



# New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Volume 4, Issue 1 (2017) 156-163

ISSN 2421-8030

[www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selected Papers of 9th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2017) 01-04 February 2017 Hotel Aston La Scala Convention Center, Nice, France

## Investigating language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate Students

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### Suggested Citation:

Sucaromana, U. (2017). Investigating language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate Students. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 4(1), pp 156-163. Available from: [www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcala, Spain.

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate students who are majoring in language, and to compare the language learning strategies of these students based on gender, years in the university, and major. A questionnaire, Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was completed by 360 Thai EFL undergraduate students. This instrument comprised 50 items grouped into six categories: (a) memory strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, (c) compensation strategies, (d) metacognitive strategies, (e) affective strategies, and (f) social strategies. The results were calculated in terms of percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. A statistical approach was employed to determine the differences between language learning strategies and the independent variables of gender, years in the university, and major. The results revealed that the language learning strategies of Thai EFL students majoring in language are significantly different among different years in the university and different language majors. However, there was no significant difference between the language learning strategies based on gender.

Keywords: Language learning strategies; EFL; teaching; students; Thai.

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## 1. Introduction

In improving the efficiency of language learning and communication among students, strategies are like tools that will help learners to study faster and develop their language potential. This leads to suitable and appropriate classes being provided for the students. A great deal of research highlights the relationship between language learning strategy and language achievement.

Students successful in learning often employ several strategies that are individually suited to them and the challenge they confront. Nevertheless, these students still underachieve; even when they can identify their learning strategies, they do not know how to apply them in a way that suits their particular situation. Thus, the researcher believes it is important to study those language learning strategies in order to collect data and information that can be used to further develop and improve the way language classes are provided.

According to Oxford (1990), a language learning strategy is behaviour, action, steps, or technique that learners employ consciously and purposefully to understand, gain knowledge, and become fluent and proficient in the use of the targeted language. Cohen (1996) described a language learning strategy as steps and behaviours that learners choose to study foreign language, and to learn how to use the desired language in context correctly. Cohen also differentiated between the strategy for studying language and the strategy for using language, which are different goals. Both kinds of strategy serve different purposes; a language learning strategy serves information input, information storage, and information organization; for example, in learning new vocabulary, picture association helps the students remember the vocabulary. In contrast, a language using strategy helps to minimize barriers to communication; such a strategy is a means of recalling stored information so it can be used during communication. For example, when one fails to recall a vocabulary item previously learned, one may use other words that are similar or close in meaning to bridge the gap and enable communication. From these concepts, a language learning strategy aims to organize language-related information to store in the memory and to facilitate the recall of such information. A language learning strategy therefore means a specific way of thinking or an action that learners utilize to help the learning process, with the aim of developing language efficiency and fluency while minimizing language barriers.

A language learning strategy helps learners to be successful in foreign language learning. A difference in ability to learn new language lies in differences in language learning strategy. From O'Malley and Chamot's (1995) study, learners with high language proficiency have a variety of language learning strategies and use them more often than those with less skill. Those with higher language proficiency show higher frequency in using metacognition strategy. Nonetheless, according to Ellis (1994), to be successful in learning English, learners must be aware of and pay attention to grammar and language structure, which makes them able to rearrange sentences in the correct manner. Learners are also encouraged to start conversation and make language contact with others without feeling shy. In this way, they create opportunities to use English language correctly in various contexts. Importantly, learners must develop their own study plan and be proficient in adjusting learning strategies to suit their own situation.

From late 1970s onward, many language researchers took an interest in language learning strategy methods and processes. For example, Rubin (1987) said a language learning strategy is categorized according to four aspects: communication strategy, social strategy, metacognitive strategy, and cognitive strategy.

However, this study in particular follows ideas presented earlier by Oxford (1990). Oxford developed a tool for assessing language learning strategies called "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version for English Speakers Learning a New Language". Shmais (2003) said that assessment tools such as SILL are popular and widely used; it is often used to assess language learning strategy for foreign language learners, and, to date, 50 studies have been conducted using this tool. In addition, Shmais (2003) further insisted that Oxford's language learning strategy assessment tool is the only tool that has been tested for reliability; other tools, being less popular, have not been tested as rigorously and so the

data they yield is thus less reliable. Those who have been tested by Oxford's language learning strategy assessment tool comment that it is interesting and easy to respond to.

Oxford (1990) has described two categories of language learning strategy: direct and indirect language learning. 'Direct language learning strategy' means strategy that is relevant to the learning content whereby it requires immediate information processing involving input, storage, and organization of language information. 'Indirect language learning strategy' means strategy that will support and organize learning that does not directly involve the content such as reading plan, review plan, and self-motivating process. The details of the two are explained as follows:

A direct language learning strategy requires immediate information processing involving input, storage, and organization of language information. This group of strategies is divided into three sub strategies;

(a) Memory strategies: technique or methods learners used to store input and recall that information once needed. It comprises: (1) creating mental linkage: categorization of input information, creation of association, and use of context to help memorization of new vocabulary; (2) applying images and sounds: using visual imagery to create meaning, use of key words and mimic of sound to help store memory; (3) reviewing well: review of grammar structures and so forth; and (4) employing action: use of body language, feelings, and tools to help in communication.

(b) Cognitive Strategies: techniques that help learners understand and use language in different contexts. Learners are able to integrate the pre-existing knowledge with new knowledge. This comprises: (1) practising, such as repeating speech, listening and writing practice, using predictable and common language structures, mixing new sentences, and other natural practice; (2) receiving and sending messages: quickly grasping the key information and using sources of information to receive and impart information; (3) analysing and reasoning: using deduction, word or phrase analysis, comparison, translating, and transfer of information; and (4) creating structure for input and output: such as taking notes, summarizing, or highlighting key sections.

(c) Compensation Strategies: strategies that learners employ when faced with language limitation during communication. This comprises: (1) guessing intelligently: using key word to estimate the meaning and use of another word; and (2) overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, such as switching to mother tongue, asking for assistance, using body movement, avoiding partial or whole conversation, content selective communication, content adjusting, constructing new words, using suggestive language or a similar word as a replacement.

The second category of indirect language learning strategy will support and organize learning that does not directly involve the content. This group of strategies is divided into three sub-strategies: (a) metacognitive strategies: learners plan their own learning process with clearly specified aims for each lesson, and after each lesson assess their own results. This comprises (1) centring their learning: includes integrating of lessons learned, focus on studying, slow speech practice to detect faults; (2) arranging and planning their learning: seeking extra information that will help learning, self-organization, setting targets, purposes, and goals of learning, understanding the task given, preparing for future tasks, and seeking for opportunities to advance; and (3) evaluating their learning: frequently testing their ability to see progress and self-regulation.

(b) Affective Strategies: this includes moods, motivation, and learning attitude. This comprises: (1) anxiety reduction: relaxation, taking deep breaths, meditation, utilizing humour and other techniques; (2) self-encouragement: staying positive, taking smart risks, having a self-reward system; and (3) taking their own emotional temperature : self-acceptance, using check lists, making journals, talking about themselves to others.

(c) Social Strategies: techniques that employ direct engagement with native speakers to understand the language and its culture. This comprises: (1) asking questions, questions to help correct mistakes made in language usage; (2) cooperating with others: working with others and with experts; and (3)

empathizing with others: understanding other cultures, traditions, and customs, along with the thoughts and feelings of others.

## 2. Objectives

This study aimed to investigate language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate students who are majoring in language, and to compare the language learning strategies of these students based on gender, years in the university, and major.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

The participants for this study were undergraduate students from language majors in Thai universities. A total of 360 questionnaires were distributed and then returned to the researcher. The students are Thai natives, and volunteered to participate in this study.

### 3.2. Instrument

A questionnaire, Oxford’s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was completed by 360 Thai EFL undergraduate students. This instrument comprised 50 items grouped into six categories: (a) memory strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, (c) compensation strategies, (d) metacognitive strategies, (e) affective strategies, and (f) social strategies.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The results were calculated in terms of percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. A statistical approach was employed to determine the differences between language learning strategies and the independent variables which are gender, years in the university, and major.

## 4. Results

To investigate the level of language learning strategies among the university students, Table 1 presents the mean score of language learning strategies.

**Table 1. Language learning strategies of the sample**

Variable	M	SD	แปลผล
Memory	3.57	.61	high
Cognitive	3.63	.57	high
Compensation	3.83	.56	high
Metacognitive	3.94	.62	high
Affective	3.34	.64	medium
Social	3.47	.76	high
Overall	3.65	.51	high

Table 1 shows that the overall result English language learning strategy is rated as ‘high’ level (M=3.65). When examined closely, the result of metacognition is highest and is rated in ‘high’ rating (M=3.94). Subsequently is language compensation strategy, constructivism strategy, memorizing

strategy, socializing strategy, and Emotion and feelings respectively whereby all are rated in ‘high’ level (M=3.83, 3.63, 3.47, and 3.34).

Table 2 reports the overall mean score by comparing the levels of language learning strategy among the university students in terms of gender.

**Table 2. Language learning strategies of the sample differentiated by gender**

	Memory	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.64	.67	1.214	.226
Female		3.55	.59		
	Cognitive	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.71	.56	1.545	.123
Female		3.60	.57		
	Compensation	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.91	.56	1.479	.140
Female		3.81	.57		
	Metacognitive	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.96	.63	.252	.802
Female		3.94	.62		
	Affective	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.29	.68	.947	.344
Female		3.36	.62		
	Social	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.58	.84	1.498	.135
Female		3.44	.74		
	Overall	M	SD	t	p-value
Male		3.70	.52	1.127	.261
Female		3.63	.50		

\*p < .05

Table 2 shows there is no significant differentiation between male and female university students in overall language learning strategy. When examined closely, the result signifies that for strategies of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social, there is no difference between male and female university students.

Table 3 reports the overall mean score by comparing the levels of language learning strategy among the university students in terms of year.

**Table 3. Language learning strategies of the sample differentiated by year**

Memory	M	SD	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
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Year 1	3.70	.69	Intergroup	2.967	3	.989	2.641	.049*	
Year 2	3.52	.60	Intragroup	131.068	350	.374			
Year 3	3.37	.56	overall	134.035	353				
Year 4	3.65	.54							
Cognitive	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	3.70	.58	Intergroup	.949	3	.316	.944	.420	
Year 2	3.58	.61	Intragroup	117.338	350	.335			
Year 3	3.67	.53	overall	118.287	353				
Year 4	3.67	.43							
compensation	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	3.87	.55	Intergroup	.406	3	.135	.412	.744	
Year 2	3.83	.59	Intragroup	114.883	350	.328			
Year 3	3.74	.64	overall	115.289	353				
Year 4	3.87	.46							
metacognitive	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	4.13	.50	Intergroup	3.030	3	1.010	2.623	.050	
Year 2	3.88	.66	Intragroup	134.756	350	.385			
Year 3	3.94	.64	overall	137.786	353				
Year 4	3.95	.56							
affective	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	3.48	.72	Intergroup	1.703	3	.568	1.367	.253	
Year 2	3.32	.62	Intragroup	144.147	347	.415			
Year 3	3.27	.70	overall	145.850	350				
Year 4	3.28	.60							
social	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	3.55	.80	Intergroup	.824	3	.275	.457	.713	
Year 2	3.43	.79	Intragroup	208.742	347	.602			
Year 3	3.55	.80	overall	209.567	350				
Year 4	3.46	.62							
overall	M	SD		SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Scheff-test
Year 1	3.75	.53	Intergroup	1.132	3	.377	1.441	.231	
Year 2	3.60	.53	Intragroup	91.682	350	.262			
Year 3	3.61	.50	overall	92.815	353				
Year 4	3.67	.39							

\*p < .05

Table 3 presents students of different years show no difference in the overall result of English language learning strategy. When examined closely, the result signifies that for strategies of cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social, there is no difference between students of separate years. However, in the results for memory strategy, the F-test analysis indicates a difference with a statistical significance of 0.5 (F=2.641, P=0.049). However, pair-comparison shows no difference between students of different years with regard to a memory strategy approach.

Table 4 reports the overall mean score by comparing the levels of language learning strategy among the university students in terms of major.

**Table 4. Language learning strategies of the sample differentiated by major**

Memory	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages	3.57	.59	.134	.893

Eastern languages		3.56	.66		
	Cognitive	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.69	.55	2.674	.008
Eastern languages		3.51	.61		
	Compensation	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.83	.54	.133	.894
Eastern languages		3.83	.62		
	Metacognitive	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.99	.59	2.140	.034
Eastern languages		3.83	.66		
	Affective	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.35	.62	-.095	.926
Eastern languages		3.35	.66		
	Social	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.51	.74	1.182	.238
Eastern languages		3.40	.81		
	Overall	M	SD	t	p-value
Western languages		3.68	.48	1.541	.124
Eastern languages		3.59	.55		

\*p < .05

Table 4 shows the overall results of a language learning strategy study between students of Western language major and Eastern language major shows no difference. When examined closely, the result signifies that for strategies of memory, compensation, affective, social, the two groups show no difference. However, the study shows that students of a Western language major have higher ratings for strategies of cognitive and metacognitive when compared with their Western language counterparts with a statistical significance of 0.5.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate language learning strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate students who are majoring in language, and to compare the language learning strategies of these students based on gender, years in the university, and major. The results revealed that the language learning strategies of Thai EFL students majoring in language are significantly different among different years in the university and different language majors. However, there was no significant difference between the language learning strategies based on gender. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Srinakharinwirot University for the generosity in funding this trip expenses.

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