

# LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: A STUDY OF CHINESE UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS IN THAILAND

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of language learning strategies by undergraduate students: the extent of use of language learning strategy categories in the Oxford Taxonomy, and the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and English proficiency. Two hundred fifty four Chinese undergraduate students (123 male and 131 female) in Assumption University participated in the study. The results showed that the students were medium users of overall strategies, Compensation Strategy was the most frequently used, and Memory Strategy category was the least used. A positive correlation was found between the use of language learning strategies and the English proficiency, which were indicated by students' grades and self-efficacy. Suggestions are offered for future research.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies, English Proficiency

## Introduction

Within the field of education during the last two decades, a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less stress on teachers and teaching and greater emphasis on students and learning. One consequence of this shift was an increasing awareness and interest in resources for learning styles and language learning strategies in foreign and second language teaching and learning. Applying the ideas to language learning, language learning itself is a lifelong task, and language-learning strategies are important skills for students' self-directed language learning. It appears that successful language students have the ability to orchestrate and combine particular types of language learning strategies in effective ways, according to their own learning needs (Oxford, 1990). Thus, to facilitate students' language learning and to promote learner autonomy, language-learning strategies are a key point for instructors to which one must pay attention.

The present study explored the use of language learning strategies as an important factor in the success of ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The scarcity of research on the language learning strategies (LLS) of Chinese students in an international context has encouraged the researcher to investigate the current use of language learning strategies among Chinese undergraduate students at an international university. With a large population of Chinese undergraduate students, Assumption University of Thailand was chosen as the place to carry out this study.

## Statement of the Problem

Assumption University is an international community with students and teachers drawn from more than 30 countries from all over the world. Although English is used in most of the communications among ABAC people, there are still occasions when culture shock occurs and the cultural and academic background of both teachers and students may affect the actual teaching and learning in the classroom. Many Chinese students come to study in Assumption University every year. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the importance of getting more information about this vast group of students in order that teachers and students can cooperate better for the improvement of the teaching and learning outcomes for this specific group of students.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: 1) To determine the extent of use of each of six language learning strategy categories by Chinese undergraduate students at Assumption University; 2) to investigate the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and the English proficiency of Chinese undergraduate students at Assumption University.

## Theoretical Framework

In Oxford's language learning strategy taxonomy, language-learning strategies are divided into two big categories: direct and indirect strategies. According to Oxford (1990b, P.71), the direct language learning strategies "directly involve the subject matter". In that sense, "all direct strategies require mental processing of the language" (Oxford, 1990a, p. 37). As for the indirect language learning strategies, they "do not directly involve the subject matter itself, but are essential to language learning nonetheless" (Oxford, 1990b, P.71).

The category of direct strategies is further divided into three subcategories, including memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Similar to the direct strategies, the category of indirect strategies is also divided into three categories, including meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

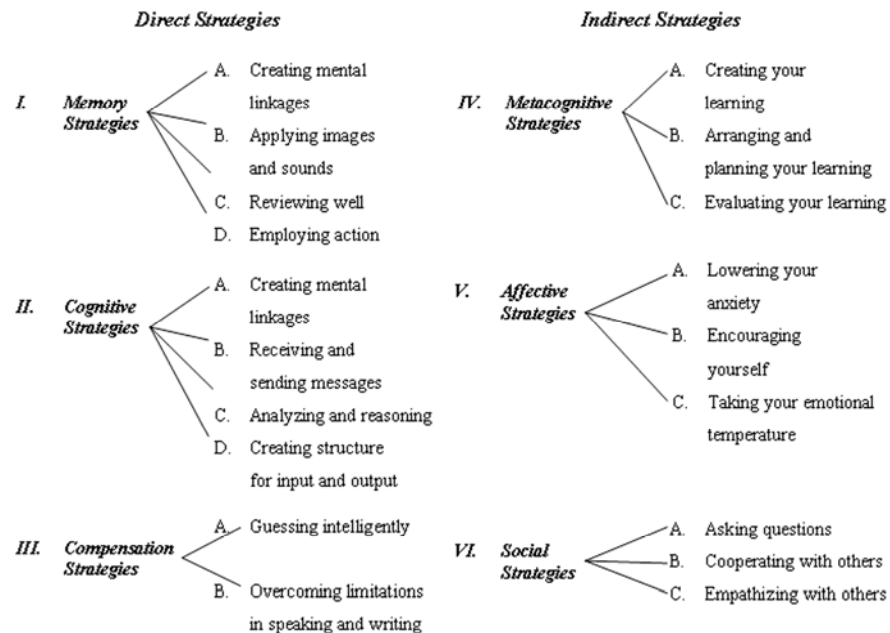


Figure 1 Oxford's LLS Taxonomy (1990a)

## Review of the Related Literature

### *Language Proficiency and Language Learning Strategies Use*

Many studies show the relationship between language learning strategies and language proficiency, and MacIntyre (1994) further emphasized that strategy use results from and leads to increased proficiency. Strategies are the causes and the outcomes of improved language proficiency. Bremner (1999) called for more investigation of MacIntyre's conclusion.

In Osanai's (2000) study of 147 foreign students in universities in the United States, he found self-rating proficiency was significantly correlated with the use of language learning strategies. In Wharton's (2000) study of university students' language learning strategies, he reported that students who rated their proficiency as "good" and "fair" used SILL strategies significantly more often than those who rated their

proficiency as “poor”. He further concluded “... a linear relationship between proficiency level and the reported frequency of use of many strategies” (2000, P.231), and “[t]he relationship is two way, however, with proficiency affecting strategy use and vice versa” (P.232).

According to the above review of literature, it appears that learners with higher proficiency use language-learning strategies more often than those with lower proficiency. Wharton (2000, P.208) argued that it does not “indicate that learners become more effective strategy users as their L2 proficiency increases”. He stated it is possible “that only successful language learner’s progress to advanced-level courses, with weaker ones simply dropping out”.

### Subjects

The subjects of the study were 254 Chinese undergraduate students who were studying at Assumption University of Thailand in the academic year 2006-2007.

### Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study of language learning strategies of Chinese undergraduate students has two parts: one part pertains to individual background information, including gender, English grades and self-efficacy, and the other part is a questionnaire based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (50 items Version 7.0 for EFL/ESL) developed by Oxford in 1989 (Oxford, 1990a). Oxford’s classification system was the basis for the self-scoring survey.

### Data analysis

#### *Strategy Categories*

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Language Learning Strategy Use (N=254)**

Strategy Group	Lowest	Highest	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank Order of Usage
A Memory	1.72	2.71	2.28	.62	6
B Cognitive	1.47	4.06	2.65	.63	3
C Compensation	2.08	3.59	3.01	.76	1
D Meta-cognitive	1.71	3.50	2.68	.83	2
E Affective	1.24	2.98	2.43	.74	4
F Social	1.30	3.54	2.37	.73	5
Overall	1.59	3.40	2.57	.59	

Note: Scores were rounded to 2 decimal places. 1=most frequently used; 6=least frequently used.

The mean score of the 50 items in the SILL was 2.57 for all the subjects. Twenty-five out of the 50 items, on average, were used more frequently. The ten strategies used most often by the subjects were practicing new English words, making up new words, repeating, practicing sounds, associating and analyzing words, paying attention when someone is speaking English, paraphrasing, guessing, thinking about the progress in learning English, and trying to find out how to be a better learner of English. Conversely, the ten strategies used least by the subjects were connecting sounds, planning time to study English, making summaries in English, reading for pleasure, using new words to make sentences, physically acting out new English words, talking to people in English, writing notes, messages, letters, or reports in English, asking help from English speakers, and writing down feelings in a diary. The ranking of the six strategy categories in the SILL according to the frequency of use was Compensation, Meta-cognitive, Cognitive, Affective, Social, and Memory strategies.

**Table 2: Correlations between EFL Proficiency and Strategy use**

Language Learning Strategy Type		Direct Strategies			Indirect Strategies			Overall Strategy
		Mem. r	Cog. r	Com. r	Met. r	Aff. r	Soc. r	
English Proficiency	Grades	.233	.274	.182	.301	.162	.260	.299
	Self-efficacy	.322	.355	.179	.233	.005	.202	.214

The relationships between students' English proficiency, including English grades and self-efficacy, and each of the language learning strategy categories were determined and examined. Regarding the correlation between English grades and strategy use, the significant positive correlations indicated that the better the grades, the more frequently they used the strategies. The strongest correlation (.301) was between Meta-cognitive strategies and English grades, and the weakest correlation (.162) was between the use of Affective strategies and English grades.

## Discussion

The subjects of the study revealed that they were medium and low strategy users in EFL learning, which is consistent with the other strategy studies in China employing Oxford's SILL (version 7.0), such as Yu's (2003) study (M=2.94) on Chinese medical university EFL learners; the study of 86 English major sophomores by Han and Lin (2000) (M=3.15), and the study of 168 third-year students university English majors by Nisbet (2002) (M=3.45). In all three cases, the overall strategy use was reported in the medium range.

Since the more the strategies are used, the better the results show for students learning, there is a need to promote strategy awareness and application in the learning and teaching of the English language. The findings of high frequency use of Compensation strategies and least frequent use of Memory strategies are consistent with the aforementioned studies on English majors by Nisbet (2002), and Han and Lin (2000). However, they are inconsistent with the few existing SILL studies which focus on non-English majors such as the study by Yu (2003) where the non-English majors reported using Compensation strategies most frequently and Memory strategies least frequently, nor was it consistent with the research by Griffiths and Parr (1999), in an ESL learning context in Auckland, New Zealand, who found Social strategies being the most frequently used and Memory strategies being the least frequently used.

Regarding the positive correlation found between English proficiency and language learning strategy use in the present study, EFL teachers may introduce those strategies used more frequently by good language learners to the academically poor learners. Hopefully, they could benefit from the effective strategies employed by the good learners to improve their EFL proficiency.

As for the issue of the reliability of the students' responses, Politzer and McGroarty advised caution for researchers using self-report data concerning learning behaviors, and stated that they can "reflect general intelligence, a desire to give the 'right' answer or to please the teacher and so on" (1985, P.118). See also Cohen (1987) for a general discussion of using verbal reports in research. There is a range of factors, then, which can affect the picture of strategy use that emerges from elicitation instruments such as the SILL. In this study, given the de-contextualized nature of the questionnaire items and the problems of interpretation that this might cause, many of the strategies with significant levels of association with proficiency level may appear rather vague to a teacher because they lack a context and might seem to be little more than a set of broad practice behaviors. Do they represent behaviors that can be translated into teachable techniques? Item 18 ("I first skim an English passage then go back and read it carefully") and item 27 ("I read English without looking up every word") could be passed on as strategies for reading; but item 12 ("I practice the sounds of English"), item 13 ("I use English words I know in different ways"), and item 49 ("I ask questions in English"), for example, are too general to be anything but exhortations to practice more.

The research methodology used here, the combination of the SILL and proficiency scores, is perhaps not in itself sufficient to provide practical, useable insights into the relationship between strategy use and proficiency level. Oxford and Green (1995) discussed what the SILL is appropriate for, and pointed out that no single data-generating technique can serve every purpose. The SILL, they stated, provides “a good general picture of strategy use” (1995, P.167), as it does for this group of Chinese students. However, when analyzing students’ levels of strategy use in conjunction with their proficiency level, a general idea of the associations between the two at one moment in time is provided. The effect of one on the other is not being measured. If we are to learn more about this relationship, a much narrower focus needs to be utilized. Instruments such as the SILL could be a starting point for such research, providing a general idea of which strategies have significant levels of association with proficiency. It would then be necessary to establish what these strategies actually mean to students in their particular learning situation, and then to find a way of converting them into teachable techniques, the effect of which could be measured over a period of time with different groups of learners. The SILL provides a snapshot, but only by using more longitudinal approaches will we get an idea of the possible effects that language learning strategies have on proficiency.

## **Recommendations**

The current survey study provides EFL teachers at Assumption University of Thailand at least with a better understanding of the ways EFL Chinese students approach their learning. It also reveals that there is a need for teachers to help students understand more about their strategy choice to enhance their learning. Pertaining to the frequency of language learning strategy use, the researcher sensed the need to promote learners’ awareness of employing more frequently these 6 strategy categories during their English study. Preferably, teachers could integrate the instruction and/or teaching of these less frequently used strategy categories into daily teaching so that they could provide learners with a systematic opportunity to be exposed to strategy instruction unconsciously since strategy use has been frequently documented as contributing to the success of second language learning.

The pedagogical implications of this study suggest that a variety of meaningful language learning tasks that can be completed and evaluated for progress will likely benefit the students. In addition, a teacher can utilize an understanding of individual language learning strategy preferences by enabling and encouraging the learner in that area if research supports it. For example, if a student tends to prefer a more frequent combination use of cognitive strategies and compensation strategies, then language learning tasks that support these strategies can be more efficiently implemented.

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