



Language Learning Strategy Used by Cambodian EFL Students

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were: (1) to investigate the language learning strategies (LLS) employed by Cambodian EFL students enrolled at Mearchey and Build Bright University in Cambodia, and (2) to explore whether or not a difference exists between female and male students in the use of LLS. The participants were 159 first-year students majoring in English who were administered with a Likert-scale questionnaire based on the Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Means were calculated and independent sample t-tests were conducted. The findings showed that the students adopted LLS for high frequency use language. There was no significant difference between males and females in LLS use as a whole.

Keywords: language learning strategy, Cambodian EFL student, gender

1. Introduction

Background

In the Cambodian educational system, English is a compulsory subject from Grade Seven (in public lower secondary school) until tertiary education (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2004). A learner-centered approach has been extensively introduced in English instruction during the recent few decades in Cambodia, a country where English is used as a foreign language (EFL). Regarding this approach, teachers should assist students in studying effectively and becoming independent and autonomous in their language learning (Yang, 1998).

Because of the radical change from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered classroom emphasis, an inevitable result was the awareness and attention to language learning strategies (LLS) in foreign and second language (L2) teaching and learning (Shamis, 2003). Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) revealed that LLS is the crucial factor in L2 acquisition stages and different strategies are utilized by successful learners to address their learning problems within the realm of the language acquisition and production process. As a result, LLS have played a vital role in facilitating language learning and enhancing learner autonomy (Su, 2005). Moreover, appropriate strategy selection may promote the performance of learners in light of L2 learning, according to many earlier research studies (e.g. Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wharton, 2000).



Statement of the Problem

Even though a large number of studies on LLS in the context of EFL have been investigated, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have been no studies of LLS in Cambodia. With this in mind, the researchers were encouraged to examine a range of LLS by employing a case study of a group of undergraduate students majoring in English in Cambodia.

Research Questions

The research questions guided this study were the following:

1. What LLS's are more frequently used by Cambodian EFL students?
2. Is there a statistically significant gender difference in the use of LLS between male and female students?

Review of Literature

Definition of LLS

It was in 1978 when LLS was first defined by Bialystok (1978, p. 71) as "optional means for exploiting available information to improve competence in a second language."

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined LLS as special ways of processing information which enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of information, while Nunan (2001) stated that LLS refer to the mental and communicative processes adopted by learners for the sake of a language use. Finally, according to Oxford (1990), LLS refer to general and specific techniques, tactics, approaches, and basic skills that people use when trying to achieve their objectives.

Oxford's (1990) Classification of LLS

Oxford (1990) classified the most comprehensive LLS classification, which was cited in many LLS research studies. Oxford categorized LLS into six main categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies as follows:

1. Memory strategies refer to the tactics that learners apply in order to support new information storage. These strategies are made up of various skills, such as creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing action (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).
2. Cognitive strategies assist learners in manipulating incoming information by means of enhancing the learners to learn, understand, and produce new language. These strategies consist of practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).
3. Compensation strategies help learners' new language in terms of comprehension or production, although there are gaps in knowledge. Skills related to compensation strategies are guessing intelligently, and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).



On the other hand, indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies as follows:

4. Metacognitive strategies make use of knowledge of cognitive processes and constitute an attempt to regulate language learning. These strategies are centered on a language student's learning, arranging and planning learning, and evaluating learning (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).
5. Affective strategies are related to emotions, motivation and values of language learning. Such strategies include lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking one's emotional temperature (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).
6. Social strategies are the ways that learners interact with other people, such as peers or foreigners. These include asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others (Oxford, 1990, p. 17).

Related Studies

As to the effect of LLS on language learning and acquisition, gender appears to be an important factor, among other variables, such as motivation, age, or proficiency level (Khamkhien, 2010). Many research studies reported that women were significantly more likely to use LLS than men (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Green & Oxford, 1995; Gu, 2002; Lan & Oxford, 2003). Also, some results showed that females were surpassed by males on individual strategies (Green & Oxford, 1993, as cited in Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

Gender differences in the use of LLS have been frequently reported in the research literature. In the US, Politzer (1983), for instance, studied 90 college students, and discovered that females used social learning strategies more than males. In the context of English being used as a second language, the study attempted to reveal that female college students were more involved than males in social interaction with others, both inside and outside the classroom.

Ehrman and Oxford (1995) investigated strategies employed by 78 students. Oxford's (1990) 121-item Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was adopted to find out their strategy use. The results showed that female students used a greater number of strategies than male students.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989) undertook a study on strategy use of 1,200 undergraduate students. The researchers revealed that females utilized formal practice, general study, and conversational input elicitation strategies more often than male learners.

Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) conducted a study on whether there was a significant gender difference of strategy use. The participants were 55 EFL learners. The results showed that female learners employed more affective and social strategies than male learners. From this finding, it could be inferred that females build relationships with others more easily and consistently than males.

Teh, Embi, Yusoff, and Mahamod (2009) investigated possible differences between female and male Arabic students in LLS use. The sample was a total of 457 secondary school students in Malaysia. The data were obtained from the questionnaire modified from SILL (Oxford, 1990). The findings indicated that there was a significant gender difference in overall LLS use.

Aliakbari (2008), on the other hand, that there was no significant relationship between gender and LLS use among Iranian English students.



Also in the Middle East, in Oman, Radwan (2011) conducted research on the possible effect of gender on choice of LLS by university students majoring in English. Based upon Oxford's (1990) SILL, the study revealed that there was no significant difference between males and females in the use of LLS regardless social strategies.

Shmais (2003) studied the English LLS used among Arabic-speaking English major students in Palestine. The sample consisted of 99 students. One of the findings revealed that there was no significant gender difference in their strategy use.

In Korea, Yang (2010) investigated strategy use of 228 Korean university students. The researcher adopted a questionnaire based on Oxford's (1990) SILL. One of the results revealed that gender did not affect the overall use of strategy use of the students. In conclusion, it appears that there may be a cultural influence on gender differences in LLS use.

Methodology

Subjects

The research was undertaken at two universities, namely Meanchey and Build Bright University in Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia. The participants in this study were first-year students majoring in English. This target group was chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, they were the students of one researcher's friend; therefore, it was convenient to gather data. Secondly, with exposure to English during lower and higher secondary school, it was assumed that they would have their own opinions on and effective ways of English learning. Also, because they were freshman English majors, they were useful for investigating and reflecting their possible formulated strategies to learn English at early undergraduate degree.

The population was 270 Cambodian students. The participants were selected by random sampling using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size selection in which five classes were chosen from all classes. The average number of first-year students per class was about 30. Thus, 159 students, comprising of 74 males and 85 females, were the representative sample.

Research Tools

The instrument employed in this study was a LLS questionnaire. It focused on two sections: background information and SILL. SILL is the most well-known LLS scale and has been used extensively all over the world in the last 20 years (Oxford, 1990, pp. 294-296). The SILL version 7.0 (50 items), designed for non-native English speaking learners who use English as a second or foreign language, was adopted in this study. The questionnaire was presented in both English and Khmer.

The structured-questionnaire included six LLS sub-scales: Part A, which comprised items 1 to 9, asked about memory strategies; Part B, which comprised items 10 to 23, looked at cognitive strategies; Part C, which comprised items 24 to 29, asked about compensation strategies; Part D, comprising items 30 to 38, focused on metacognitive strategies; Part E, with items 39 to 44, looked at affective strategies; Part F, with items 45 to 50, concentrated on social strategies. The respondents' opinions were measured using a five-point scale. The numerical representations of the scales were as follows: 5 = almost completely true of me; 4 = usually true of me; 3 = somewhat true of me; 2 = usually not true of me; and 1 = almost never true of me.



The reliability value was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha (α) to ensure whether there was internal consistency within the items. The result of Cronbach's alpha coefficient of questionnaire was 0.94, showing that it was a highly reliable instrument.

Procedures

After gaining permission from the relevant universities, the researchers asked for cooperation from classroom lecturers and explained the nature of the study to the participants. The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 159 participants within a period of three days. The questionnaires took about thirty minutes to be filled in. Ethically, each participant had the right to choose their involvement in the study and they were asked to sign the "consent" form prior to the questionnaire being completed.

After the data collection phase, ten students did not complete all the questions and provided unclear answers. The actual response rate was 93.71%. A total of 149 questionnaires were completed and returned.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were calculated from the SILL's scores to determine the LLS patterns used by Cambodian EFL students when learning English. In addition, t-tests of the differences between two independent means were computed to find out whether there were any significant differences between male and female learners' questionnaire responses with regard to LLS usage. The significant level was set up at $p < .05$ in this study.

Results

LLS Employed by Cambodian EFL Students

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score of LLS adopted by the participants was 3.55, which is in the range of high use.

Among the six categories of LLS, the most used strategies were metacognitive strategies, whereas the least used were memory strategies.

It was further found that the medium degree of three categories of strategy use comprised affective strategies ($M=3.43$, $SD=.68$), memory strategies ($M=3.38$, $SD=.61$), and compensation strategies ($M=3.35$, $SD=.75$), while three high categories of strategy use were metacognitive strategies ($M=4.00$, $SD=.72$), social strategies ($M=3.63$, $SD=.78$), and cognitive strategies ($M=3.51$, $SD=.64$).

Direct strategies, namely memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies were revealed to lie between 3.35 and 3.51, in the medium use range. Moreover, indirect strategies composed of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies were found to lie between 3.43 and 4.00. Thus, the participants tended to apply indirect strategies more than direct strategies.



Table 1. Summary of LLS Use

n = 149			
Strategy Categories	Mean	SD	Degree
Memory	3.38	.61	Medium
Cognitive	3.51	.64	High
Compensation	3.35	.75	Medium
Metacognitive	4.00	.72	High
Affective	3.43	.68	Medium
Social	3.63	.78	High
Total	3.55	.57	High

Difference in the Use of LLS between Male and Female Students

The means of LLS use revealed that male students tended to use a higher frequency of strategy use than their female peers. Based on a t-test analysis, however, Table 2 indicates that there was no significant difference in the overall LLS use between males and females ($t = 1.97, p > .05$)

Table 2. Independent sample t-test of overall LLS use by gender

Strategy Categories	Male group		Female group		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Memory	3.45	.63	3.31	.60	1.34	.181
Cognitive	3.62	.67	3.41	.60	2.02	.045
Compensation	3.50	.69	3.22	.78	2.35	.020
Metacognitive	4.14	.66	3.89	.75	2.17	.031
Affective	3.44	.68	3.43	.68	.044	.965
Social	3.74	.77	3.53	.79	1.63	.104
Total	3.65	.55	3.47	.57	1.97	.053



Discussion

LLS Use by Cambodian EFL Students

The students were found to use overall strategies at a high level. The result was consistent with a previous study which reported a high frequency use of overall LLS (Politzer, 1983). On the other hand, these findings did not coincide with other earlier findings (Al-Natour, 2012; Park, 2005; Shmais, 2003; Su, 2005; Tse, 2011; Wharton, 2000), which revealed that overall LLS were used in a medium level.

The high level use of metacognitive strategies in this study was in line with previous studies on LLS (Aliakbari, 2008; Radwan, 2011; Shmais, 2003). This result implies that Cambodian EFL students may be conscious of the English language learning process that is related to planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Depending on this strategy, learners are able to control their emotions and motivation through self-monitoring (Shmais, 2003). Radwan (2011) indicated that using metacognitive strategies should be helpful in learning a curriculum, particularly through the earlier stage of second or foreign language learning. In relation to beginning stage of learning, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006, p. 412) highlighted that “the teacher needs to be explicit in developing declarative and procedural knowledge that helps heighten understanding of the *what and how* of successful language learning”.

Interestingly, compensation strategies were found to be the least used ones, which was congruent with a previous finding (Shmais, 2003). It may be speculated that Cambodian EFL students were reluctant to adopt compensation strategies, such as synonym, guessing, or gestures, that help produce linguistic knowledge of English. It was stated earlier that the English learning context in Cambodia has shifted from passive to active learning in the classroom. Thus, Cambodian learners do not depend completely on memorizing linguistic knowledge, and they may have other ways of learning English which does not solely rely on compensatory techniques.

LLS Use and Gender

The lack of a significant mean difference between the male and female group infers that the variable of gender does not play a key role in affecting the LLS in this sample of EFL students. This result was congruent with previous studies on LLS (Aliakbari, 2008; Lee & Oxford, 2008; Radwan, 2011; Shmais, 2003; Yang, 2010) which revealed no gender difference in strategy use. However, it was inconsistent with other studies of LLS (Al-Natour, 2012; Teh et al., 2009; Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Khalil, 2005; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer, 1983). These latter studies reported that female students used more LLS than male students.

The main possible reason beyond the gender issue explains the findings reflecting uniqueness of English learning in Cambodia. Moore and Bounchan (2010) indicated that English is regarded by learners as essential for raising their status in Cambodia. Broadly speaking, not only males but also females appreciate and perceive English as a crucial foreign language that can be used for the sake of careers, education, communication, and research. Moreover, they were undergraduates majoring in English, so they appeared to be conscious of the English learning process and various strategies that were adopted with the aim of achieving their goal (Aliakbari, 2008). Therefore, their desire may drive them to utilize a greater variety of strategies when learning English.



Summary and Conclusion

This current study aimed at examining the LLS use of Cambodian EFL students and investigating a possible relationship between LLS utilization and gender. This study investigated the strategy usage of 149 Cambodian university students through administering Oxford's (1990) SILL. The results showed that the students overall used LLS at a high level. Metacognitive strategies were used most frequently whereas compensation strategies were used least frequently among Cambodian university students.

In this study, gender was not a significant predictor of LLS use. Thus, it did not influence the result of LLS employment of Cambodian EFL males and females. English is important to Cambodian female and male students, so they tended to place emphasis on employing various strategies with the purpose of attaining English learning.

With the aim of learning and teaching attainment, identification of students' LLS use in terms of type and frequency should be practiced at the beginning and during the learning course, as teachers are believed to provide courses appropriate for students' needs and level (Su, 2005). Thus, Cambodian language teachers should contemplate exploring the categories and the frequency of their students so that they are able to offer their students suitable courses.

Metacognitive strategies are revealed to be the most frequently used strategy in the present study. Adopting these strategies should be considered by instructors, school authorities, and curriculum planners. By doing so, students should get ample opportunity to use LSS, and they should improve their knowledge with regard to less-frequently utilized strategy categories, such as compensation, memory and affective strategies.

Recommendations for Further Research

The recommendations for further research are presented as follows:

1. As this study was undertaken at two universities in Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia, generalizations can be made if more universities from other settings are included in future studies.
2. Future research studies should investigate the possible influence of other individual factors, such as self-assessed proficiency, learning styles, learning motivation, etc. on LLS.
3. As this study is a quantitative one using a self-reported questionnaire, further research is recommended to provide qualitative data for more comprehensive and ample results. Such data may be derived from observations, journals, and interviews.



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