate with foreigners.

Both an EP student and a RP student tried to find a way to practice their English in their free time. They felt English was fun and tried to speak with foreigners. This helped them to engage in English contexts automatically whether they set their goals for language learning or not.

8.3.6 *Social strategies:*

Participants asked questions, asked for clarification and verification, talked to native speakers and peers in English, and asked for help when doing a task.

P: How can you make sure that you will answer everything to the question?

HE1: Maybe I'll ask my friends or look in the dictionary.

P: And then did you work by yourself?

LE2: Not all I ask my friend help some word that I cannot writing.

A high achieving student in the EP needed help from others when having problems in English. The student chose to

ask friends and consulted a dictionary in order to know the meaning of some words.

P: What was the listening passage about?

HR1: Can I listen to it one more time please?

In addition, a high achieving student in the RP asked for help when she was obstructed in understanding a listening passage. In other word, it can be similar to asking another speaker to slow down or say it again.

students. One activity may lead to more than one sub-category, talking with foreigners and singing English songs were examples. Thus, as professional teachers, English teachers should provide tasks that involve more sub-categories in order to save time, but also offer experience in using more language learning strategies.

To sum up, all sub-categories were helpful and useful for either RP or EP

9. Recommendations for further studies

Some recommendations for further study are provided.

1. *Different Contexts:* This investigation was conducted in one context, Strisuksa school. Further studies should investigate language learning strategies between RP students and EP students in other contexts, such as schools in Bangkok and in remote provinces, international students and regular students at the university level or at the vocational level.

2. *Other Research Tools:* This study employed three research tools: the SILL questionnaire of Oxford (1990), think aloud protocol, and in-depth interview; so further studies might be done by employing other methods, such as observation and diary journal writing.

3. *Experiment:* Language learning strategies must be taught explicitly, so experiment studies may be conducted for

further study. Materials and tasks should be designed to provide a wide range of Language Learning Strategies use.

10. Conclusion

Mattayom three students at Strisuksa school employ a wide range of overall language learning strategies at a moderate level. The most often used strategies are in the group of *Metacognitive strategies*, followed by *Compensation strategies*, *Social strategies*, *Affective strategies*, and *Cognitive strategies*. *Memory strategies* were the least often used. The most often used strategies put the most emphasis on thinking about progress in learning, finding out how to be better students, and paying attention when someone speaks English. Both the RP students and EP students generally employed all six groups of language learning strategies.

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