

## Comparative Study of Language Learning Strategies Used by First-Year Students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand and UniMAP, Malaysia

Rongdara Rochanahasadin<sup>1\*</sup>, Liew Khe Li<sup>1</sup>, Masturah Sabri<sup>1</sup> and Kanya Pornwasanying<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP).

<sup>2</sup>Prince of Songkla University (Pattani campus).

### ABSTRACT

*The purposes of this study were (1) to explore language learning strategies used by first-year Prince of Songkla University (PSU) and UniMAP students; and (2) to compare their use in terms of gender and nationality. The instrument used to collect data was the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0, which consists of six categories of language learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The 68 subjects were 10 first-year English majors and 58 first-year students enrolled in Foundation English courses required at each university. The data was analyzed for mean and standard deviation. Results showed that both Thai and Malaysian students used English learning strategies at a high level in all the categories. Metacognitive strategies were most frequently used among the students while memory strategies were employed the least. It was also found that genders and nationalities did not affect learning strategy use.*

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Genders and Nationalities, Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL),

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning and teaching nowadays emphasizes on learners. There are many teaching methods aimed at promoting activeness or collaboration from learners. Teachers, on the other hand, are required to be adaptive with technology and help their students to become life-long learners. For several years, English Language has become very important. It is seen as the global language. It is also a vehicle to gain information in science, technology and also for academics purposes. The importance of English has been acknowledged in Thailand and Malaysia alike. As for Malaysia, English language is the second most important language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Malaysia as the country's national language (Yunus, Sulaiman and Embi, 2013). For Thailand, there is a vital need to have competence in English in order to access the information available and achieve success in all fields.

In Thailand, although students spend more than twelve years studying English in school, they are not able to speak, write, read and listen to English at a high level of proficiency. The cause of this problem may be that Thai students do not have a chance to use English in their daily life. Teachers can help promote the use of English in the classroom and fostering an English environment in a school. However, that is not enough. In order to be proficient English language learners, students need to have specific strategies. As Pranee Pathomchaiwat (2013) stated in her paper, *'If the learners use appropriate strategies, even the poor will succeed in learning language. As the result, language learning strategies should be considered to be one of the factors which affect the students' language achievement.'* Malaysian students, by contrast, have

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\*Corresponding Author: [rongdara@unimap.edu.my](mailto:rongdara@unimap.edu.my)

more chances to use English even though the official language is Malaysian Language or Bahasa Melayu. English is widely used in the country especially in metropolitan areas. English is acknowledged in Malaysia as an international language essential for employment locally and internationally (Ramiza & Albion, 2013).

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language learning strategies are given various meaning. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are defined as ‘specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations’ (Oxford (1990: 8 quoted in Orawee Pannak and Thanyapa Chiramanee, 2011: 4). Similarly, Nyikos (1991) perceived them as ‘the purposeful steps used by language learners to comprehend and process new information more deeply, to help to recall old information, and apply knowledge and skills to facilitate problem-solving. (Nyikos, 1991). Rubin (1987) referred to them as “strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which learners construct and affect learning directly” (p. 23 quoted in Hayati and Nejad: 2010). In addition, Weinstein and Mayer (1986: 315) defined them as ‘the techniques for learner’s conscious construction of language rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse, and sociocultural understanding.

In short, language learning strategies are processes in which learners employ when learning language including, for example, vocabulary, sentence structures, and social context.

Oxford (1990) further classified language learning strategies into two groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies.

**Table 1** Oxford's language learning strategies taxonomy

<b>Direct Strategies</b>	1. <i>Memory Strategies:</i>	- creating mental linkage, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, employing action
	2. <i>Cognitive Strategies:</i>	- practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output - guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations speaking and writing
	3. <i>Compensation Strategies:</i>	
<b>Indirect strategies</b>	1. <i>Metacognitive Strategies:</i>	- centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning
	2. <i>Affective Strategy:</i>	- lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself, taking your emotional temperature
	3. <i>Social Strategy:</i>	- asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others

Direct strategies are steps learners apply directly when learning language while indirect strategies are those apply for managing their learning. Memory strategies are those that help learners to store and retrieve information when needed, while cognitive strategies enable them to understand and produce expression. Compensation strategies allow them to use language despite their limitations. Indirect strategies are subdivided into three categories: metacognitive

strategies help learners to evaluate and plan their learning; affective strategies are concerned with learners' emotions; and social strategies involve interaction with others (Oxford, 1990).

### **3. RELATED WORKS**

Many studies focused on identifying language learning strategies employed by language learners as well as those comparing strategies used by students of different language proficiency levels, and gender (Orawee Pannak and, Thanyapa Chiramanee (2011); Jiraporn Dhanarattigannon, 1990; Nisakorn Prakongchati, 2007; Nisbet, Tindall and Arroyo, 2005). In terms of levels of language proficiency, previous research revealed that learners with high proficiency level employed more language learning strategies than those with lower proficiency. Chayata Viriya and Sutthirak Sapsirin (2014) studied language learning style and language learning strategies of 150 first year University students at the faculty of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Thailand. They used the perceptual learning-style preference questionnaire (PLSPQ) to investigate the learning style preferences and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) version 7.0 designed by Oxford (1990) to find the learning strategy preferences. They found out that gender did have an effect on language learning style, but there is no effect on language learning strategies. Both male and female learners in their study preferred to study in group rather than studying individually.

Niyat and Hayati (2010) compared the language learning strategies used by bilingual (Arab-Persian) and monolingual (Persian) EFL learners in Iran. They found a difference on preferences of the strategies employed by the subjects. Bilingual learners tended to use social and compensation strategies most frequently. On the other hand, monolinguals preferred social and affective strategies.

### **4. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

The comparative study investigated language learning strategies employed by first year English major students, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand and first year non-English major students of UniMAP, Malaysia. Moreover, the relationships between the use of language learning strategy and gender as well as nationality were identified.

### **5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What language learning strategies do Thai and Malaysian learners use?
2. Are there differences between gender and nationality in language learning strategies used?

### **6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **6.1 Participants**

68 participants were included in the study. Among them were 10 1<sup>st</sup> year English major students at Prince of Songkla University, Thailand, and 58 1<sup>st</sup> year non-English major from UniMAP, Malaysia. All participants had taken Foundation English courses required at each university.

## 6.2 Instruments

The instrument employed in the study was the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0. The form consisted of six categories of language learning strategies: (1) memory (9 items); (2) cognitive (14 items); (3) compensation (6 items); (4) metacognitive (9 items); (5) affective (6 items); and (6) social strategies (6 items). The participants were asked to respond to each statement on a five-point Likert scale. The answers ranged from '1 = never or almost never true of me' to '5 = always or almost always true of me.'

## 6.3 Data collection and Analysis

On the data collection process, the researcher distributed the online Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0 to the participants. The aim and process of the study were briefly described with the form. A sample of 68 responses was used in the final analysis. The authors used descriptive statistics and chi-square to report the data analysis and findings. The comparison was made to identify the differences learning strategies used by the participants according to their gender and nationality. Each type of learning strategies including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies was also compared between the two groups of participants.

## 6.4 Findings

The data obtained from the questionnaire indicated that from the 68 participating students, 14.7% were Thai students and 85.3% of the participants were Malaysian students. Moreover, from the 68 participants, 44.1% were male (n=30), and 55.9% (n=38) were female.

The mean scores of the overall strategy use and the six subcategories of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were calculated for each of the nationality groups and genders. The analysis of strategy use was based on Oxford (1990) as follows:

- 1.0 - 2.4 = low strategy use
- 2.5 - 3.4 = medium strategy use
- 3.5 - 5.0 = high strategy use

## 6.5 General Strategy Uses among Participants

To answer research questions 1, *What language learning strategies do Thai and Malaysian learners use?* the percentage of both groups of learners on language learning strategies was calculated. Table 2 showed the overall percentage of both group of learners on each category of language learning strategies. As shown in table 1, the cognitive strategy is the one employed most. In addition, social strategies and affective strategies were relied on respectively. The lowest employed strategies were compensation and metacognitive.

**Table 2** Language learning strategies used by Thai and Malaysia learners

Strategies Categories	Percentage	Rank
Memory	63.2	5
Cognitive	75	1
Compensation	61.8	4
Metacognitive	61.8	4
Affective	67.6	3
Social strategies	69.1	2

To answer research questions 2, *Are there differences between gender and nationality in language learning strategies used*, percentage, and chi-square of each data were analyzed.

### 6.5.1 Different Gender

**Table 3** Language learning strategies used by different genders

Strategies Categories	Male (%)	Female (%)	P
Memory	76.7 (3)	52.6 (3)	4.166
Cognitive	90 (1)	75 (1)	6.442
Compensation	76.7 (3)	50 (4)	5.048
Metacognitive	76.7 (3)	50 (4)	5.048
Affective	86.7 (2)	52.6 (3)	8.873
Social strategies	73.3 (4)	65.8 (2)	0.447

As seen in Table 3, male and female participants had a relatively high different strategy use in the frequency of overall strategies used as well as all six strategy categories. The only similarity between these two gender groups is that they both employed the cognitive strategy the most. Male participants had a low frequency of using social strategies, while females tended to use them more, as the second highest level of frequency.

### 6.5.2 Different Nationality

In terms of nationality, there was a slight difference in the frequency of overall strategies used as well as all six strategy categories among students with different nationality. The mean scores of the overall strategies used for Thai and Malaysian learners were 3.99 and 3.85 respectively, a range defined as high use.

**Table 4** Language learning strategies used by different nationalities

Strategies Categories	Thai Learners (Percentage)	Malaysian Learners (Percentage)	P
Memory	40 (4)	39 (5)	2.723
Cognitive	80 (1)	74.1 (1)	.156
Compensation	50 (3)	63.8 (4)	.687
Metacognitive	50 (3)	63.8 (4)	.687
Affective	70 (2)	67.2 (3)	.030
Social strategies	70 (2)	69 (2)	.004

As can be seen in Table 4, metacognitive strategy use was similarly high in both Thai and Malaysian learners. Significant similarities were found between the two groups in social strategies ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The use of memory strategies was the lowest frequently employed in both Thai and Malaysian learners.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The study revealed that both groups of participants had the highest frequency of the use of a cognitive strategy. This followed by social strategies, affective, compensation and metacognitive strategies, respectively. The lowest frequency employed strategies was memory. Significant relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the subjects' gender was also

found. The results of the study reveal that male learners reported employing all six categories of language learning strategies more often than females. This study produced contradictory results to the works of Chayata Viriya and Sutthirak Sapsirin (2014). This study found a significant difference in language learning strategies between male and female participants, but the use of similar strategies among the two nationality groups.

The findings of this study offer some implications for learners, and teachers. Learners should be aware of the language learning strategies they use to learn more effectively. Also, for teachers, they should be aware of their learners' language learning methods to assist them to be more competent language learners. The students-centered teaching approach, promoting collaborative and active learning should be adopted by all teachers. Furthermore, the notions of culturally and linguistically differences among learners should not be overlooked.

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