

Individual learner differences and language learning strategies

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate what language learning strategies were frequently used by English as a foreign language undergraduates at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand and the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies based on individual differences, including gender and self-rated English proficiency. The research was conducted with 392 Thai undergraduates through administering a quantitative method. Instruments for the study included a demographic questionnaire and Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. The findings revealed that research participants reported a low-to-medium use of language learning strategy. The strategies most used by learners were compensation strategies while the least were cognitive strategies. Regarding gender differences, female participants used the all six strategy categories more than did the male counterparts. The results also demonstrated that participants with different English proficiency employed learning strategies at different levels with a statistical significance at .05 in almost six strategies, except affective strategies. Research participants who were good at English most used metacognitive while social strategies were most used by participants with less English proficiency.

Keywords: Individual learner differences, language learning strategies.

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1. Introduction

It is believed that language learning varies depending on individual characteristics. Individual differences in terms of personality traits, attitude, motivation, and learning styles and strategies have played a critical role for successful second and foreign language acquisition. It is important to recognize different characteristics of language learners, since all these are useful for a language teacher to organize learning activities that advocate learners' preferred learning strategies.

Language learning strategies have been considered as tools for facilitating language learners to "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Obviously, learning strategies help increase the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Oxford, 1990). Language learning strategies, therefore, are able to make learners learn the target language more autonomously, independently, and continuously throughout their lifetime (Little, 1991). Oxford (1990: 1) also claimed that learning strategies are "tools for active, self-directed involvement,... Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence." It has also been recognized that strategies for learning the language give an influential power to learning. They are regarded as "an extremely powerful learning tool" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper & Russo, 1985; as cited in Griffiths, 2004).

This research aimed to explore what language learning strategies were frequently used by Thai undergraduates studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at Phranakhon Rajabhat University. Also, the study attempted to investigate the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies based on individual differences, including gender and self-rated English proficiency.

2. Method

Research questions

The study seeks to discover responses to the following three research questions:

1. What are the most and least used language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduates at Phranakhon Rajabhat University?
2. What are the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between female and male participants?
3. What are the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies by self-rated English proficiency applied to those of excellent, good, fair, and poor language learners?

3. Design of the study

3.1. Research setting

This research was carried out at Phranakhon Rajabhat University, in Bangkok Metropolis, in Thailand in the second semester of the academic year 2014 (from July 2015 to December 2015).

3.2. *Research participants*

392 participants were drawn from 3,292 Thai EFL undergraduates from different academic disciplines and five different faculties through stratified sampling technique. Out of all participants, there were 159 male (40.6%) and 233 female (59.4%) students. They all were non-native speakers of English with different English proficiency levels.

4. **Instrumentation**

A questionnaire was employed as an instrument in this quantitative study. It included two major parts. The first part was about demographic data of research participants: their age, gender, previous and present academic major, length of having studied English, and grade point average in their high school or vocational certificate level. The second part, Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version of Speakers of Other Languages Learning English (Oxford, 1990), was used in gathering a foundation of language learning strategies that students applied in their learning process. In this study, independent variables were gender and self-rated English proficiency. The dependent variables were the mean scores of the entire SILL items and the mean scores of the six different language learning categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

5. **Data analysis procedures**

Data was analysed through descriptive statistics, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and independent samples T-test to respond to the three research questions. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, mean, and standard deviations were applied to conduct demographic data analyses: gender and self-rated language proficiency and to investigate the overall strategy use, strategy use in each strategy category, and the most and least used strategy items. Oxford's assessment criteria were also used to examine the mean scores of frequency of strategy use. Mean scores ranged from 1.0-2.4 were considered as low use of strategy, the range of 2.5-3.4 as medium use, and the range of 3.5-5.0 as high use.

6. **Results**

Research question 1

What are the most and least used language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduates at Phranakhon Rajabhat University?

Participants were asked to rate the frequency of the six language learning strategy use with which they applied to their learning process using a five-point Likert-type scale, with one being the lowest frequency and five the highest.

Table 1. Frequency of overall six categories of strategy use

Language Learning Strategies	M	SD	Use
Memory strategies	2.49	0.548	low
Cognitive strategies	2.44	0.576	low
Compensation strategies	2.70	0.714	medium
Metacognitive strategies	2.58	0.722	medium
Affective strategies	2.62	0.750	medium
Social strategies	2.46	0.783	low
Total	2.55	0.557	medium

As shown in Table 1, the frequency of the overall strategy use ranged from low to medium. The research participants, in general, applied the six strategy categories to their learning process at a moderate level. With regard to the frequency of use of each strategy, the medium use of learning strategy included compensation strategies (M = 2.7, SD = .71), affective strategies (M = 2.62, SD = .75), and metacognitive strategies (M = 2.58, SD = .72) respectively. Memory, social, and cognitive strategies were used at a low level. Cognitive strategies were the least used category (M = 2.44, SD = .57). High range of strategy use was not found in any of the six strategy categories in this study. Regarding the scale of strategy use from the most use to the least use, the results showed that the most frequent use of strategy categories were If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again (M = 3.02, SD = 1.166), followed by I pay attention when someone is speaking English (M = 2.99, SD = 1.034), and To understand unfamiliar English words I make guesses (M = 2.93, SD = 1.057) respectively. The least frequent use of strategy categories were I write notes, messages, letters or reports in English (M = 1.95, SD = 0.831).

Table 2. Ten most frequently used strategies

Rank	Item*	Strategy	M	SD	Use
1 st	COM 25	When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.	3.11	1.100	medium
2 nd	SOC 45	If I don't understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	3.02	1.166	medium
3 rd	MET 32	I pay attention when someone is speaking English.	2.99	1.034	medium
4 th	COM 24	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.	2.93	1.057	medium
5 th	COG 15	I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English	2.86	0.972	medium
6 th	AFF 39	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	2.84	1.075	medium
6 th	AFF 40	I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.	2.84	1.058	medium
7 th	AFF 42	I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.	2.82	1.117	medium
8 th	COG 12	I practice the sounds of English.	2.81	0.979	medium
9 th	MET 33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	2.80	0.992	medium
10 th	COM 28	I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	2.77	1.031	medium
10 th	MET 30	I try to find as many way as I can to use my English.	2.77	0.939	medium

Note. * MEM = Memory strategies; COG = Cognitive strategies; COM = Compensation strategies; MET = Metacognitive strategies; AFF = Affective strategies; SOC = Social strategies

As seen in Table 2, the ten most preferred strategy included strategy items 25, 45, 32, 24, 15, 39, 40, 42, 12, 33, 28, and 30 respectively. All of which were in a medium range of use. The top most frequently used strategy item was in the compensation strategy category (item 25), When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.

Table 3. Ten least frequently used strategies

Rank	Item*	Strategy	M	SD	Use
1 st	COG 17	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	1.9 5	0.831	low
2 nd	COG 23	I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.	2.0 5	0.877	low
3 rd	MEM 6	I use flashcards to remember new English words.	2.1 7	0.837	low
3 rd	COG 16	I read for pleasure in English.	2.1 7	0.946	low
4 th	MET 34	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	2.1 9	0.909	low
5 th	COG 20	I try to find patterns in English.	2.2 1	0.938	low
6 th	MEM 7	I physically act out new English words.	2.2 4	0.907	low
7 th	MEM 8	I review English lessons often.	2.2 7	0.766	low
8 th	AFF 41	I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	2.3 1	1.078	low
9 th	SOC 48	I ask for help for English speakers.	2.3 2	1.083	low
10 th	COG 19	I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.	2.3 5	0.907	low

Note. * MEM = Memory strategies; COG = Cognitive strategies; COM = Compensation strategies; MET = Metacognitive strategies; AFF = Affective strategies; SOC = Social strategies

As shown in Table 3, the ten least frequently used strategies included strategy items 17, 23, 6, 16, 34, 20, 7, 8, 41, 48, and 19 respectively. All of which were used in a low range. The top least preferred strategy item was in the cognitive strategy category, I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.

Research question 2

What are the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies between female and male participants?

Table 4. Comparison of six strategy categories used by female and male participants

Language Learning Strategies	Gender				t	Sig.	*p<0.05
	Male		Female				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Memory strategies	2.44	0.551	2.52	0.545	-1.419	0.833	
Cognitive strategies	2.40	0.552	2.47	0.590	1.233	0.231	
Compensation strategies	2.67	0.754	2.71	0.687	-0.543	0.361	
Metacognitive strategies	2.45	0.704	2.67	0.722	-2.954*	0.578	
Affective strategies	2.46	0.725	2.74	0.743	-3.690*	0.571	
Social strategies	2.39	0.788	2.50	0.777	-1.457	0.793	

In a statistical comparison of use of strategy categories between male and female participants as exhibited in Table 4, the findings revealed that both groups used memory, cognitive, compensation, and social strategies at an equal level with a statistical significance at .05. Metacognitive and affective strategies were used by the female participants more than did the male counterparts with a statistical significance at .05. Male learners preferred to use compensation strategies most and social strategies least while female learners used affective strategies most and cognitive strategies least.

Research question 3

What are the significant differences in the use of language learning strategies by self-rated English proficiency applied to those of excellent, good, fair, and poor language learners?

Table 5. Comparison of self-rated English proficiency and language learning strategies

Language Learning Strategies	Self-Rated English Proficiency								F
	Excellent		Good		Fair		Poor		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Memory strategies	2.70	1.067	3.01	0.513	2.59	0.509	2.28	0.512	18.555
Cognitive strategies	2.73	1.072	2.90	0.674	2.54	0.541	2.23	0.532	14.824
Compensation strategies	2.44	1.004	3.05	0.867	2.79	0.685	2.53	0.695	5.964
Metacognitive strategies	2.29	0.957	3.17	0.918	2.67	0.652	2.39	0.724	10.014
Affective strategies	2.83	1.481	2.71	0.669	2.66	0.713	2.55	0.795	0.821
Social strategies	2.22	0.976	2.85	0.791	2.57	0.700	2.24	0.840	7.577

*p<0.05

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Memory strategies	Between Groups	14.761	3	4.920	18.555	0.000
	Within Groups	102.890	388	0.265		
	Total	117.651	391			
Cognitive strategies	Between Groups	13.344	3	4.448	14.824	0.000
	Within Groups	116.425	388	0.300		
	Total	129.770	391			
Compensation strategies	Between Groups	8.805	3	2.935	5.964	0.001
	Within Groups	190.957	388	0.492		
	Total	199.762	391			
Metacognitive strategies	Between Groups	14.655	3	4.885	10.014	0.000
	Within Groups	189.277	388	0.488		
	Total	203.932	391			
Affective strategies	Between Groups	1.388	3	0.463	0.821	0.483
	Within Groups	218.578	388	0.563		
	Total	219.966	391			
Social strategies	Between Groups	13.278	3	4.426	7.577	0.000
	Within Groups	226.648	388	0.584		
	Total	2396	391			

As seen in Table 5, the statistics showed that participants with different levels of English proficiency employed the learning strategies differently, notably memory and cognitive strategies with a statistical significance at .05. Participants with good English proficiency used learning strategy categories different from those possessing English proficiency at fair and poor levels. Also, participants with a fair level of English proficiency used the learning strategy categories different from those who had poor English proficiency. Regarding the compensation strategies, participants with different levels of English proficiency used these strategies differently with a statistical significance at .05. Participants with good

English proficiency used the compensation strategies different from those with poor English proficiency and those with fair English proficiency employed these strategies different from those with poor English proficiency. Concerning the metacognitive strategies, different levels of English proficiency exhibited different use of these strategies with a statistical significance at .05, i.e. participants with excellent English proficiency used these strategies different from those with good English proficiency. Participants with good English proficiency used these strategies different from those with fair and poor levels of English proficiency. Also, participants with fair English proficiency used these strategies different from those with poor English proficiency. Regarding the use of social strategies, participants with different levels of English proficiency used these strategies differently with a statistical significance at .05, e.g. those with good English proficiency differed from those with poor English proficiency and those with fair English proficiency differed from those with poor English proficiency.

7. Discussion

7.1. Use of language learning strategies

In general, Thai EFL students reported low and medium use of the six strategy categories. The mean score ($M = 2.55$) suggested that while acquiring a new language, research participants employed learning strategies at a moderate level. The present findings was contradictory to some previous research. Earlier research conducted with ESL learners demonstrated that they use language learning strategy at a high frequency level (Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). However, the findings of the study were consistent with the findings of previous research undertaken with EFL students in Thailand (Kittawee, Soranasathaporn, Engchuan & Thanathiti, 2011; Pringprom, 2008). In EFL learning contexts in Thailand, most of the earlier studies showed the similar findings that Thai students applied the learning strategy to their learning process at a medium level. Although most research participants could not define language learning strategy or even know that they applied LLS to their learning process, they seemed to understand the function of LLS.

In this study, compensation strategy category was most used by participants, followed by affective and metacognitive strategy categories respectively. Even though cognitive strategies were found to be the least used strategies, the mean score indicated the relative value in LLS use level. The results therefore do not necessary refer that the participants were unaware of cognitive strategies. The mean score for this category was at 2.44, suggesting that Thai EFL students still applied the cognitive strategies in their learning process.

Lee (2006) claimed that the more learners know about LLS, the more likely they will apply the strategies when learning a second language. In Kaotsombut's (2003) study, Thai undergraduate students majoring in science reported using compensation, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies more frequently than the other strategy categories while in this study, compensation, affective, and metacognitive strategies were used more frequently.

EFL university students in Thailand seem to use different learning strategies from those of ESL learners. ESL learners are more likely to learn English for survival and to maximize their accessibility to authentic learning materials (Rao, 2006). Unlike ESL learners, Thai EFL learners learn the English language with a limited exposure to English speaking environments. Also, they have fewer opportunities to communicate with native English speakers. This perhaps results in the use of learning strategies at different levels and with different strategy categories.

Regarding the six learning strategies, the results of the study reported a strategy use ranging from low ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .58$) to medium levels ($M = 2.7$, $SD = .71$). Investigating an order of the strategy use of Thai EFL learners in the study, it was found that compensation strategies came first, followed by affective, metacognitive, memory, social, and with the least use of cognitive strategies. No any high degree of strategy use was reported in the study. Why Thai EFL students most used compensation strategies was due to the fact that they made up for unknown linguistic competence. As in case that they could not find a specific word while communicating, they would use gestures to help convey their messages. Other techniques such as guessing meaning from the context and using synonyms were also employed to compensate for unknown vocabulary.

Learning a new language in Thailand, in general, has focused more on form, rather than meaning. That is why a grammar-translation method has been widely used for classroom activities. Since it has been considered an effective way to teach a new language, this method of instruction of the English language has become a popular way for decades. It is inevitable to say that learning the new language in a Thai context has relied primarily on this approach. Most Thai EFL students have been influenced by this kind of instruction and familiarized with the proposed way of learning the L2. While learning the new language in class, rote-learning and translating texts from L2 to L1 techniques have usually been employed. Also, increasing a repertoire of L2 vocabulary is encouraged. A new language learning has been done through the presence of a teacher. The linguistic knowledge of English would be transmitted to L2 learners via a passive learning environment, rather than a self-pace learning. In this stance, most Thai EFL learners have concentrated more on memorizing linguistic knowledge derived from a teacher, not from their own learning strategies. There have been great demands to teach learners how to handle difficulties in learning the new language, i.e. learners are strongly recommended to discover their own tools or strategies to compensate for the dearth of L2 linguistic competence and performance. Language learners in Thailand who have learned the language through a teacher-centred approach and are limited to exposure of the English contexts are more likely to use different compensation strategies. Supported to the characteristics of good language learners, while facing an unfamiliar English word, proficient learners usually guess its meaning from the context, rather than look it up in a dictionary. In interpersonal communication, good learners are always willing to take risks and participate in English conversation, even they do not know the exact word they want to say. They perhaps employ gesture or make up new words while communicating. In this study, Thai EFL undergraduate students reported using compensation strategies most. Compensation strategies most applied to their learning the new language comprised using gestures when being unable to think of English vocabulary ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.10$), guessing meanings of unfamiliar words ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.06$), and thinking of what other speakers will say in English ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.03$).

In summary, EFL learners in Thailand prefer to use compensation strategies to make up their language deficiency as well as to overcome their unknown linguistic knowledge. Interestingly, Oxford (1990 : 47) claimed that “less adept language learners often panic, tune out, or grab the dog-eared dictionary and try to look up every unfamiliar word—harmful responses which impede progress toward proficiency”. To be good language learners and develop their own learning skills, they avoid doing things that bring about negative outcomes towards learning the language like always looking up unknown words.

Apparently, affective strategies are the second most frequently used strategies in this study. If one assumes that the more learners are relaxed, the more likely they will learn the language effectively. This assumption can be applicable to language learning. It seems that when learners feel relaxed and are not afraid of making mistakes in speaking of the English language, they will learn the language better. The findings in this study demonstrated that the mean scores of compensation ($M = 2.70$) and

affective strategies ($M = 2.62$) were almost equal. Both learning strategies, particularly in the present study were used at a moderate level. Language learners found that the two strategies were useful to their L2 learning process. Affective strategies contribute to learners in terms of lowering their anxiety, encouraging themselves, and taking their emotional temperature while using and learning the English language. The findings of the present study were contradict to some earlier research. As in Oh's (1992) study carried out in EFL context in Korea and Yang's (1999) study in EFL environment in China, The findings of the two studies showed that language learners in non-English speaking environments avoided showing their emotions while learning the language. Specifically, in an EFL context in Korea, learners are not willing to present their opinions or emotions while learning a new language; it is maybe because Korean culture shapes their learning behaviour. In Asian contexts, particularly in Korea and Japan, most learners are less likely to express their opinions in front of public; they are quite shy and keep silent in English classes. Like Asian EFL learners, most Thai EFL learners, in general, are afraid of communicating in English. They also avoid losing face due to making errors in speaking English. This is quite contradictory to the finding of the current research, Thai EFL learners indicated that they usually motivate themselves to speak English even being a little worried about making mistakes. They attempt to seek opportunities to communicate in English. Interestingly, one of participants in an in-depth interview claimed that making mistakes is a natural phenomenon which exists in human. Everyone can make a mistake. Speaking of English with errors is better than doing nothing with it. Avoid using the new language brings about negative results towards the language learning and unsuccessful learning process. Hence, teachers should do every way they can do to encourage their students to speak of the new language. It would be concluded that the more learners can manage their negative feelings towards using English, the more success they have in learning the language.

In this study, metacognitive strategies came in the third rank. In the learning process, metacognitive strategies help learners concentrate on learning, arrange and plan learning for maximum benefits, and evaluate learners' language performance. While being focused on English grammatical elements, vocabulary, and the improvement of reading skills, Thai EFL students engage much in controlling the development of their own English learning process and progress. The important role of metacognitive strategies in learning the English language is to help facilitate learners in being aware of and determining their learning achievement, selecting learning tasks, discovering task-related materials and resources in English, making decisions about available strategies which are useful for learning tasks, as well as assessing their process of learning English. Oxford (1990) claimed that metacognitive strategies advocate learners to overwhelm the new experience of learning new grammatical elements, unfamiliar words, different rules, and confusing writing systems. Thai EFL undergraduate students must determine what should be learned, how difficulty should be handled, and how their learning process should be managed.

The findings of the present study illustrated that memory strategies were the fourth rank out of six language learning strategies with a low range of use. The results of this research were different from the previous study carried out by Politzer and McGroarty (1985). They reported the most frequently used strategies of Asian students were memory strategies. Among memory strategies, the least preferred strategy item in the study was *using flashcard to remember new English words* ($M = 2.17$). This might be because EFL learners use new technological devices like a mobile phone to help remember a new vocabulary. The other two least preferred memory strategy items included *I physically act out new English words* ($M = 2.24$) and *I review English lessons often* ($M = 2.27$).

Riazi and Rahimi (2005) claimed that memory strategies defined by Oxford (1990) are different from the memorization techniques that EFL learners use in their learning process. They further elaborated that participants in their study were not familiar with the memory strategies suggested by

Oxford, for instance, making a mental picture of situation in which the word might be used, using rhymes to remember new words, and grouping new words into synonyms, antonyms, nouns, or verbs. Some of the EFL learners perhaps employ the memory strategies suggested by Oxford while others may utilize different memory strategies from those in Oxford's SILL. Based on present English curriculum in Thailand which still puts a more focus more on English grammatical structures and the development of vocabulary skills, these require learners to apply much memorization techniques while learning the new language. That is why Thai EFL learners have to develop their own memorization techniques to overcome any challenges in learning a new language in terms of new grammatical rules, sentence structures, and unknown words. Interestingly, from the in-depth interview conducted in this study, participants reported not to prefer using memorization techniques. They claimed that vocabulary writing and memorizing created negative results to their learning the English language. It would conclude from this that Thai EFL learners are less likely to use memory strategies. However, researchers or even lecturers in a university cannot ignore the advantages of the memory strategies since EFL learners are still required to develop their repertoire of vocabulary and new grammatical rules.

Social strategies were used in the study in a relatively low level with mean scores of each strategy items ranging from 2.31 to 3.02. The findings of this study were consistent with those of the earlier research carried out in Asian learning contexts (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990; Politzer, 1983). The previous studies revealed that Asian EFL learners were reluctant to have social interactions with others and preferred not to employ social strategies while learning the English language. The findings of some other previous research, however, were different from the current study. As in Lee's (1994) study conducted with Korean high school students, the results of his study revealed that social strategies were preferred by Korean students. In fact, social strategies are viewed as one of the strategic means of practicing English in interpersonal communication, for instance, asking for clarification and correction, asking for help, and asking questions. These help facilitate learners' learning process while encountering challenges in international communication.

It is obvious that Thai EFL learners do not prefer employing social strategies as these come in the fifth place out of six strategies with a low range of use. This might be because they are less likely to expose to authentic English communicative situations, i.e. they have less chances to practice a new language and communicate with native speakers of English. Thus, opportunities to utilize their language learning strategies in real contexts become lesser. More importantly, with the advent of modern technology, knowledge can be discovered through different forms of multimedia, the Internet, and other networking technologies where learners are easier to access to authentic English materials. Also, they would have more opportunity to apply social strategies in anywhere they are willing to do so. As an English teacher, encouraging learners to practice their English skills in class is another way to increase chances for L2 learners to utilize their own learning strategies and monitor their learning process.

The findings of the present study exhibited cognitive strategies as the least preferred used strategies in learning the language. Specifically, the least frequently used strategy items in this category were *I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English* ($M = 1.95$); *I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English* ($M = 2.05$); and *I read for pleasure in English* ($M = 2.17$). It can be seen from this that Thai university students do not prefer writing in English, but they favour watching TV shows or movies in English for practicing their new language skills. Writing is a crucial skill that illustrates the understanding of what one reads, watches, or listens. How well and how much one knows about English linguistic competence could be shown through their writing performance. Thus, it is worthwhile putting a more focus on learners' writing skills. It would be suggested that one of

classroom activities might incorporate watching a short clip available on YouTube or English movies into writing skills by summarizing the gist or main points of what learners are watching or responding to questions related to the clip or movie being watched with a short answer. Open-ended questions would be recommended for this activity, since learners could practice more English writing skills.

In conclusion, the current study apparently indicated that compensation strategies were rated as the most preferred used strategies and cognitive strategies the least. Investigating individual learning strategy item in the list of ten most preferred used strategies, three compensation strategies, one social strategy, three metacognitive strategies, three affective strategies, and two cognitive strategies were included. All of the most favoured strategies were used at a medium range. No any high range of use of each strategy item was discovered in the study. The strategies that learners used most in learning the language were *using gestures while being unable to think of a word during a conversation in English* (compensation strategies ; $M = 3.11$), *asking the other person to slow down or say it again when encountering some difficulties in understanding English* (social strategy; $M = 3.02$), and *I pay attention when someone is speaking English* (metacognitive strategies, $M = 2.99$). This showed that Thai EFL learners know how to handle language problems when they face some challenges in learning the language like using gestures, asking someone for help, or even concentrating on what others are saying. These strategies could be of help in overcoming L2 learning difficulties. Based on Oxford's (1990) learning strategy taxonomy, compensation strategies are very useful to keep learning, even though language barriers exist while social strategies work well in learning the language through interaction with others and with their helps. Concentrating on the conversation helps understand the new language system, new vocabulary, and new rules which is one of important roles of metacognitive strategies. It would be suggested that English teachers not only pay much attention to the most used learning strategies when conducting their English classes, but also focus more on the least used ones. This is because the six language learning strategies are linked to and help support one another in the learning process. Another thing that calls for attention is that Thai EFL learners prefer learning the language in the real context. Thus far, the new language learning should be conducted in an authentic setting if possible.

Regarding the ten least used strategy items, the present research revealed that the first two least favoured strategy items were in cognitive and memory strategy categories. The cognitive strategy items which were found the least frequently used were *I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English* ($M = 1.95$) and *I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English* ($M = 2.05$). Among memory strategy items, the least preferred strategy was *I use flashcards to remember new English words* ($M = 2.17$). All of the least used strategy items were rated in a low range. The findings of the current study were similar to and supported by some of previous research. In Yang's (2010) study, Korean EFL learners claimed that *writing notes, messages, letters, or reports in English, making summaries of information that I hear or read in English, and using flashcards to remember new English words* were the three least frequently used strategies. It is obvious that Asian learners do not prefer writing, since they may employ other strategies relevant to the new technology to their learning process. Using flashcards for retaining new vocabulary is also another strategy that is not preferred by both Korean and Thai learners. On the other hand, they are more likely to acquire the new language through watching TV shows or seeing movies spoken in English. Korean EFL learners preferred writing vocabulary with letter-sound memorization while Thai learners preferred thinking of relationships between what they already knew and new things and remembering new vocabulary from their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

7.2. Use of language learning strategies between female and male participants

This study was conducted to examine the differences in the use of language learning strategies between male and female learners. The study exhibited both groups of research participants employed memory, cognitive, compensation, and social strategies at an equal level with a statistical significance at .05. Interestingly, female learners used metacognitive and affective strategies more than did male counterparts at a statistically significant level at .05. It can be said that gender differences have a significant effect on using language learning strategies in some aspects.

The findings of the current research were both consistent with and contradictory to earlier research. The previous research revealed that gender differences do not affect language learning strategy use, i.e. there were no any differences in use of learning strategies between male and female learners. This research showed the same results in some strategies, notably memory, cognitive, compensation, and social strategies but the important differences were discovered in metacognitive and affective strategies with a statistical significance at .05, i.e. female learners employed the metacognitive and affective strategies more than did male counterparts. Lee (1994) found out from his study that there were no any significant differences in using learning strategies between male and female learners in a university context. In other words, gender differences do not have a significant effect on strategy use. In Oh's (1996) study, the results reaffirmed the previous findings that both males and females have strong interests to utilize learning strategies. Moreover, the findings of the present study were consistent with the results of previous research within ESL learning environments. They suggested that female learners used more strategies than male counterparts (Bacon, 1992; Green & Oxford, 1995; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). In EFL situations, some of the earlier research supported the findings of the current study and indicated that female learners preferred using learning strategies more than did males (Gu, 2002; Lee, 2000). "Gender differences have no significant influence on learning strategy use" can be further elaborated with some possible reasons. One of which is that the English language is considered an important tool to Thai EFL learners. This is because knowing the English language help learners to take advantages of, for example, finding a better job, future career advancement, and international communication. Learners' drive and desire to develop their English competence and performance lead them to employ a greater variety of learning strategies in their learning process.

On the contrary, in a cultural aspect, some previous research claimed that cultural behaviours may have an important effect on using learning strategies more of female learners. Cultural contexts in EFL learning in particular greatly affect what and how learners should learn (Green & Oxford, 1995). They suggested that within and across cultures, male and female learners are employing different approaches in their learning process.

7.3. Use of language learning strategies by self-rated English proficiency

This study examined the differences in learning strategy use among learners with different levels of English proficiency. The findings of the present research indicated that the four groups of learners (excellent, good, fair, and poor) employed different levels of language learning strategies.

With regard to an investigation of the six learning strategy categories in terms of different levels of English language proficiency, the findings indicated that excellent English proficiency learners used affective strategies most while good proficiency learners preferred employing metacognitive strategies most and fair and poor proficiency learners favoured utilizing social strategies most in their learning process. Excellent proficiency learners preferred to use affective strategies most and social

strategies least. For learners with good language proficiency, they reported using metacognitive strategies most and affective strategies least. The social strategies were used most and the cognitive strategies least by learners with fair and poor proficient learners. The significant mean differences of strategy use by participants with different levels of language proficiency were also found in the results of the present study, i.e. among six strategy categories, the significant mean differences of the five strategies, notably memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social were discovered, except affective strategies. Interestingly, learners with excellent and good English proficiency used social strategies least while learners with fair and poor English proficiency employed social strategies most. It could be explained from this that most English classes in Thailand concentrate more on the linguistic knowledge (grammatical structures and rules) being transferred from a teacher to a student. Without others' help, less English proficiency learners may not manage their learning process and learning tasks well. To be proficient L2 learners, they should discover effective learning process for themselves instead of relying on the presence of teachers. With the advent and development of technology, learners can seek for a body of knowledge in different disciplines through the Internet, multimedia materials and the like, rather than only by spoon-feeding. In this sense, L2 learners can make ultimate use for maximum advantages from the technology which is better than using it in an appropriate way unbeneficial to learning a new language, for example, playing games. How well and to what degree learners can manage their learning process in and out of the classroom affect their English proficiency. The better they can manage their learning process well, the more proficient in learning the English language they are. A more detailed analysis of six strategy categories revealed that the mean differences were found in the six strategy categories among four groups of learners (excellent, good, fair, and poor) with the exception of affective strategies. Regarding memory and cognitive strategies, there were significant differences between learners with good English proficiency and fair and poor English proficiency learners. With respect to compensation strategies, significant differences between good and poor language learners, and between learners with fair and poor English proficiency were found. Concerning metacognitive strategies, there were significant differences between learners with excellent and good proficiency, between good and fair and poor proficiency, and between fair and poor English learners. Regarding social strategies, significant differences between good and poor English proficiency learners, and between fair and poor proficiency learners were identified.

This study showed that there was no difference in affective strategies among the four proficiency learners. Thai EFL learners whether they are proficient or less proficient learners put great emphasis on and monitor their emotions, motivations, and attitudes in language performance. Affective strategies, as pointed out by Oxford (1990), result in positive language learning outcomes if learners have positive attitudes and emotions towards learning the new language. So teachers of English should encourage L2 learners where possible, for example, by rewarding them when they perform well in English classes or making them recognized the importance of a new language.

There are limitations of the present study. The obvious limitation of this study is the research instruments—a self-reported questionnaire, interview, and SILL questionnaire. With only the two instruments, the findings may not provide profound learning strategies. Additionally, the self-reported questionnaire is perhaps the issue of the reliability of participants' responses. According to Politzer and McGroarty (1985; as cited in Lee & Oxelson, 2006), they claimed that the self-reported data can "reflect general intelligence, a desire to give the 'right' answer or to please the teacher and so on". The study also relies primarily on responses elicited from the research participants. It may not necessarily manifest actual language learning behaviours. It would be suggested that video recording and class observing would be useful to determine more accurately the frequency of language learning

strategy. These two methods may help reflect clearer and deeper understanding of language learning strategies in the EFL classroom. Also, these would give empirical evidence of exact learning strategy used by students learning a foreign language. Another limitation is that the research participants in the study are limited to undergraduate students of only one public university in Bangkok, Thailand. This may not provide detailed information for other different groups. Thus the generalizations of the findings are perhaps limited to a similar population. Inclusive of other public and private universities for further research would reflect the similarities and differences in language learning strategy use.

8. Recommendations

Regarding the findings of the current study, teachers of English at a tertiary level should consider the preferred learning strategies while organizing classroom activities. That is students should be provided learning activities corresponding to their favoured learning strategies in order to obtain optimal learning outcomes of both students and teachers.

In the present study, Thai EFL learners preferred using compensation strategies, followed by affective, metacognitive, memory, social, and cognitive strategies. It would be good if curriculum developers should take a closer look at this findings. New or present curriculum should be compensation and affective-based curriculum, rather than memory-based. Another aspect is if learners of English in Thai contexts are given more opportunities to learn how to deal with learning difficulties when learning the English language, they can handle with language challenges with ease. L2 learners, if possible, should be provided with authentic learning environments, for they will put themselves in those particular situations and seek out proper solutions in English.

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