

EXAMINING AND EXPLOITING ENGLISH LEARNING STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines learning strategies employed by 43 high to medium achieving Thai university students majoring in Business English at a private university in Thailand. The study lays particular emphasis on social strategies which learners use to afford them opportunities to be exposed to and practise their knowledge in the target language. It is found that the most used social strategies are the ones considered easily achievable: asking for repetition or clarification, watching TV, and listening to songs, and that talking to other foreigners and to native English speakers are useful strategies to enhance chances to practise English. Many report trying to use merely English at school, speaking Thai only necessary as a technique useful to improve their English competence. The process of exploring the participants' use of learning strategies is carried out through questionnaires and interviews. By combining these two methods, greater insights are offered. Implications from the study have contributed to the teacher's role in strategy training and to other domains of language learning strategies with different groups of participants. The study also takes a position where no learning strategy is ideal as individuals should attempt to seek strategies appropriate for their needs and levels of learning.

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INTRODUCTION

In an EFL learning environment where English is used as a medium of instruction, which is deemed unique, it urged me to undertake a study into language learning strategies used among the learners within such a context. Particularly, at university level in which learners are pursuing a degree in English or in a cognate discipline, their use of English learning strategies and how they employ such strategies to help them improve their English skills appear to be a topic of interest.

Thus I decided to investigate one of the indirect learning strategies, social learning strategies (Oxford, 1990), that the participants utilise during their university studies and even in their daily lives outside the classroom. My rationale for electing to focus on indirect strategies is that all participants are enrolled to study in a specific field (Business English) in an EFL setting where direct needs for improving English seem less important. They tend to center more on their studies to attain satisfactory academic performance and disregard the mental processes of learning English, although this cohort (group) of learners in my view is likely to have more English fondness than those in other disciplines. Moreover, in this milieu of learning, English is used predominantly at school but rarely or perhaps none other than that. Because of this, investigating the strategies that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language seems to fit in this research context.

Social learning techniques also appeal to me in particular. As a Thai EFL teacher, I experience that Thai students have a tendency to be socially oriented to learning English in their own time. In addition, during the pilot interview when I questioned some interviewees on what language strategies they used, most of their responses were directed towards learning strategies appearing in the social context. The specific research question was:

What social learning strategies are employed by Thai university students who are considered successful language learners?

The study focused on forty-three high to medium achieving students who were selected purposively on the basis of their academic performance (G.P.A.) and numbers of credits achieved. In this study context, it is believed that all participants can be considered successful language learners since they have performed satisfactorily in terms of grade given the fact that they are currently studying through the medium of English. Why investigating specifically at successful students? Most of the literature has suggested that strategies used by successful learners can be applied to less successful learners in helping them become better language learners (Rubin, 1975). Even though this notion is still problematic to some strategy researchers, I can see the possibility of using strategies of successful learners as guidelines or hints for helping unsuccessful learners to develop their own effective learning strategies.

Next, the relevant literature on language strategies is discussed with a particular reference to social learning strategies.

LITERATURE ReVIEW

There has been a shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the past two decades to a focus on learners and learning rather than merely on teachers and teaching. In the light of this, how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they employ to understand, learn or remember has been the main concern of many of the researchers who work in the area of foreign language teaching.

The term language learning strategy has been defined by many researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987: 19) define learning strategies as ‘any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the

learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information'. Richards and Platt (1992: 209) assert that learning strategies are 'intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information'. According to Cohen (1998: 4) learning strategies are defined as 'learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner'. Faerch Claus and Casper (1983: 67) stress that a learning strategy is 'an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language'. However, there are problems in defining language learning strategies as terms such as tactics, plans, techniques and language processing strategies are used, creating difficulty in separating what is meant by each.

Research into learning strategies started in the 1960s. Williams and Burden (1997: 149) state that developments in cognitive psychology influenced much of the research done on language learning strategies. The first focus for learning strategy research was on identifying the characteristics of effective learners. In 1966, Aaron Carton's study was the first attempt to investigate learner strategies. After Carton, in 1971, Rubin started doing research which focused on the strategies of successful learners and stated that such strategies could be useful to less successful learners to help them learn a foreign language effectively. O'Mally and Chamot (1990) make the assertion that language learning strategies are also viewed in cognitive theory as complex cognitive skills. The advantage of viewing language acquisition as a cognitive skill is that it provides a mechanism for describing how language learning ability can be improved.

Wenden and Rubin (1987) identified strategies reported by students or observed in language learning situations that appear to contribute to learning. Their research showed that students do use learning strategies while learning a second language and that these strategies can be described and classified. Therefore, it is possible to say

that all language learners use language learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously when they process new information and perform tasks in the second language.

Useful categories of strategy use have been formulated by Wenden and Rubin (1987), O'Mally and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Cohen (1998) and many others. Most of these efforts to classify language learning strategies reflect more or less the same categorisations of strategies. However, although it is beneficial to classify language learning strategies into categories, research studies on learning strategies should go beyond their descriptive taxonomies. To identify types of language learning strategies that appear to be the most effective to learners in certain contexts would seem to be a more productive goal.

Wenden and Rubin (1987) as well as Oxford (1990) classify the learning strategies into two types. The first consists of categories that directly affect learning, including clarification, monitoring, memorisation, guessing or inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice. The second category, consisting of strategies that contribute indirectly to learning, includes creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as using gestures, starting conversations in L2, watching films and reading books.

Oxford (1990) further subdivides learning strategies into six groups. She claims that the aim of language learning strategies is to develop communicative competence. Each type of strategy can support and connect with the others. In Oxford's system, direct strategies are 'memory', 'cognitive' and 'compensation' strategies whereas indirect strategies encompass 'metacognitive', 'affective' and 'social' strategies. In brief, memory strategies are those used for storage of information. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning. Compensation strategies help learners to overcome gaps to continue the communication. Metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned

with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies, the focus of this study, refer to those activities that lead to increased interaction and practice with the target language, such as asking for clarification, cooperating with others and empathising with others.

Rubin (1975), who pioneered much of the work in the field of strategies, identifies seven general characteristics of a good language learner, which include such social strategies as seeking out opportunities to use the language by looking for native speakers, and going to the cinema or to other cultural events.

The use of social strategies relates to what Bialstok (1981) called functional practicing. Functional practice occurs when the language learner increases his or her opportunity to use the language for communication with activities, such as going to movies, reading books or talking to native speakers (*ibid*: 25). Using Bialstok's model of second language learning, Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) conducted research on the role of functional strategies in the development of oral communication. They confirm that students who were more successful in oral skill reported using more functional practice strategies than the less successful students.

Other research studies that examine social learning strategies as related to the improvement of language skills were conducted by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) and Halfiz and Tudor (1989). Elley and Mangubhai's study investigated the effect of extensive reading on Fijian school children. The findings showed that students who were exposed to extensive reading had advanced in receptive skills, reading and listening, at twice the progress of the control group. Halfiz and Tudor's research on a group of second language learners from Pakistani origins in England revealed that the experimental group, which spent three months reading for entertainment one hour a day, had made noticeable levels of improvement on all seven language tests.

In an attempt to find an effective methodol-

ogy to examine how learners use strategies, early researchers such as Naiman et al. (1975) stated that observation alone yielded insufficient information about strategies. They consequently used interviews with learners. However, the last decade has witnessed an increased interest in using learners' introspections such as think-aloud technique. Learner reports have formed a major research instrument while many claim that this approach is limited and problematic, as it can only investigate conscious strategies.

It is reported that language learners who are capable of using a wide variety of language learning strategies appropriately can improve their language skills (Fedderholdt, 1997). Developing skills in learning strategies can help language learners build up independence and autonomy and take control of their own learning. That language learning strategies contribute to the development of the communicative competence of the students is supported by Lessard-Clouston (1997). By this, he means that language learning strategies are used to refer to all strategies foreign language learners use in learning the target language, not only strategies used in communication. Communicative competence does not simply apply to being competent in speaking or listening. Rather, this concept applies to all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. As Oxford (1990: 1) states, language learning strategies 'are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence'.

Research into language learning strategies has identified a number of positive strategies used by good language learners. Such strategies could also be used by less successful language learners aiming to become more successful in language learning. However, there is the possibility that unsuccessful language learners use the same strategies as successful learners but become less successful due to some other reasons (Vann and Roberta, 1990). It is important to note that using the same

strategies as successful language learners does not ensure that unsuccessful language learners will eventually become successful in language learning as other factors may also play a role in achievement. Factors such as age, gender, personality, motivation, experience and learning style also affect the way that language learners learn the target language. Thus, we cannot claim that all language learners must use the same good language learning strategies to succeed in learning a language.

Besides developing the communicative competence of the students, teachers who train students to use language learning strategies can help them become better language learners. To help students understand good language learning strategies and to train them to develop such effective strategies can be considered 'the appreciated characteristics of a good language teacher' (Lessard-Clouston 1997: 3).

Hall (1997) suggests that the most important teacher role in foreign language teaching is the preparation of a variety of tasks to match varied learning styles. Language teachers who try to train their students in using language learning strategies should learn about their students, their interests, motivations, and learning styles. Teachers can learn what language learning strategies they use by observing them in and outside of class. They should observe their behavior such as whether students ask for clarification, verification or correction, or whether they cooperate with their peers or seem to have some contact with proficient foreign language users. In this way, teachers can have some knowledge about their students and their language learning background. Teachers should be aware that individual learners in the same classroom might have different learning styles and various awareness of the use of strategies. Realizing the individual variety, teachers can provide a wide range of learning strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of their students who have different learning styles and strategy preferences.

METHOD

Research rationale

This research was carried out primarily within an interpretative framework. It aims to understand the phenomenon and interpret how individuals make sense of their meanings. Two instruments were employed to collect data for this study: a questionnaire followed by a semi-structured interview. The quantitative tool is used merely to express the findings of questionnaire data in figures so that it is possible to gain a simplified insight into the participants' use of social strategies. Many researchers have tried to use both quantitative and qualitative methods in their studies whenever appropriate (Ernest, 1994) to strengthen and supplement their research data.

Participants

The sample in this study was Thai students studying for a 4-year undergraduate degree program in Business English at a Thai private university. To meet the selection criteria set out for the purpose of the research, the participants must have obtained at least a 2.75 G.P.A. out of a 4.0 scale at the time this study was conducted. In addition, a minimum of 100 credits earned by the participants out of 142 credits required for graduation was a requisite. This was to ensure that they had been on the program for some time and had obtained proper numbers of credits commensurate with their academic year (they should have been juniors and seniors and indeed they were). All have been studying English since they were five to seven years old. About one fourth have studied abroad for some time. Their ages range from nineteen to twenty two, with the most frequent age being nineteen to twenty, and female students outnumber the males.

Data Collection Methods

After I had interviewed three students during the pilot study, I decided to use two data collection methods: a questionnaire and a semi-structured

tured interview. There are several main reasons for this. First, these respondents were able to point out only a few strategies they employed. I had to prompt them to speak in detail and they admitted that in fact they had undertaken several learning strategies but could not introspect or express them within the interview session. At that point, I believed that if I used a questionnaire listing all possible social strategies related to language skill development in the actual investigation, it would enable the participants to recognise and evaluate those learning strategies used. Second, with the interview, the respondents were able to give in their own words their views on their learning strategies. Finally, combining these two methods helped me to obtain unbiased and complete data; that is, I was able to compare their questionnaire responses with the interview data.

Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire consisted of thirty-one items. Each item was scored on a Likart scale from one to five. I took several items from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990). However, these items asked about social strategy use in general so I reworded them to make them suitable for the respondents' context. Other items arose from the interviews I conducted prior to questionnaire construction. I also asked some students both Thai and foreigners to contribute some input on their social learning strategies. To ensure that the instrument indeed measured what it intended to examine, I established face and content validity through two English lecturers who affirmed that the questions did measure the constructs sensibly. The questionnaire was then translated into Thai to minimise the problem of the participants' misunderstanding the language. Different wordings in translation were resolved through a discussion with another Thai teacher of English. After that I piloted my translated questionnaire with five students. They agreed that all items asked were comprehensible.

For the main study, I assured the participants

that all their names and information would be kept confidential and that participation in the questionnaire was purely voluntary. For ethical reasons, a coding system was used so that respondents could avoid writing their names on the forms. They were informed that I would contact them for voluntary follow-up interviews in due course. The questionnaire was totally administered within the period of ten days. Out of forty-eight, forty-three sets of questionnaires were returned. The response rate was approximately ninety percent.

In analysing the questionnaire data, I identified and classified participants' social learning strategies using the categories developed by Oxford (1990: 169), but I also modified them to reflect strategies that my participants reported using in the pre-interview session during the pilot. Oxford's original system of social strategies comprises three main categories: asking questions, cooperating with others and empathising with others. 'Seeking opportunities' was the new category formulated which can be divided into two subcategories: seeking opportunities to listen and/or read in L2 and seeking opportunities to speak and/or write in L2. I placed listening and reading together, and speaking and writing together because they are 'receptive skills' and 'productive skills' respectively. Table 1 displays the categories of social strategies.

Constructs relating to social learning strategies, which contribute to English skill development, were expressed in the questionnaire in terms of how true the respondents believe the statements were. The response 'almost or almost always true of me' received the value of five, while the other responses received four, three, two and one respectively in descending order. The mean was calculated for each strategy statement. This gave a simplified insight into the participants' use of social learning strategies.

Of the forty-three subjects who returned the questionnaires, ten were selected for interview. Since I targeted this particular group, where no attempt to generalise was desired, a similar popu-

Table 1 Social Learning Strategies Contributing to Language Development

	Categories of social strategies	Subcategories of strategies
Social strategies	A. Asking questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asking for clarification or verification or repetition 2. Asking for correction
	B. Cooperating with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cooperating with peers 2. Cooperating with proficient language users
	C. Empathising with others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing cultural understanding 2. Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings
	D. Seeking opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seeking opportunities to listen and/or read in L2 2. Seeking opportunities to speak and/or write in L2

lation was acceptable (Cohen et al. 2000). Particularly, I used dimensional sampling, one type of non-probability sampling, to identify various factors of interest in a population and obtain at least one respondent for every combination of those factors. As a result, the criteria for selection included gender: half of the interviewees were male and the other half were female. I also considered their ages, covering all the possible ranges; numbers of credits taken; time spent learning English and in any English-speaking countries, minor areas of studies, and interesting cases of activities as noted from the questionnaire responses. I was given their consent prior to conducting the interview.

The interview was based on the research question and the information I obtained from the questionnaire. I used a semi-structured interview, allowing me to prompt the interviewees to elaborate their ideas when they gave incomplete answers or too little information about their learning strategies. This way, I was also able to pursue topics that may have been overlooked when the questions were drawn up. Correspondingly, respondents were free to expand on any answers if

they wished.

All interviews were conducted in Thai. They were audiotaped and transcribed. After transcribing, I sent interview scripts back to the interviewees to let them read them and fill in additional information wherever they wished. Finally, a Thai lecturer in TESOL assisted me to ensure acceptable translation of interview scripts into English as well as to crosscheck the scripts for properly constructed categorisation. The interviews lasted about ten to fifteen minutes for each respondent.

Limitations

There is a constraint related to the participants' use of strategies. I realise that not all learning strategies are consciously employed; some strategies used may be unconscious (Rubin, 1975). With regards to the limitation of the research design, it lies in the lack of generalisability of results. Although we cannot generalise too much from a small sample across all population in the world, this research study at least will shed light on future research into learning strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire results

The results of questionnaire analysis reporting the strategies used in order of the mean scores are shown in Table 2.

Item 6, If I don't understand something in English, I ask other persons to slow down or say it again, had the highest mean score of 4.25. However, I can see that in order to do this, students need to learn acceptable ways to ask for clarification or verification.

The second and third most used strategies were item 8, I try to watch English programs on TV, and item 18, I try to watch English movies as often as I can, with the mean scores of 4.09 and 3.97 accordingly. Apart from entertaining the respondents, watching TV and movies helps them develop greater cultural awareness and provides opportunities to listen to the target language. Some introverted language learners might prefer to employ this strategy to practise on their own rather than engaging in a direct interaction with other foreign students and teachers or native English speakers.

Table 2 Quantitative statistics of social strategies used in order

Social strategies (Questionnaire item)	Category(s)	Subcategory(s)	Mean
1. If I do not understand something in English, I ask other persons to slow down or say it again (6)	Asking questions	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition	4.25
2. I try to watch English programs on TV (8)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen and read in L2	4.09
3. I try to watch English movies as often as I can (18)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen and read in L2	3.97
4. I try to listen to English songs (14)	Seeking opportunities	Seeking opportunities to listen in L2	3.90
5. I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English (9)	Empathising with others	Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings	3.79
6. I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English (12)	Empathising with others	Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings	3.79
7. I read extra books or sources in English (13)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to read in L2	3.70
8. I try to listen to English radio programs (17)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen in L2	3.60

Social strategies (Questionnaire item)	Category(s)	Subcategory(s)	Mean
9. I ask questions in English in the classroom when studying with foreign teachers (2)	Asking questions	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition	3.58
10. I read and try to understand English signs and directions (27)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to read in L2	3.58
11. I try to sense the feelings of other people when I speak English with them face to face (28)	Empathising with others	Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings	3.53
12. I have a regular language learning friend (7)	Cooperating with others	Cooperating with peers or with proficient language users	3.46
13. I keep in touch with other foreign or native English speaking students by writing or e-mailing (22)	Cooperating with others and seeking opportunities	Cooperating with peers or with proficient language users and seeking opportunities to write in L2	3.41
14. I try to find opportunities to talk to and socialise with native English speaking people and other foreigners (15)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	3.23
15. I ask other people to check whether they have understood my meaning in English correctly (10)	Asking questions	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition	3.18
16. If I don't understand something after I read, I ask native English speakers, or foreign teachers or friends to clarify (20)	Asking questions	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition	3.11
17. I ask for general help from my classmates who are native English speakers and foreign students (3)	Asking questions	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition and asking for correction	3.09
18. I register for English lessons extra from regular ones at school (30)	Seeking opportunities	Seeking opportunities to listen, speak, write and read in L2	2.90
19. I ask native English speakers or foreign teachers/friends to correct me when I speak (5)	Asking questions	Asking for correction	2.88
20. I work with other learners (both native English and foreign) to practise, review or share information (11)	Cooperating with others and seeking opportunities	Cooperating with peers and seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	2.86

Social strategies (Questionnaire item)	Category(s)	Subcategory(s)	Mean
21. I try to learn about the culture of native English speakers (1)	Empathising with others	Developing cultural understanding	2.83
22. I use the Internet to learn more about English, native English people and their culture (21)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to read in L2	2.74
23. I try to speak with or ask Thai English teachers using English (19)	Asking questions and seeking opportunities	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition and seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	2.69
24. I ask native English speakers or foreign teachers/ friends to correct me when I write (4)	Asking questions	Asking for correction	2.55
25. I play English games with myself and with others (24)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen, read, and speak in L2	2.55
26. I try to speak with or ask my Thai friends in English (31)	Asking questions and seeking opportunities	Asking for clarification or verification or repetition and seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	2.45
27. I participate in university activities e.g. taking part in English club or attending social events related to English (16)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	2.27
28. I attend the theatre to see a play in English (if any) (26)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen in L2	2.15
29. I spend extra time practising English in the language lab (29)	Seeking opportunities	Seeking opportunities to listen and speak in L2	2.04
30. I attend free public talks and lectures in English (23)	Empathising with others and seeking opportunities	Developing cultural understanding and seeking opportunities to listen in L2	1.90
31. I practise listening to English language tapes (25)	Seeking opportunities	Seeking opportunities to listen in L2	1.79

I try to listen to English songs, item 14, was ranked fourth, showing a 3.90 average score. This social learning technique, like watching TV and movies, familiarises the respondents with cultural understanding and offers chances to listen more in the second language. In the era of globalisation, it is quite likely to say that most of the respondents have radios at home or else personal computers equipped with playable audio functions, allowing them to listen to various kinds of music in English and other languages.

The fifth and the sixth most used strategies were item 9, *I try to sense the feelings of other people when they write something to me in English*, and item 12, *I pay close attention to the thoughts and feelings of other people with whom I interact in English*, receiving equal mean scores of 3.79. My belief is that these two strategies are favoured as they bring the students closer to the people they encounter, and help them understand what is conveyed more deeply and clearly. As shown in Table 2, the remaining strategies are listed in descending order of reported use.

In contrast, item 25, *I practise listening to English language tapes*, received the lowest score from the students, with a mean score of 1.79. The probable explanation embodies the fact that this learning strategy lacks an element of motivation to interest them given that they are not language beginners. It is a one-way non-visual communication aimed mainly at listening and is not realistic and pleasurable as compared to other means of communicative activities such as watching TV or listening to songs.

The second lowest score was item 23, *I attend free public talks and lectures*, receiving a 1.90 mean score. Many factors might contribute to this. Uninteresting topics of lectures could mean that the respondents do not attend. *I spend extra time practising English in the language lab*, item 29, was the third least used strategy with a mean score of 2.04. This is probably like listening to English practice tapes in that it does not

supply updated, enjoyable and practical learning content.

The average mean score for all participants was 94.38 out of 155, equivalent to 60.89%. Drawing on most of the literature on successful language learners, I was not surprised to see that all respondents, whom I considered to be successful learners in this context, generally employed a considerable number of learning strategies to facilitate the language learning process (Abraham and Vann, 1987).

Interview results

The interview attempted to answer the research question and crosscheck the questionnaire results. I started by asking the first question, “What learning strategies do you use to improve your English?” (I avoided technical language in the Thai version). I was aware that the question was a general question, not specific to the social context because I intended to give interviewees freedom to express their ideas about learning strategies but with high expectation that their responses would be associated with social strategies. I assumed that if I specifically directed my query toward social strategies, the interviewees might have had difficulties thinking of answers that related to those that occur only in the social context. This problem arose in the pilot interview. As I anticipated, most responses related to learning strategies used in the social context and were quite similar to those responses given during the pilot study. In most cases, their responses were quite alike, including phrases such as ‘watching TV, listening to the radio, socializing with foreign friends and teachers’. However, in a few instances, they gave more particular explanations such as trying to speak only English at school, asking questions, listening to English whenever possible, playing games, reading texts in English, and practising and observing. Table 3 summarizes the responses to the first interview question.

Table 3 Response to Question "What learning strategies do you use to improve your English?"

**Watching TV	Asking questions to native English speakers
**Talking to foreign friends and teachers	Listening to everything in English
**Listening to songs	Playing games
*Trying to speak English all the time particularly at school	Talking to native English speakers
*Watching movies	Asking for correction
*Listening to the radio	Observing signs
*Reading magazines and newspapers	Reading English texts
	Practising and memorising

NB. **response from > 50% of interviewees * response from >25% of interviewees

Almost half of the interviewees stated that they saw a need to improve their English and wanted to do so. However, spending a lot of time focusing on their studies at school and working on assignments restricted some possibility. These academic obligations had some impact on them than a desire to purposefully improve their English as illustrated in the following quotations:

‘After my class, I feel very tired. I have no time to attend any seminar. It is also a bit boring and the topic is not interesting. I think if I attend it, it might be useful provided that I know some background about the topic’.

‘I want to practice speaking and listening from watching TV but I have no time. There is so much

work that I have time for nothing. If the teacher asks us to see a movie or listen to something, then it is just a good chance’.

‘I think using the language lab is useful. I want to go but I have to study. After class, I feel I have no mood to do any other task’.

The subsequent interview questions were intended to compare the questionnaire results. The six most used strategies and the three least used strategies according to the quantitative outcomes were selected and investigated for this purpose. These strategies can be found in Table 4. The outcomes of the interview were checked against the responses to these nine items in the questionnaires.

Table 4 Statistics of the most and least used strategies from questionnaire analysis

Most used strategies	Mean
1. Asking others to slow down or say it again	4.25
2. Watching programs on TV	4.09
3. Watching movies	3.97
4. Listening to songs	3.90
5. Trying to sense the feelings of other people when they write something	3.79
6. Paying attention to the thoughts of others while interacting	3.79
Least used strategies	
1. Practising listening to English language tapes	1.79
2. Attending free public talks and lectures	1.90
3. Spending time to practice English in the language lab	2.04

The interviewees' responses were mostly in line with strategies they reported using in the questionnaires. Only one male interviewee gave an extremely opposite answer to the question on using the language lab. After I asked him twice, it was apparent that he misunderstood the distinction between the strategy he used and that which he believed to be effective.

By analyzing both data collection methods, I am able to categorise the social learning strategies that the participants use frequently. A discussion of these strategies including a selection of the relevant students' direct quotations is given as follows:

1. Asking others to slow down or say it again

Most of the interviewees said they used this strategy very often. However, two participants pointed out that asking others to repeat something might depend on the relationship between the speaker and the listener and the significance of the topic. If both parties are close to each other, a tendency to use this technique increases and vice versa. Also, if the topic is not very important, there is no need to know every word.

A participant reported,

'Sometimes I feel that the speaking partner may be annoyed if I ask him/her to slow down or repeat the sentence. If we are not close, I am not going to interrupt'.

Another added,

'Usually I will ask the person to repeat first. Then, if I still don't understand, I will ask him/her to say it more slowly. It also depends on how quickly it is spoken. When the speed is very fast, I just let it go'.

According to Oxford (1990), asking questions for clarification or verification is used more often in receptive skills (listening and reading) than in productive skills (speaking and writing). It is not surprising that the respondents in this study employ this learning strategy most in communication as they need to communicate frequently at university in the target language. With this in mind,

I feel that L2 learners should be exposed to ways of asking questions for clarification. Thus, they can most effectively make use of this strategy.

Levine, Baxter and McNulty (1987) also draw attention to 'focused repetition' by which learners underscore the word or part of the sentence they do not understand by repeating the whole phrase and replace the unknown word with 'what'. Thus, the needed part is made clearer. With this kind of information-gathering technique, learners can tell the speaker exactly what they want to hear.

2 & 3. Watching programmes on TV and movies

All participants reported watching TV programmes and movies to some extent. Most of them said watching TV had helped them become familiar with English. A few stated that this was also entertaining and familiarised them with native English speakers culture, as the following extracts show.

'I always watch TV. I like to see a football match. I get to listen to a variety of English accents. At the beginning, I didn't understand at all. After a while, it has got better. I am also entertained. It is fun and I get more general as well as cultural knowledge, too. Having a cable TV at home where I can watch different English programmes is a good way for me to practise listening and speaking.'

'Watching the same kind of program is better than watching various programs in my idea. You will get used to the vocabulary used specifically in that area, depending on how often you watch it too.'

Several of the participants also reported watching movies;

One said:

'Whenever I am free, I will leave the TV on especially the movie channel. I believe watching it improves my English.'

Another remarked:

'If I have time, I will rent or buy some movies

to watch or go to the cinema. This way, I can relieve my stress’.

The other participant added;

‘Watching movies really helps my English. Sometimes I repeat after what I hear. I can see cultural differences too’.

Weschler (2003) claims that movies are difficult to understand because they are ‘real world’, but at least from the linguistic perspective movie watching can become a tool for ESL learners to gain a rich experience, where native levels of comprehension are reachable. I tend to agree with his reference, as I feel that people will often modify their communicative styles when speaking with foreigners both by talking more slowly and reducing the range of colloquial vocabulary they use. Thus, through watching programmes on TV or movies, learners are exposed to authentic communicative English, which can assist in improving their linguistic competence and performance.

4. *Listening to songs*

Most participants favored this method of seeking opportunities for pleasure and language acquisition. They were able to access songs through tapes, the Internet, CDs or the radio. More than half indicated that memorizing phrases from songs could help improve their grammar and familiarise them with actual daily conversations.

As several participants pointed out;

‘Listening to songs helps me a lot. Some sentences are used in the daily life. I memorise what I often hear. As a result, my grammar is better too’.

‘At least I know how to pronounce some words. I remember some sentences and know what situations to use’.

‘I think it's better than watching TV because you will not see their mouths. It is more difficult and challenging, thus needs more skills so you have to try harder to listen’.

There is little data in the literature as to the development of language acquisition from listening to songs, but the input learners receive ap-

pears to correspond with Krashen’s input hypothesis. Pickard (1996) also claims that learners' exposure to the language through the medium of songs or radio, and in an enjoyable and pleasurable way, may aid language acquisition as opposed to learning. I always tell my students that ‘the more English you listen to, the faster you will reach a point where individual words become discreet sounds and meanings in your head’.

5 & 6. *Becoming aware of others’ thoughts and feelings when they write something or while interacting with them*

Almost without exception, the participants reported being concerned about others’ ideas and feelings when interacting or reading something in English. Two thirds of those interviewed stated that trying to repeatedly read the intended messages could bring them closer to the people with whom they communicate. In addition, they sought to interpret the meanings beyond the written words so as to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Half of the interviewees became aware of gestures, facial expressions, discussion topics and choices of words of their English speaking partners. One student said that she always had to guess other people’s feelings when conversing with them. The following extracts illustrate the way the participants work to interpret written text.

‘It will be better off after you read it many times. You will finally understand’.

‘Communicating through writing is limited. It is written and fixed. That's why I think it is very important that I pay close attention to the message. My strategy is to put myself into the position of the writer’.

In addition, some participants are actively involved in interpreting spoken communication;

‘I consider their postures to be very crucial in communication even more significant than the message itself’.

‘For me, I will notice their expressions whether they are serious or not. It depends on

the topic too. If it's academic-oriented, I am not much concerned. If it's personal, then I try to guess more. It is more difficult to guess their feelings about things that happen in their daily lives such as being angry or annoyed'.

Wenden and Rubin (1987) stress the need for deliberate, conscious effort on the part of the learner to excel in learning a second language. In other words, this means paying a lot of attention and being mentally active. Being mentally active entails converting or acting upon what one has received or asked about, which may cause changes in one's mind.

7. Talking to foreigners and native English speakers

The results obtained from the interview revealed the importance of this strategy. The majority of the interviewees said that speaking to foreigners or native English speakers could improve their English listening and speaking skills. Many of them expressed their intentions to be friends with other Asian foreigners as they found it more comfortable due to some reasons, such as similar cultures or backgrounds, the greater numbers of Asian students in their learning context, and a high degree of tolerance. However, they believed that talking and socialising with native English speakers was important if language improvement was needed despite the fact that there are very few of them at school. The following are extracts from their interviews:

'I look for non-native foreign speakers. At least, I have a chance to practice no matter right or wrong. In the end, it will improve by itself.'

'I try to socialise with native English speakers; Americans, English, Australians if I see them though they are not so many at university. Thus, I can pick up their feelings, pronunciation and stress. Mostly, I only manage to have short conversations with them such as greetings and partings.'

'The most important is to associate with any foreigner who speaks English. You don't have a chance to do this with Thais'.

Many research studies point to the importance of creating practice opportunities with native speakers and fluent language users. For example, Pearson (1988) finds that in one of the interview series with Japanese speakers, five participants who took every opportunity to talk and make friends with local people for six months reported that they could handle most of their communication needs in the target language. Practice strategies mentioned in the study of Huang and Van Naerssen (1987), including speaking with other students and native speakers, reveal perceivable language improvement of learners under study. It has almost become common knowledge today that associating with native speakers or fluent users of the target language helps second language learners improve language proficiency.

In the interview, a few participants also referred to other learning strategies not directly related to learning strategies used in the social context but showing some interconnectedness e.g. reading English textbooks, and practicing with oneself and memorising. I realise that these relevant strategies are very useful and can be applied appropriately to help learners become more successful. Nevertheless, to maintain the validity of the research domain, the discussion of results particularly focuses on social learning strategies.

Through questionnaires and interviews, I was able to investigate social learning strategies of this particular group of participants in great detail. Without a questionnaire, it would have been very difficult to elicit their strategies, as they did not appear to introspect on what strategies they actually used. Similarly, the interview is a necessary instrument, allowing me to compare the questionnaire data as well as facilitating respondents to freely express their ideas about learning strategies. Both methods permit considerable understanding of strategies used by language learners.

The data analysis reveals a wide range of social learning strategies employed by the participants. This relates to the findings of Rubin (1975), which state that good language learners employ a

variety of strategies including social strategies to help them become better and successful learners. In addition, such strategies may serve as a guideline to less successful learners. Most participants in the study seek what Bialstok (1981) called 'functional practising' in which language learners increase their opportunity to use the language for communicative competence. In their first language context such practice opportunities are limited owing to many factors. However, using a semi-structured interview may not be the best methodology to extract the strategies used, some of which may be subconscious. As the purpose of the research was to find out only what kind of strategies the participants used consciously, I did not make use of any methods that would investigate those used unconsciously.

It is important to repeat at this point the small-scale nature of this research. However, I hope this study will contribute to further studies which involve larger samples. I also believe that this research has established some interesting and useful insights into language learning strategies, which could benefit other researchers interested in this learning domain. There is a possibility for future studies in other areas of learning strategies such as cognitive and affective ones to find out how they bring about benefits to language learners.

I have learnt that the participants in this study have a preference for different kinds of strategies, leading to the inference that every learner has his or her own learning strategy and a personal rationale for that strategy. Factors like age, gender, personality, motivation, self-concept, life experience and learning style affect the way in which language learners learn the target language.

CONCLUSION

With reference to this study, it is apparent that the participants made most use of the strategies that were easily available to them e.g. watching TV, listening to the radio or songs and asking for

repetition. Strategies that required them to put some extra effort were not favored: going to the lab, practicing from English tapes and attending public lectures. This is possibly due to the demands of their academic studies and assigned tasks, resulting in less use of some certain learning strategies even though these strategies were thought to be beneficial.

The interview data also revealed the notion that talking to other foreigners and native English speakers is a useful way to improve the participants' English. This comes in with the idea of using English as much as possible; trying to avoid using Thai unless necessary. Given these findings, more research into this area appears to be needed. I believe a larger sample of participants and more in-depth investigation into learners' use of strategies in different contexts can generate interesting instances to see how learners in certain circumstances approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of learning.

In addition, the data emerging from this research have certain implications for language teachers. Teachers can act as facilitators of learning strategies. They can encourage learners to use a wide range of learning strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of the students. However, as Lessard (1997) mentions, studies of language learning strategies should go beyond detailed classification to seek answers to a wide range of questions, such as: what types of language learning strategies work best with what types of learners and in which contexts? Do language learning strategies transfer easily between the first language and the second language? I expect that answers to these questions will help pave the way for useful insights into language learning strategies.

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