AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE FIRST YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: The study investigates language learning strategies (LLSs) employed by first year English major students at School of Foreign Languages (SFL), Thai Nguyen University (TNU) and examines differences in the use of LLSs among students with different language learning experiences measured by years of learning English. Two data collection instruments used are a questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990) and an interview. The study was conducted with the participation of 100 first year English major students at SFL, TNU. The results of the study indicate that all the LLSs were used by the 100 participants. In addition, there were a number of variations in the employment of LLSs among students with different language learning experiences. It was found that the more experienced students used LLSs much more frequently than the less experienced ones.

Key words: Language learning, language learning experiences, language learning strategies

1. Introduction

In the era of integration and globalization, English has become an international means of communication. English has been the dominant language in the fields of education, commerce, tourism and many other aspects of life. In the field of education, English has been taught as one of the compulsory subjects at all levels of education in many countries (Mai Lan Anh, 2010). Due to the importance of English, plenty of research on English language teaching and learning has been conducted.

In Vietnam, English has affirmed its important position in different fields, especially in education. However, most Vietnamese students learn English with the aim of finishing the course or passing examinations. Few students find English interesting and learn English because their interest because English is so difficult for them to learn and to love. According to an investigation of Ho Chi Minh City Department of Science and Technology, 50 percent of university graduates do not meet the requirements of English language skill and only 3 percent of Vietnamese students have obtained international English certificates. One of the main reasons for this is their lack of English language learning strategies. An abundance of research on language learning strategies, therefore, have been carried out and a number of suggestions have been given (Le Thanh Hoang (1999), Mai Lan Anh (2010), Mai Dang Phuong (2012)). However, none of them was done at School of Foreign Language (SFL), Thai Nguyen University (TNU). This study is, therefore, aimed at answering the following questions:

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1. What English language learning strategies are frequently employed by the first year English major students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University?

2. What are the differences in the students' use of English language learning strategies due to English learning experience?

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of language learning strategies

There have been numerous definitions of language learning strategies by different researchers. According to Oxford, language learning strategies are "mental steps or operation that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their effort to do so" (Oxford, 1990, p. 7). O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) defined language learning strategies as "special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information". Language learning strategies are "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieve and use of information…; specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to situation" (Oxford (1990), p. 1). The definition by Oxford (1990) is used in the current study.

2.2. Classification of language learning strategies

In Rubin's (1987) viewpoint, there were three types of language learning strategies which are learning strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies. These types of learning strategies make direct or indirect contribution to learner's learning process.

The most notable classification of language learning strategies was given by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford, there are 62 strategies which are divided into two main categories, direct and indirect. Direct strategies consist of three subtypes of strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. Direct and indirect strategies work together and assist language learners in different ways. While direct strategies help learners store, recover information and even produce language, indirect strategies support and manage language learning strategies without direct engagement.

2.3. Studies on language learning strategy

2.3.1. Studies on language learning strategy employment

Bremner (1999) conducted a study in order to study the language learning strategies used by a group of Hong Kong learners. The participants of the study were 149 students who were attending a language and communication skill course at the City University of Hong Kong. The researcher used a fifty-item questionnaire adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) as a data collection instrument. The result showed a medium level of strategies use by learners. In addition, compensation and metacognitive strategies were used most frequently while memory strategies were least frequently used.

Ratana (2007) investigated the English language problems and learning strategies of thirty Thai students of Mahidol University. A questionnaire modified from Oxford's (1990) SILL was used as the instrument to collect the data for the research. The study result showed a

medium frequency use of strategies among participants. The thirty Thai students used metacognitive the most frequently but in medium range, and compensatory strategies the least frequently.

Dhanapala (2007) explored the differences in language learning strategy use between Japanese and Sri Lankan advanced English language students. The three data collection instruments were a sixty-item strategy questionnaire modified from Oxford's SILL, a background questionnaire, and an English proficiency test. It was indicated from the study result that Sri Lankan students employed strategies more often than the Japanese ones. The Sri Lankan students gave the most preference to metacognitive strategies followed by cognitive strategies and memory strategies. On the other hand, the Japanese students used compensation strategies the most frequently and affective strategies the least.

It is indicated from the previous study that the most common data collection instrument was a strategy questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) SILL. The result of the studies revealed that most participants showed a medium frequency use of language learning strategies. In addition, the metacognitive strategies were the most frequently used. Compensation strategies were also mentioned as being used frequently, followed by social strategies and cognitive strategies.

2.3.2. Studies on the relationship between language learning experience and language learning strategy use

Purdie and Oliver (1999) carried out an investigation on language learning strategies employed by bilingual-aged children from three main cultural groups: Asian (predominantly Vietnamese or Chinese dialect speakers), European (children who spoke Greek and those who identified themselves as speakers of Macedonian), and speakers of Arabic. The instrument for collecting the data was a written questionnaire. The results pointed out that the students who had been in Australia for a longer period of time (three or less year and four or more) obtained significantly higher mean scores for Cognitive strategies and for Memory strategies. From the findings of the study, it could be concluded that experience in studying a language can affect the language learning strategy use.

Khamkhien did a research on the factors affecting language learning strategy used by Thai and Vietnamese EFL learners in 2010. The two main objectives of the study were to determine the effects of three factors (gender, motivation and experiences in studying English) on the choices of language learning strategies and to compare the roles of these factors and the pattern of language learning strategy used by Thai and Vietnamese students. The study was conducted with the participation of 136 undergraduate students (84 Thai and 52 Vietnamese students). All the participants had no more than 4-months experience abroad and had at least 6 years of experience of learning English. The researcher used the 80-item Strategy Inventory for Language Learning as the instrument of data collection. The result noted that along with motivation and gender, language learning experiences had significant effects on the learners' language learning employment. With regard to Thai students, cognitive and metacognitive categories were used more frequently by those with additional experiences in studying English in the language center and/or of going abroad than by the ones with no additional experiences.

For Vietnamese students, the t-test showed that the participants without additional experience reported higher use of memory category than the additional experience group.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the research were 100 first year English major students at SFL, TNU. At the time of gathering the data for this study, they were in the second semester of the school year 2017-2018. Most of them were from 18 to 20 years old and had learned English for 8 to 12 years. They had never been given any training in language learning strategies. The 20 students for the face-to-face interview were randomly chosen from the 150 participants.

3.2. The instruments

The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part I is designed by the researcher to collect the participants' background information. This part includes questions about name, age, gender, class, major, years of studying English. Part II is adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning devised by Oxford (1990) with a five point Likert-scale: (1) "never or almost true for me", (2) "usually not true of me", (3) "somewhat true of me", (4) "usually true of me", (5) "always or almost always true of me".

The interview asked the students questions about name, age, major, English learning duration and their perceptions about language learning strategies. The purpose of the interview is to have deeper understanding about the students' use of language learning strategies.

3.3. Procedure

Firstly, the questionnaire was distributed to the students by the researcher after an English lesson. The researcher was with students during the time they filled the questionnaire to give any necessary help such as explaining any new words or strategies in the questionnaire. It took about 15 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaire.

Secondly, based on the result of the questionnaire, the researcher chose 20 students to interview to check the reliability of the students' answer in the questionnaire. While answering the interview questions, the interviewees were given a copy of the questionnaire in order to make sure that they would not forget any strategies. Then the researcher compared their answers to the interview questions with their responses in the questionnaire.

The data elicited from the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22. Each question in the questionnaire was analyzed by counting its mean. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for categorizing and summarizing.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Discussion on the result of the questionnaire

4.1.1. Result of the questionnaire

Use of overall strategies

Table 1 reveals that the 100 participants used most strategy categories at "medium" level. As can be seen from it, social strategies were the most frequently used among the six categories (M = 3.49). The second highest rank was compensation strategies (M = 3.09), followed by memory strategies (M = 2.90), affective strategies (M = 2.88), metacognitive strategies (M = 2.86) and cognitive strategies (M = 2.69). It is easily recognized that all the strategy categories were in the same frequency level. No great disparity, therefore, could be seen among the columns representing the six strategy categories in the table.

Table 1. The subjects' responses to the use of the six strategy categories

Strategy Category	Number of students	Mean	SD	Rank order of the usage
A: Memory	100	2.90	.847	3
B: Cognitive	100	2.69	.886	6
C: Compensation	100	3.09	.920	2
D: Metacognitive	100	2.86	.841	5
E: Affective	100	2.88	.883	4
F: Social	100	3.49	.852	1

Use of individual language learning strategies

Table 2. Memory category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	100	2.35	.828
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	100	3.55	.835
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.	100	2.33	.930
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	100	2.13	.994
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	100	2.83	.821
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.	100	3.67	.876
7. I physically act out new English words.	100	3.22	.851
8. I review English lessons often.	100	3.81	.884
9. I remember new English words or phrase by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a screen sign.	100	2.25	.882

Table 2 shows that there were significant differences in the use of memory category (items 1 to 9). The strategies used the most often were *"I review English lessons often"* (M = 3.81), *"I use flashcards to remember new words"* (M = 3.67), and *"I use English words in a sentence so that I can remember them"* (M = 3.55). Five strategies were found to be in low use, item 1 (M = 2.35), item 3 (M = 2.33), item 4 (M = 2.13), item 9 (M = 2.25) and item 5 (M = 2.83).

Table 3. Cognitive Category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
10. I say or write new English words several times.	100	3.34	1.022
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.	100	2.67	.998
12. I practice the sounds of English.	100	3.55	.833
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.	100	2.13	.927
14. I start conversations in English	100	3.14	.948
15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or to go to movies spoken in English.	100	3.23	.834
16. I read for pleasure in English.	100	2.42	.838
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	100	1.88	.934
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.	100	2.25	.875
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	100	3.11	.933
20. I try to find patterns in English.	100	1.25	.987
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.	100	3.01	.998
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.	100	3.67	.911
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	100	2.05	.841.

Table 3 describes the means and standard deviations of cognitive strategies (items 10 to 23). As can be seen, the most frequently used strategy was item 22 - *"I try not to translate word for word"* (M = 3.67) followed by item 12 - *"I practice the sound of English"* (M = 3.55). The least frequently used strategies were item 20 - *"I try to find pattern in English"* (M = 1.25), item 17 - *"I write note, messages, letter and reports in English"* (M = 1.88), item 13 - *"I use the English words I know in different ways"* (M = 2.13), item 18 - *"I first skim an English passage then go back and read carefully"* (M = 2.25). The other strategies were used at medium level.

Table 4. Compensation Category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	100	3.23	.765
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	100	3.55	.898
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.	100	3.12	.875
27. I read English without looking up every new word.	100	2.87	.987
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	100	2.07	.766
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	100	3.67	.834

Table 4 gives the means and standard deviations of compensation strategies (items 24 to 29). Remarkable differences are found in the use of compensation strategies among the first year students. Four out of six items got mean scores higher than 3 while two others got mean

score lower than 3. Item 29 -*"If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing"* got the highest mean score (M = 3.67) followed by item 25 - "*When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures"* (M = 3.55). The two items with lowest mean scores were item 28 - *"I try to guess what other person will say next in English"* (M = 2.07) and item 27 - *"I read English without looking up every new word"*.

Table 5. Metacognitive Category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.	100	2.09	.785
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	100	2.67	.899
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	100	3.89	.874
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	100	2.86	.866
34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	100	3.25	.932
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.	100	3.45	.957
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	100	3.21	.923
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.	100	2.23	.982
38. I think about my progress in learning English.	100	2.05	.910

Table 5 describes the use of metacognitive strategies in learning English by the 100 participants. *"I pay attention when someone is speaking English"* (M = 3.89) was used the most frequently. *"I look for people I can talk to in English"* (M = 3.45) ranked the second place followed by *"I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English"* (M = 3.25) and *"I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English"* (M = 3.21). The least exploited strategy was *"I think about my progress in learning English"* (M = 2.05) and *"I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English"* (M = 2.09).

Table 6. Affective Category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	100	3.88	.900
40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	100	2.67	.909
41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	100	2.56	.800
42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	100	2.07	.887
43. I write own my feelings in a language learning diary.	100	2.56	.857
44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	100	3.52	.861

As can be seen from Table 6, item 39 – *"I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English"* received the highest mean score (M = 3.88). Item 44 – *"I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English"* got the second highest mean score (M = 3.52). The

strategy with the lowest mean score was item 44 – *"I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English"* (M = 2.07). The other strategies got mean scores from 2.56 to 2.67.

Table 7. Social Category descriptive statistics

Individual Strategy	N	MEAN	SD
45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	100	3.79	
46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	100	3.27	
47. I practice English with other students.	100	3.85	
48. I ask for help from English speakers.	100	3.28	
49. I ask questions in English.	100	3.72	
50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	100	3.05	

As can be seen from Table 7, mean scores of all social strategies were higher than 3. The most frequently exploited one is item 47 – *"I practice English with other students"* (M = 3.85) followed by item 45 - *"If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again"* (M = 3.79) and item 49 – *"I ask questions in English"* (M = 3.72). The mean scores of the other strategies ranged from 3.05 to 3.27.

Difference in the use of language learning strategies due to language learning experiences

The participants' language learning experience is measured based on numbers of years of learning English. From the students' answer in the questionnaire, they are divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 62 students who have learned English for 8 – 9 years. The second one included 38 students who have learned English for 10 – 12 years. The first one was classified as "less experienced" students while the second one was classified as "more experienced" students. Due to the time limitation, the researcher pointed out the effects of language learning experience on the overall use of language learning strategies by the less experienced and more experienced students.

Table 8. Overall strategy use by the less experienced and more experienced students

Strategy category	Less experienced students	More experienced students
	Mean	Mean
A: Memory	3.19	2.60
B: Cognitive	2.58	2.80
C: Compensation	2.96	3.22
D: Metacognitive	2.77	2.95
E: Affective	2.80	2.96
F: Social	3.15	3.83

As can be seen from Table 8, there were a number of differences between the use of language learning strategies by the more experienced and the less experienced students. The clearest difference is that the mean scores of 4 out of 5 categories by the more experienced students were higher than those by the less experienced ones. Therefore, it can be concluded

that the more experienced employed language learning strategies more frequently than the less experienced students. Second, for more experienced students, the social strategies ranked the first place (M = 3.83) followed by compensation strategies while for less experienced students, the memory strategies ranked the place (M = 3.19) followed by social strategies.

4.1.2. Discussion on the result of the questionnaire

The result of the current study revealed that the first year students at SFL, TNU were aware of the importance of learning strategies to the development of their English proficiency. The mean score of all the students' response is 3.00 pointed out that the participants used the language learning strategies at medium level. This result was similar to those of the previous studies by Bremner (1999) and Ratana (2007). In addition, the result showed the importance of the language learning strategies in students' process of learning English, which was similar to the result of the study conducted by Khamkhien (2010). Moreover, all strategy categories were used at medium level while some individual strategies of the categories were rated at low use or high use level, so there was not always a correspondence in the use of learning strategy categories and individual strategies. Regarding the use of the six strategy categories, the social strategies were used the most frequently, which was completely different from the result of the previous studies. The frequent use of the social strategies also revealed that students depended greatly on other people in their language learning and always wished to practice English with other people.

With regard to the effects of English learning experience on the language learning strategy use, the findings indicated that the more experienced students used most strategy categories more frequently than the less experienced ones. This might due to the fact that the more experienced participants had more chance to deal with learning strategies in their English learning process or they might have been taught the learning strategies by their teachers. This result was similar to that of Purdie and Oliver's (1999) study. The higher use of memory strategy by the less experienced students was the same as the findings of Khamkhien's (2010) study.

4.2. Discussion on the result of the interview

In the second part of the interview, the participants were asked questions about frequency of language learning strategies. The results of the interview then were compared to those collected in the questionnaire. It was found that students' answer to the interview questions matched the questionnaire's result. With regard to the frequently used strategies, most of the interviewees stated that English was really challenging to them, so they often reviewed English lessons to memorize and understand the lessons better. In addition, flashcards with lively and eye-catching pictures combining with the sentences with the new words were really useful for them to remember English words. Besides, due to their lack of vocabulary, they usually used words or phrases with the same meaning to regulate the flow of their talk. Especially, they paid a lot attention when listening to other people such as teachers or friends with the purpose of learning English from the speakers. Additionally, they did their best in finding methods that help their English better by asking for teachers' and friends' help, searching information on the Internet. Moreover, they were really into talking with other students in English to get peer correction. Whenever they felt stressed because of using English, they stopped and relaxed.

5. Recommendation and conclusion

The present research was carried out with the aim of finding out the language learning strategies applied by the first year English major students. The findings, therefore, could provide teachers with students' learning strategy preference so that the teachers could have suitable teaching methods and build up an effective plan to help them improve their English. For example, the students preferred the social strategies especially "practice English with other students", so the teachers should organized more group work and pair work activities in English lessons.

Firstly, as mentioned in the findings, the participants used language learning strategies at medium level. As the result, it is necessary for teachers to help their students, especially the first year ones to determine their strengths and weaknesses in learning English so that they can choose the suitable language learning strategies. Secondly, based on the results of the current study, teachers can decide if there is a need for providing their students with language learning strategies so that they can become more independent in learning English. Thirdly, the more experienced students have better knowledge of language learning strategies and are fond of group practice, so it is suggested for teachers to organize a forum in which students can share their learning strategies with their friends and learn other strategies from them as well. Fourthly, teachers should have good knowledge of their students' background such as learning style, learning experience, learning difficulties in order to choose the most effective teaching methods as well as language learning strategies. Finally, teachers should also evaluate the textbooks and other teaching materials being used to see whether there are enough language learning strategies included so that appropriate additions can be made.

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KHẢO SÁT CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC NGÔN NGỮ CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI KHOA NGOẠI NGỮ - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát chiến lược học ngôn ngữ được sử dụng bởi sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên và tìm ra sự khác biệt trong việc sử dụng chiến lược học ngôn ngữ của các sinh viên có kinh nghiệm học ngôn ngữ khác nhau dựa trên số năm học tiếng Anh của các sinh viên. Tác giả sử dụng hai công cụ thu thập số liệu là câu hỏi khảo sát chỉnh sửa từ mẫu kiểm kê dành cho chiến lược học ngôn ngữ của Oxford (1990) và phỏng vấn trực tiếp. Nghiên cứu được tiến hành với sự tham gia của 100 sinh viên năm thứ nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Kết quả của nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng sinh viên sử dụng tất cả các chiến lược học ngôn ngữ được đưa ra trong câu hỏi khảo sát. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra sự khác biệt trong việc sử dụng chiến lược học ngôn ngữ của sinh viên có kinh nghiệm học ngôn ngữ khác nhau. Cụ thể, nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng những sinh viên có thời gian học tiếng Anh lâu hơn hơn sử dụng chiến thuật học ngôn ngữ thường xuyên hơn các sinh viên có thời gian học tiếng Anh ít hơn.

Từ khóa: Học ngôn ngữ, kinh nghiệm học ngôn ngữ, chiến lược học ngôn ngữ